

# UNDERSTANDING “NATIONALLY DETERMINED CONTRIBUTIONS” UNDER THE PARIS AGREEMENT



The core of obligation of parties to the Paris Agreement is to undertake a “nationally determined contribution” (NDC) toward the global response to global change. Parties presently are preparing and submitting their second round of NDCs stipulating their respective efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through 2030. This factsheet answers some frequently asked questions about nationally determined contributions.

## WHAT ARE COUNTRIES’ OBLIGATIONS UNDER THE PARIS AGREEMENT?

The Paris Agreement establishes a set of binding procedural commitments. Parties commit to “prepare, communicate and maintain” successive NDCs; to “pursue domestic mitigation measures” aimed at achieving their NDCs; and to regularly report on their emissions and on progress in implementing and achieving their NDC.

## WHAT ARE NATIONALLY DETERMINED CONTRIBUTIONS?

NDCs are countries’ self-defined mitigation goals. Parties decide for themselves the level of ambition reflected in their NDCs. For instance, the first NDC submitted by the **United States** set a goal of reducing economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions 26 to 28 percent below its 2005 level by 2025.

Countries submitted “intended nationally determined contributions” (INDCs) ahead of the Paris Agreement and converted these to final NDCs upon their acceptance of the agreement. NDCs are recorded in an NDC **registry** maintained by the secretariat of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Paris’ parent agreement.

Parties commit to submit updated NDCs every five years, following a “global stocktake” process that will

assess progress towards the agreement’s long-term goals. The agreement sets the expectation that each successive NDC will “represent a progression” beyond a party’s previous one and “reflect its highest possible ambition.”

While parties are legally obligated to have an NDC, and to pursue measures with the aim of achieving it, achievement of the NDC is not a legally binding or enforceable commitment.

## HOW EXPLICIT ARE NDCS?

The Paris Agreement requires that in communicating their NDCs, parties provide “the information necessary for clarity, transparency and understanding,” known as ICTU. As appropriate, depending on the nature of its NDC, a party must provide quantifiable information on the NDC’s reference point (e.g., base year); timeframes for implementation; the NDC’s scope and coverage; planning processes; methodologies used to estimate and account for emissions and withdrawals; how the NDC is fair and ambitious, in light of a party’s national circumstances; and how it contributes to achieving the UNFCCC’s long-term objective.

In submitting its first NDC, the United States chose to go further by also outlining the domestic laws, regulations and measures relevant to implementing the NDC, such as various regulations that been or were being developed under the federal Clean Air Act.

## HOW DO THE NDCS OF DEVELOPED AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES DIFFER?

Although, technically, parties are free to decide for themselves the form of their NDCs, the Paris Agreement sets out some guidelines. It says that developed countries should undertake economy-wide absolute emission reduction targets, while developing countries “are encouraged to move over time towards economy-wide emission reduction or limitation targets in the light of different national circumstances.” To date, developing countries have offered a range of approaches, including absolute economy-wide targets, reductions in emissions intensity (emissions per unit of GDP), reductions from projected “business-as-usual” emissions, and reductions in per-capita emissions.

## HOW ARE NDCS DEVELOPED?

The Paris Agreement leaves it to parties to determine the processes by which they develop or adopt their NDCs. Some countries have developed explicit processes to engage domestic stakeholders. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the government must take into account the advice of the UK’s **Committee on Climate Change**, an independent public body that engages with a wide range of stakeholders. Costa Rica has created two open participation councils, and its **Climate Change Directorate** hosted 12 “Climate Conversations” with stakeholders. **Gambia**

held workshops in each of its eight regions to gather stakeholder input.

The Obama Administration provided no formal avenue for stakeholder input in developing the first U.S. NDC. An **executive order** signed by President Biden a week after taking office said the process to develop a new U.S. NDC “will include analysis and input from relevant executive departments and agencies (agencies), as well as appropriate outreach to domestic stakeholders.”

## IF NDCS ARE NOT BINDING, HOW ARE COUNTRIES HELD ACCOUNTABLE?

Under the Paris Agreement’s “enhanced transparency framework,” parties must report regularly on their emissions and on their progress in “implementing and achieving” their NDCs. These reports are subject to an independent review by technical experts and a peer review by fellow governments, called a “facilitative, multilateral consideration of progress.”

In addition, a failure to comply with binding procedural commitments, such as submitting an updated NDC or a mandated report, can trigger review by the agreement’s implementation and compliance committee. This committee of experts is “facilitative” and “non-punitive” in nature; it will help countries improve their performance but impose no penalties for noncompliance.

### Other C2ES Resources:

*Paris Climate Agreement Q&A*

<https://www.c2es.org/content/paris-climate-agreement-qa/>

*A Brief Guide to the Paris Agreement and ‘Rulebook’*

<https://www.c2es.org/document/a-brief-guide-to-the-paris-agreement-and-rulebook/>

*Evolving Functions of the UNFCCC*

<https://www.c2es.org/document/evolving-functions-of-the-unfccc/>



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