

Common Time Frames under the Paris Agreement

Needed: Agreement on 5-year Implementation Periods at COP26

Summary:

Agreement on Common Time Frames for NDCs is an unresolved element of the Paris Agreement Work Program, and is essential to the success of the Paris Agreement. The political and scientific focus on emissions reductions by 2030 in the current round of NDC revisions has played an invaluable role in creating pressure and expectations for ambitious 2030 targets in NDCs. This focus on a single year end point for NDC targets on the way to net zero by mid-century is in sharp contrast to the mix of 2025 and 2030 targets submitted in INDCs in the lead-up to Paris.

Agreement is needed at COP 26 to enable countries to prepare for the Global Stocktake and the next round of NDCs by 2025, with a common target date of 2035. Without this agreement, it will be much more difficult to build momentum behind the global emissions reductions required, and the contribution each country should make to the aggregate effort.

A 10-year time frame, or worse, a mix of 5 and 10 year targets (2035 and 2040 end points in the next round of NDCs) is not in line with the 5-year cycle set by the Paris Agreement and will not provide the flexibility needed to adapt to rapid changes in climate science and technological development.

Background:

The 2015 Paris Agreement left many important details to be ironed out in subsequent years. The detailed rules for most elements of the Agreement were agreed in 2018 in the “Katowice Rulebook”. But the issue of common time frames remains unresolved, and it has received relatively little attention despite its importance for safeguarding the integrity and effectiveness of the Paris Agreement and collective efforts to step up climate action.

Common time frames (CTF), also known as “implementation periods”, refers to the period covered by each successive Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) submitted by parties to the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement is very clear that Parties must submit a new NDC every five years. It is not clear, however, what time period those NDCs will cover - e.g., whether the end point for the period should move forward by 5 or 10 years for each successive NDC.

The issue has been stalled for some time at the negotiator level, and there was little sustained effort from either the previous Polish or the Chilean COP presidencies to resolve the issue. This has allowed opportunistic opposition from countries such as Japan, China, Saudi Arabia and Russia to fill the void in leadership and damp momentum towards an agreement, despite best efforts from countries such as Brazil and Switzerland. But this could change with the desire by the UK COP 26 Presidency to unlock the stalemate, and new leadership on the issue, particularly by the EU.

The urgent need to strike an agreement by COP 26

The lack of agreement to align the implementation periods has already generated confusion in the first round of INDCs, with a mix of 2025 and 2030 end points, which required guidance in the Paris outcome to converge on 2030 end points with new or revised NDCs in 2020.¹

The next round of NDC submissions following the 2023 first global stocktake may generate the same confusion if parties cannot find an agreement on common time frames, with parties submitting

¹ “Parties whose INDC contains a timeframe up to 2025 must communicate a new NDC with a 2030 time frame, and Parties whose INDC contains a timeframe up to 2030 (like the EU) must now submit an enhanced NDC.” (1/CP.21, para 23)

NDCs for the period either up to 2035 or to 2040. Such misalignment would be counter-productive for several reasons:

- It will make transparency and comparability between the efforts of different countries more difficult, if not impossible, therefore driving down ambition;
- It will undermine the effectiveness of carbon markets and other initiatives that require collaboration between countries, requiring time and effort to develop complex workarounds;
- It will make it more difficult to communicate the level of ambition needed collectively and from individual countries.

An agreement by COP 26 is urgently needed as countries have already started working on their next NDC which they must submit by 2025. Planning and implementation of domestic policy takes years and must for most countries will be done in parallel with preparations for the Global Stocktake expected to starting with COP 27 in 2022.

Why parties must agree on 5-year common time frames

If the case for agreement on common time frames by COP 26 is clear, the next question is: what common time frame or implementation period should parties agree on. The choice is simple:

- 5 years;
- 10 years;
- Some combination of the two (e.g., 10 years + a mid-point review; 5 years + 5 years; 5 years + an indicative 5 years).

The World Resources Institute (Dagnet and Cogswell, 2019) provides a comprehensive overview of the different options. The option of 5-year common time frames has clear advantages in the ambition cycle of the Paris Agreement:

- The Paris Agreement calls for presentation of NDCs on a regular 5-year cycle, and it makes more sense to present a new 5-year target following a clear process than to revise an existing 10-year target as the EU had to do for its 2030 target;
- An agreed 5-year period will provide more regular opportunities to review and if necessary increase ambition of targets, rather than locking in longer-term commitments with fewer and further apart revision and ratchet points;
- A 10-year implementation period would allow only two more NDC implementation periods – 2031-2040 and 2041-2050 – before the world must reach climate neutrality; only two chances to resolve the climate emergency, which could easily be missed;
- 5-year periods will provide more flexibility to adjust policies in light of the latest science available, and developments in technologies and energy sources;
- 5-year periods will provide more frequent opportunities at the international level to hold parties to the Paris Agreement accountable and ensure countries are on track to meet the targets in their NDCs.

Useful references:

Dagnet, Y., and N. Cogswell. 2019. "Setting a Common Time Frame for NDCs." Working Paper. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute. <https://www.wri.org/paris-rulebook/common-time-frames>

'Common Time Frames': What & Why? A CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEBATE ON ARTICLE 4.10 OF THE PARIS AGREEMENT Discussion Note. Second Updated Edition <https://ecbi.org/news/common-time-frames-what-why>

[Common time frames: Summary of discussions at the March 2018 Climate Change Expert Group Global Forum \(oecd.org\)](#). Note prepared by the OECD/IEA Climate Change Expert Group. 2018