

GENERAL STUDIES III

UNEP Emissions Gap Report 2026 | UPSC Complete Notes

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UNEP's 17th Emissions Gap Report, *The Point of Return (2026)*, warns that avoiding any overshoot of the Paris Agreement's 1.5°C temperature threshold is no longer realistically possible. Its lowest-overshoot pathway requires global greenhouse gas emissions to fall 18% by 2030, 45% by 2035 and 69% by 2040, compared with 2025 levels. These original Civil Service Gurukul UPSC notes explain the emissions gap, warming scenarios, Nationally Determined Contributions, carbon dioxide removal, Global Stocktake, India's climate commitments, Prelims MCQs and a GS Paper 3 Mains model answer.

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Understand UNEP's latest climate assessment, the 1.5°C overshoot, emissions reduction targets, Paris Agreement, NDCs, carbon removal and India's climate commitments.

17th

Edition of UNEP's report

45%

Required cut by 2035

2.8°C

Warming under current policies

320 GtApproximate CO₂ removal in lowest-overshoot scenario

1. Why Is the Emissions Gap Report 2026 Important?

The United Nations Environment Programme's Emissions Gap Report 2026, titled **The Point of Return**, warns that global climate action remains far below the level required to meet the most ambitious temperature objective of the Paris Agreement.

The world is now expected to exceed the 1.5°C warming threshold above pre-industrial levels.

Nevertheless, the report concludes that deep and sustained emissions reductions could limit the magnitude of overshoot and potentially bring warming back to or below 1.5°C by 2100.

This makes the report important for UPSC because it connects climate science, global governance, environmental policy, energy transition and India's development priorities.

Central message: The challenge has moved from avoiding every 1.5°C overshoot to minimising its peak, duration and irreversible impacts.

2. UPSC Syllabus Relevance

UPSC paper	Relevant syllabus area
Prelims GS I	Environment, climate change and international environmental institutions
GS Paper III	Environmental conservation, pollution, degradation and climate change
GS Paper II	Energy security, renewable energy and sustainable development
GS Paper II	International treaties, global institutions and climate diplomacy
Essay	Climate justice, sustainable growth and intergenerational equity
GS Paper IV	Environmental ethics and responsibility towards future generations

Complete UPSC Study Guide

1. What is the emissions gap?
2. Major findings of UNEP 2026
3. Emissions reduction pathway
4. Global warming scenarios
5. Understanding climate overshoot
6. Paris Agreement and NDCs
7. Carbon dioxide removal
8. India's climate commitments

9. Challenges and climate justice
10. Recommendations and way forward
11. UPSC Prelims MCQs
12. UPSC Mains answer writing
13. Frequently asked questions

3. What Is the Emissions Gap?

The emissions gap is the difference between the amount of greenhouse gases expected to be released under existing policies or climate pledges and the amount consistent with a specified global temperature pathway.

Illustrative example

Suppose projected global emissions in a particular year are 50 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent, while the pathway compatible with a climate objective requires 35 gigatonnes.

The illustrative emissions gap would be 15 gigatonnes.

These figures are hypothetical and are not the reported 2026 emissions gap.

UPSC definition: Emissions gap = Projected greenhouse gas emissions minus emissions consistent with a specified temperature goal.

Who publishes the report?

The United Nations Environment Programme publishes the annual Emissions Gap Report.

The 2026 edition is the seventeenth assessment in the series.

4. Major Findings of the Emissions Gap Report 2026

Indicator	Major finding
Report title	The Point of Return
1.5°C temperature threshold	Overshoot is considered unavoidable under present circumstances
Lowest-overshoot peak	Approximately 1.7–1.8°C around mid-century
2030 reduction requirement	18% below 2025 emissions
2035 reduction requirement	45% below 2025 emissions
2040 reduction requirement	69% below 2025 emissions

Indicator	Major finding
Warming under current policies	About 2.8°C during this century, potentially rising further thereafter
Warming with full NDC implementation	Approximately 2.6°C if similar efforts continue
Carbon dioxide removal	Approximately 320 gigatonnes over the century in the lowest-overshoot scenario

Important examination distinction: The 18%, 45% and 69% figures are reductions from the 2025 global greenhouse gas emissions level. They are not reductions from 1990 or 2005.

5. The Emissions Reduction Pathway for Remaining to 1.5°C

UNEP's lowest-overshoot scenario requires rapid reductions in global emissions.

Year	Required GHG reduction	Reference year
2030	18%	2025
2035	45%	2025
2040	69%	2025

These figures represent a global pathway for minimising temperature overshoot.

They should not be confused with identical binding targets for every country.

Country-level responsibilities depend on national circumstances, historical contributions, capabilities and the international climate framework.

Why early action is essential

Delaying cuts adds greenhouse gases to the atmosphere and increases cumulative warming.

It can also increase the future dependence on carbon dioxide removal technologies.

6. Comparing Global Temperature Scenarios

Policy or mitigation scenario	Projected warming
Continuation of current policies	Approximately 2.8°C during this century, with potential further increase
Full implementation of NDCs with comparable efforts continuing	Approximately 2.6°C

Policy or mitigation scenario	Projected warming
Implementation of NDCs and additional net-zero commitments	Approximately 2.1°C
Lowest possible 1.5°C overshoot pathway	Peak of about 1.7–1.8°C near mid-century, potentially returning to 1.5°C by 2100

The scenarios demonstrate that current national commitments are insufficient to achieve the lowest overshoot pathway.

Even the more ambitious cases require strong policy implementation and continued emissions reduction.

7. What Does Overshooting 1.5°C Mean?

Climate overshoot occurs when the global temperature temporarily exceeds a specified threshold before potentially falling back.

In UNEP's lowest-overshoot scenario, warming could reach around 1.7–1.8°C near the middle of the century.

It may then return to or below 1.5°C by 2100 if deep emissions cuts and carbon dioxide removal are achieved.

Why overshoot is dangerous

- Greater exposure to extreme heat.
- Higher risks to biodiversity and ecosystems.
- Additional pressure on glaciers and ice sheets.
- Greater threats to coastal communities.
- More severe climate impacts on agriculture and water resources.
- Risk of irreversible changes even if temperatures later decline.

Prelims distinction: A temporary global temperature overshoot does not mean that all climate impacts will reverse once temperatures decline.

8. Paris Agreement, NDCs and the Global Stocktake

Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement was adopted in 2015 under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

It seeks to hold global temperature increase well below 2°C while pursuing efforts to limit warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

Nationally Determined Contributions

NDCs are national climate action commitments communicated under the Paris Agreement.

They set out measures and targets countries intend to pursue to address climate change.

Global Stocktake

The Global Stocktake is a collective assessment of progress towards the Paris Agreement's long-term objectives.

It informs subsequent rounds of stronger national climate action.

Major global priorities

- Accelerating renewable energy deployment.
- Improving energy efficiency.
- Transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems.
- Reducing methane and other non-CO₂ greenhouse gases.
- Protecting forests and ecosystems.
- Scaling climate finance and technology cooperation.

9. Carbon Dioxide Removal: Opportunities and Limitations

Carbon Dioxide Removal, or CDR, means removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and storing it for a meaningful period.

UNEP's lowest-overshoot scenario requires approximately 320 gigatonnes of CO₂ removal over this century.

Examples of removal approaches

Afforestation and reforestation

Trees and vegetation absorb atmospheric carbon through photosynthesis, although storage can be reversed by fire, degradation or land-use change.

Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage

BECCS combines biomass energy production with capture and storage of associated CO₂.

Direct Air Capture

DAC uses engineered systems to capture CO₂ directly from ambient air.

Soil and ecosystem carbon restoration

Improved land management may enhance carbon storage in soils and natural ecosystems.

Limitations

- High cost of many engineered removal technologies.
- Significant energy and infrastructure requirements.
- Competition for land and water.
- Challenges in measuring permanent carbon storage.
- Uncertain scalability and environmental consequences.

Important distinction: Carbon dioxide removal is not a substitute for rapid cuts in fossil-fuel emissions.

10. India and the Emissions Gap Report 2026

India is an important participant in global climate negotiations because of its population, development needs, energy demand and commitment to low-carbon growth.

India's major climate commitments

Commitment	Target or objective
Emissions intensity of GDP	45% reduction by 2030 compared with 2005
Non-fossil electricity capacity	About 50% of cumulative installed power capacity by 2030
Additional carbon sink	2.5–3 billion tonnes CO ₂ equivalent through additional forest and tree cover by 2030
Long-term net zero	2070 target
Mission LiFE	Promoting sustainable lifestyles and responsible consumption

Emissions intensity versus absolute emissions

Emissions intensity measures greenhouse gas emissions relative to economic output.

A country may reduce emissions per unit of GDP while its total absolute emissions continue to increase.

This distinction is important for understanding India's development strategy and climate commitments.

India's strengths

- Expanding non-fossil electricity capacity.
- Growth of solar and other renewable technologies.
- Energy efficiency policies.
- Electric mobility and clean energy innovation.
- Climate adaptation and resilient development initiatives.

India's continuing challenges

- Meeting rising electricity demand.
- Managing dependence on coal-based generation.
- Financing energy transition infrastructure.
- Supporting coal-dependent communities.
- Strengthening adaptation to heatwaves, floods and drought.

GS Paper 3 analytical point: India's climate strategy must balance developmental priorities with decarbonisation, energy security and environmental justice.

11. Climate Justice and the Major Obstacles to Global Action

Historical responsibility

Industrialised countries account for a large share of cumulative historical greenhouse gas emissions.

Unequal economic capabilities

Developing economies often have more limited financial and technological resources for rapid transitions.

Energy security

Countries must maintain reliable and affordable energy supplies while reducing fossil-fuel use.

Climate finance gap

Large-scale mitigation and adaptation require sustained public and private investment.

Geopolitical fragmentation

Changing government policies and international tensions can delay collective climate action.

These problems make climate cooperation a question of equity as well as environmental science.

12. Way Forward: How to Narrow the Emissions Gap

1. **Strengthen national commitments:** Align future NDCs more closely with science-based global pathways.
2. **Accelerate renewables:** Invest in solar, wind, geothermal and energy storage.
3. **Improve energy efficiency:** Reduce energy/waste in industry, buildings and transport.
4. **Reduce fossil-fuel dependence:** Plan an equitable and orderly energy transition.
5. **Cut methane:** Address emissions from energy, agriculture and waste.
6. **Protect ecosystems:** Reduce deforestation and restore degraded landscapes.
7. **Expand climate finance:** Support affordable capital and technology transfer for developing countries.
8. **Govern carbon removal carefully:** Adopt clear standards for measurement, sustainability and permanence.
9. **Prioritise adaptation:** Strengthen resilience to unavoidable climate impacts.

Conclusion for Mains: The emissions gap can be narrowed through rapid mitigation, stronger international cooperation and equitable implementation of climate commitments.

13. UPSC Prelims Practice MCQs

Question 1

The Emissions Gap Report is published by which organisation?

- (a) World Meteorological Organization
- (b) United Nations Environment Programme
- (c) International Monetary Fund
- (d) International Energy Agency

Correct answer: (b) UNEP.

UNEP publishes the annual Emissions Gap Report.

Question 2

Consider the following statements about Emissions Gap Report 2026:

1. The report is titled The Point of Return.
2. The lowest-overshoot scenario requires a 45% global GHG reduction by 2035 from 2023 levels.
3. The report states that no carbon dioxide removal would be needed to return to 1.5°C.

Which statements are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 1 and 2 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Correct answer: (b) 1 and 2 only.

The report identifies substantial carbon dioxide removal as a component of the lowest-overshoot pathway.

Question 3

Which statement best describes climate overshoot?

- (a) A permanent decrease in global temperature
- (b) A temporary exceedance of a temperature threshold
- (c) An immediate halt to all greenhouse gas emissions
- (d) A fall in ocean temperatures without atmospheric change

Correct answer: (b).

Overshoot means warming rises above a threshold before potentially declining again.

Question 4

India's updated 2030 NDC target for reducing the emissions intensity of GDP uses which reference year?

- (a) 1990
- (b) 2000
- (c) 2005
- (d) 2025

Correct answer: (c) 2005.

India's updated target is a 45% reduction in emissions intensity of GDP by 2030 relative to 2005.

Question 5

Which of the following can qualify as carbon dioxide removal approaches?

1. Direct Air Capture with durable storage
2. Afforestation that increases carbon stocks
3. Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage

Select the correct answer:

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Correct answer: (d).

All three can remove atmospheric carbon, subject to the relevant accounting and storage conditions.

14. UPSC Mains Practice Question and Model Answer

GS Paper 3 | 15 Marks | 250 Words

"The Emissions Gap Report 2026 shows that the global response to climate change remains inadequate." Discuss the key findings and suggest a balanced way forward, with special reference to India.

Model Answer

The UNEP Emissions Gap Report 2026, titled The Point of Return, examines the difference between projected global greenhouse gas emissions and levels compatible with climate temperature goals.

Key findings: The report warns that overshooting 1.5°C is now effectively unavoidable. Its lowest-overshoot pathway requires global emissions cuts of 18% by 2030, 45% by 2035 and 69% by 2040, relative to 2025. Under current policies, warming could reach about 2.8°C during this century.

Challenges: Continued fossil-fuel dependence, insufficient climate finance, unequal technological capabilities and geopolitical tensions undermine global mitigation efforts. Heavy reliance on carbon removal also creates technological and ecological risks.

India's perspective: India has committed to reducing GDP emissions intensity by 45% by 2030 from 2005 levels and pursuing net-zero emissions by 2070. Its energy transition must protect developmental needs, energy access and vulnerable communities.

Way forward: Countries should strengthen NDCs, expand renewable energy, improve efficiency, cut methane emissions and mobilise equitable climate finance.

Conclusion: Closing the emissions gap requires urgent action anchored in climate justice, scientific evidence and international cooperation.

15. Frequently Asked Questions

What is the title of UNEP's Emissions Gap Report 2026?

The report is titled The Point of Return.

Which organisation publishes the Emissions Gap report?

The United Nations Environment Programme.

What is the required emissions reduction by 2035?

A 45% reduction in global greenhouse gas emissions compared with 2025 levels under the lowest-overshoot scenario.

What is the projected warming under current policies?

Approximately 2.8°C during this century, with potential further warming thereafter.

What is climate overshoot?

It is a temporary exceedance of a specified temperature threshold before a possible later decline.

What are NDCs?

Nationally Determined Contributions are countries' climate commitments under the Paris Agreement.

What is India's long-term net-zero target year?

2070.

How is emissions intensity different from total emissions?

Emissions intensity measures emissions per unit of economic output, while total emissions measure the absolute quantity released.

16. Conclusion: The World Must Act Before the Climate Gap Widens

The Emissions Gap Report 2026 delivers an important warning: existing climate policies and commitments remain insufficient to limit warming to the lowest possible overshoot.

Yet the report also highlights the opportunity to accelerate proven climate solutions.

Renewable energy, energy efficiency, methane reduction, ecosystem protection and stronger international cooperation can collectively reduce future risks.

For India, the path forward requires reconciling rapid economic development with clean energy, climate resilience and equitable international action.

For UPSC aspirants, the report is a valuable case study linking environmental science, sustainable development, global governance and climate justice.

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Educational disclaimer: This original UPSC study guide was prepared on 22 October 2026 using publicly available climate assessments and policy information. Temperature projections are scenario-based, not guaranteed outcomes. Aspirants should distinguish global pathway requirements from individual countries' formal NDC targets.

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