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The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

I. Introduction

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was adopted at the Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro from 3 to 14 June 1992. It entered into force on 21 March 1994 and currently has a total of 197 Parties, with near universal membership.

II. General aspects of the Convention

According to the text of the Convention, what is climate change?

The UNFCCC, in Article 1, defines climate change as a "change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods".

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The UNFCCC thus differentiates between climate change attributable to human activities that alter atmospheric composition and climate variability attributable to natural causes.

However, as a consequence of climate variability, the so-called adverse effects of climate change arise, negatively impacting ecosystems, the cryosphere, the biosphere and the anthroposphere. In this sense, serious damage has been assessed, such as the acceleration of the polar ice caps; the rise in sea level; the intensification of droughts and floods; impacts on water supply as a consequence of melting glaciers; the appearance of diseases; the compromise of the rights of future generations or the extinction of biodiversity.

III. Main features of the Convention

Among the main characteristics of the UNFCCC, we can highlight the recognition of the problem and its effects on humanity. Already in the preamble of the Convention, the definitions contained in Article 1, which are necessary to understand the complexities of the climate system and science, and the definition of a specific objective to achieve "stabilisation of greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system". This level should be achieved within a timeframe sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food



production is not threatened and to allow economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.

Broadly speaking, this objective establishes the urgent need to change our production and consumption models towards low-emission patterns, i.e., to avoid burning fossil fuels, which is the main cause of global warming, but it is also possible to visualise shortcomings, as this Convention contains minimal provisions that could be developed taking into account the progress of science and technology in this area. In fact, it does not include a list of GHGs to be regulated, which the Kyoto Protocol does, nor does it include a global objective for mitigating GHG emissions. Moreover, the text is riddled with ambiguities. For example, the term "sufficient timeframe" in Article 4.

IV. Common obligations for the Parties under the Convention

As far as obligations are concerned, we should note the distinction of commitments according to their common but differentiated responsibilities. Thus, there are common obligations applicable to all Parties, obligations applicable to Parties listed in Annex I to the Convention and obligations applicable to Parties listed in Annex II to the Convention.



Common Obligations (art. 4.1) include:

1. The development of national GHG emission inventories;
2. The implementation of programmes containing measures to mitigate climate change;
3. The promotion of technologies, practices and processes that improve emissions;
4. Conservation and enhancement of carbon sinks;
5. The adoption of measures to adapt to climate change;
6. Promoting and supporting scientific research, education and public awareness of climate change.

V. Obligations for the Parties of the Annex I and II under the Convention

As obligations Parties to Annex I and II (Art. 4.2 and 4.3) it is possible to find:

1. The commitments of the developed country Parties listed in Annex I of the Convention add emission reduction obligations that imply, in particular, that these Parties must return to their 1990 levels of greenhouse gas emissions by the end of the year 2000.



2. The commitments of the developed country Parties listed in Annex II are essentially to provide "new and additional" financial resources to meet the agreed full costs incurred by developing country Parties in meeting their obligations under the Convention.



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