

# How COP works

The simplest possible explanation of what the COP—the prime annual international event on climate politics—is all about, can be made by reimagining the entire world as a classroom of noisy and notorious countries



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**M**any of you have heard about COP summits. These are very big meetings that take place around the world where people gather to discuss climate change and how to manage it. COP stands for Conference of Parties. Basically, it is a group of countries who have agreed to work together to act and reduce emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG), so that the worst effects of climate change are avoided.

By the year 1992, countries around the world had realized that burning fossil fuels – coal, oil, and gas – and cutting down forests, was leading to the greenhouse gas effect. GHGs, like carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), were emitted in excess – when coal is burnt or when a tree is cut down – and were trapping the sun's heat and warming our planet. So, countries formed a group and called it the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Countries in that group would meet every year in a different location to decide how to jointly cut their GHG emissions and stop this warming process, which was known as global warming.

This meeting every year is the COP meeting.

Now, imagine your classroom. A group of your classmates – let's call them Group X, has about seven naughty kids. These kids are the United States, the United Kingdom, European Union, Russia, Japan, Australia, and Canada. One day, Group X makes a lot of noise in class before the teacher comes in. The rest of the class, let's call them Group Y, is sitting quietly and reading. When the teacher comes in, she is angry. She hears a lot of noise, but when she walks in

everyone is quiet. She wants to punish the class. She says that everyone will have to stay back for TWO HOURS after school and write 200 times in cursive writing – We will not make noise. Group Y is shocked. They did not make any noise but must bear the punishment when it is Group X that caused the ruckus! This is injustice! Kids in Group Y will miss their afterschool sports practice or playtime because of this punishment.

In climate change conferences, this difference is talked about very often. Some countries – like the Group X countries – emitted most

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of the GHGs in the atmosphere starting back from the 1850s till today. GHGs, like CO<sub>2</sub>, once emitted stay in the atmosphere for almost a 100 years and keep warming the planet! So the truth is that much of the CO<sub>2</sub> that is warming the planet today was emitted by richer countries a 100 years ago, and not by poorer countries of Group Y like India, Brazil, countries of Africa, and others.

Now, imagine that the teacher suddenly decides to listen to Group Y's protest and understands that they did not cause the ruckus. She affirms that Group X will stay for two hours after school. And while Group Y did not cause the noise themselves but should have told Group X to stay quiet – will

have to stay for only half an hour of punishment. So that the next time, if there is noise, they speak up and shush Group X between their class periods.

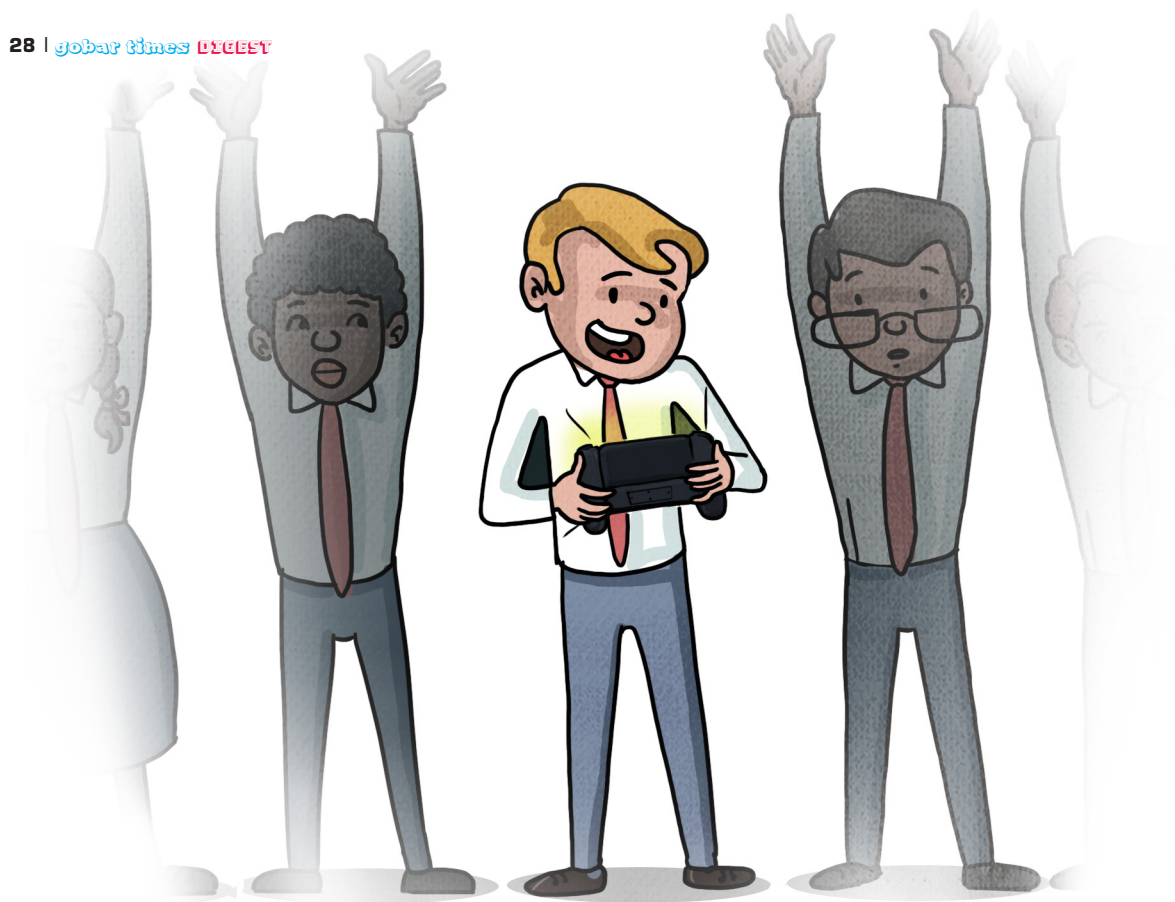
Similarly, in 1997, some countries signed an agreement called the Kyoto Protocol that differentiated between countries who had emitted most of the GHGs and those which emitted very little. It gave bigger targets of GHG cuts to the historical polluters who are the rich countries and smaller targets to the low emitters. Group X's countries followed this for some time, but as the years went by, they decided that they do not want to put in more punishment time than the others. "Group Y was also in the class! How can you put the entire burden of punishment on us!" they whined.

So, in 2015, Group X decided to push the world to sign a new agreement. Under this, all the kids would serve the punishment, but they would stay back after school only as long as they could or felt like.

Can you believe that? At COP in 2015, held in the city of Paris, this new agreement was signed. All countries would try to cut GHG emissions, as much as each could do, even if they had not contributed much to the historical emissions. This came to be known as the Paris Agreement and we are still following the agreement to this day.

So, it is like the United States – the kid who made the most noise on the first day – saying that it will stay back for one hour but suddenly after fifteen minutes felt like going home to feed its dog! So, the US left early, even though it should have stayed much longer.

At the COP each year, countries gather and discuss how much emissions have been



cut and is it enough, as much as scientists have told us to cut, to reduce global warming. Walking around at the conference, different rooms have different discussions ongoing between groups of countries. In one room, it will be climate finance. This is the money that rich polluting countries should pay to help poor countries cut emissions. It's like if a kid from Group Y – the quiet kids – missed her tuition because she had to stay back for the punishment period, then a kid from Group X offers to spend some extra time the next day to help that Group Y friend with physics homework.

Similarly, another room at COP will be discussing climate mitigation – the efforts that countries are making to reduce emissions. Say, by switching to renewable energy from coal-based power or switching to electric vehicles from diesel-based cars.

Occasionally, the President of some rich polluting country

will come to COP and give a big speech to show the world how much effort his country is putting up to cut emissions. This is like if the Group X kids want to impress the teacher and show that they have been spending a lot of time in punishment and learning their lesson, they will make a speech telling the teacher that they spent some time in the punishment period and then also continued thinking about their mistake at home. But the truth is, those kids spent barely 15 minutes in punishment and then went home and played video games! This does not count as proper penance. But the teacher listens and claps, since he/she does not know what they did once they returned home.

In such ways, countries try to drumbeat about how many emission-cutting activities they are undertaking in their homeland and come to COP to show off. Other countries, however, take the opportunity to remind them that they are a

historical polluter and they must do much, much more!

And so, the COP saga continues year after year. Scientists have told us that if we want to save the world, we must reduce emissions by 43 per cent by 2030 compared to the level it was in 2019. Are we close to doing that? No! In fact, after the COVID pandemic was solved, emissions have increased! We are not on track to reduce the emissions by as much as we need to, and this is bad news! This year at COP – the 28th time that countries will be meeting to discuss climate change – we hope that countries will finally realize that lying to the teacher is wrong. Countries must own up and pay the real price and truly reduce emissions for the benefit of all humanity!

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