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Stories *that changed the* WORLD

Building a partnership to create
the global standard for measuring
greenhouse gas emissions



GREENHOUSE
GAS PROTOCOL



“There was never a point when I thought it wasn’t going to happen,”

says Janet Ranganathan, the driving force behind the pioneering Greenhouse Gas Protocol. For her, this critical tool in the fight against climate change had an air of inevitability about it, simply because of the broad coalition she had helped assemble behind it. “Once we’d got this ball rolling, once we’d got all these collaborators from business, NGOs, governments and others, there was no stopping it. There was just so much momentum.”

There is one simple idea behind the GHG Protocol: if a company can measure its emissions it can do something about reducing them. But in the late 1990s, as work began on the Protocol, they found that behind this simple idea sat a multitude of questions. “There were many companies attempting to measure

and report their emissions,” says Janet. “And they were running into these basic questions, like do you include your product emissions? Do you include your electricity? What do you do about joint ventures? And companies wanted a level playing field across countries.”

Solving this complex set of interlinked puzzles was to be the real challenge for the team that created the GHG Protocol, but they were doing so at an auspicious time. “It was a moment when people were asking, what is the role of business in solving this climate problem,” adds Janet. In the background was the Kyoto Protocol and what that meant for climate action from governments, but the spotlight was now on what the private sector should do. “Companies knew regulations were coming, they were expecting them, but didn’t know

how to prepare for them. So getting your house in order with an accounting and reporting standard, and knowing what your risks and opportunities were, was a great first step.”

As Pankaj Bhatia, GHGP’s Director since 2025, put it, “There was a need, there was a demand. We were meaningfully responding to a very important demand in the marketplace. Different companies had different methods to account for their emissions, but there was no consistency, no way to assess the accuracy and completeness of these methodologies. It was clear that we needed solid analytical work.”

“The dynamic was awful,” remembers David Moorcroft, at that time the Director of Climate and Energy at WBCSD. “It was really industry on one side, being defensive and attacking, and NGOs on the other being defensive and attacking.”

Developing a measurement protocol quickly rose to the top of the agenda for the Safe Climate, Sound Business Initiative, a partnership convened by WRI’s Liz Cook with BP, General Motors, and Monsanto. “The protocol was such a basic, almost apple pie, starting point for companies,” Liz recalls. Around the same time, WRI discovered that WBCSD was working on a similar effort. Having two competing systems risked creating confusion, so Janet went to London to meet with WBCSD’s David Moorcroft to work out a partnership.

“I met Janet from WRI in a pub where we had a beer,” says Moorcroft. “We got talking and I said, look, if we could do



Pankaj Bhatia presents the *Scope 3 Accounting and Reporting Standard*, 2011



The revised *Corporate Accounting and Reporting Standard*, co-published with WBCSD in 2004

something tangible . . . we could actually get people working together. Fundamental to a lot of this is agreeing on how you measure and account for greenhouse gas emissions.” From there, a partnership between the two organizations was forged, and a working group convened to map out the strategy.

As Janet recalls, there would be four phases in the development of the GHG Protocol. First, the team would form a multi-stakeholder process, drawing in representatives from the companies themselves as well as other sectors. Next, they would develop the standards themselves, and in phase three they would pilot test them with companies. Finally they would push to get the standards adopted and used, and scale up.

The multi-stakeholder process itself was far more than simply reaching out to those who had an interest in developing a set of robust emissions standards. It was to be the foundation for the entire project's success. “A standard only becomes a standard if it's widely used,” says Janet. “So the idea behind the multi-stakeholder process is that we bring in all the users, whether they were companies or people designing climate initiatives, NGOs and governments. Bring them in there, co-create it. Then they'll own it, they'll use it, and it'll spread.” She mentions an African proverb that helps explain the need for this process: “If you want to go far, take many people with you, but don't expect to get there fast; if you want to go fast, go alone, but don't expect to get very far.”

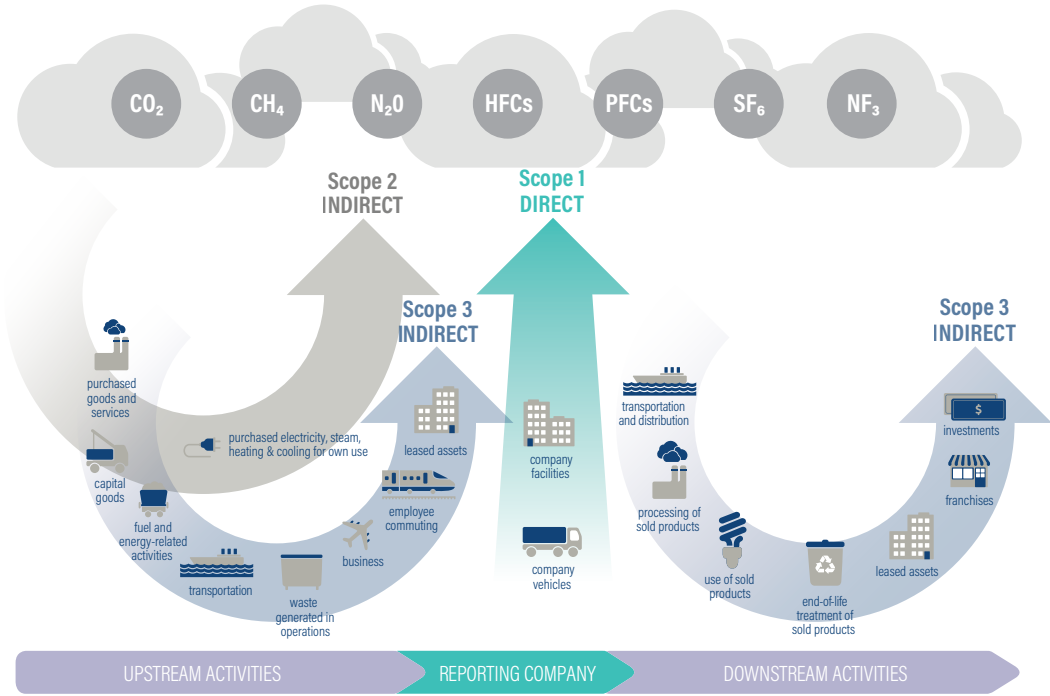
“The Protocol is WRI at its best. It’s evidence based, it’s built on data, it’s a practical tool with a very big vision attached to it.”

–Liz Cook

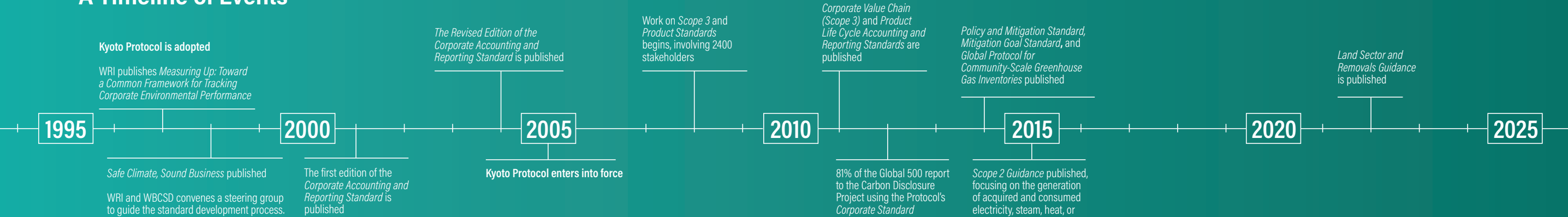
The whole process relied heavily on the involvement of companies who wanted to develop emissions standards so they could take responsibility for them. Cynthia Cummis, who joined the team later after similar work on other projects, reflects that companies had numerous reasons for getting involved. “It's all about brand reputation. That was the reason why companies joined voluntary programs and still do to this day. Reputational advantage, reputational benefits, differentiating your

company from your competitors. Once one does it, then their peers follow because they don't want to be left behind.” She also mentions energy efficiency as a driver, but notes that in the late 1990s there was not much pressure from politicians or investors.

The next challenge was working out who was responsible for which emissions. “Did companies just report on their emissions relating to their own direct operations, or are they responsible for reporting for the whole value chain?” asks Janet. “Agreeing on the scope of the measurement and reporting system was one of the more challenging moments, and the three Scopes was the way we resolved that.”



A Timeline of Events





Attendees at the launch of the Scope 3 Guidance in New York City, 2011



GHGP Team Retreat, 2014

Put simply, Scope 1 included direct emissions that were owned or controlled by the company. So far, obvious and uncontroversial. Scope 2 emissions were indirect, from the purchased energy, heating and cooling that the company used. That too seemed straightforward. Scope 3 was the hardest to pin down and referred to all the other indirect emissions within a company's value chain. That could relate to anything from transport emissions for raw materials or finished items through to the disposal of waste or dealing with the product once it was at the end of its useful life. Scope 3 would be voluntary, but by defining and reporting the existence of these emissions the Protocol incentivized companies to do something about them.

"This changed the mindset of what a company's responsibility was," says Janet. "It expanded it from being its own fence line direct emissions to its entire value chain. It changed from just sweeping your own porch to actually cleaning the whole road."

If this system had been drawn up by an NGO or business group working alone it would have likely been rejected out of hand. But WRI and its partners had built that big tent of companies and other interested parties. "It was like an open kitchen table. We had invited everyone in," says Janet. "The multi-stakeholder process created credibility, and we ran the process in a transparent way. Because it was an unbranded product everyone felt they could own it."



The standards were pilot-tested, and not just in companies: WRI and other NGOs applied it to their own activities. Then it was launched, and the team concentrated on getting it adopted and scaling up. It was gradual, but it worked. "Greenhouse Gas Protocol is the world's most trusted measurement and reporting system for climate," Janet says proudly. "It's standards, guidance and calculation tools that are special because they were developed by those who were going to use them and apply them."

Being at the center of creating the GHG Protocol was a landmark achievement for the World Resources Institute. "The Protocol is WRI at its best," says Liz Cook. "It's evidence based, it's built on data, it's a practical tool with a very big vision attached to it. It's built with the people who are going to be using it, so it's embraced as something that they can understand because they were part of putting it together. And it's something that's used both locally but also can be applied universally and globally." The Protocol also had a profound impact on WRI's direction. Liz remembers it as a project that marked the end of WRI focusing primarily on producing written reports, with a new emphasis on practical results in the real world. "It was really important that we create research that would turn into action. It's now baked into everything that we do."

Janet Ranganathan agrees. "It helped change our ambition from being this sort of policy research think tank to an organisation that could develop global solutions. It established us as this global trusted convenor who could create a credible and transparent process. It helped us see business not just as the climate problem, but also a source of climate solutions. The GHG Protocol became the backbone of every single climate initiative that followed. We got a seat at the design of that table."

"I must admit I was amazed how quickly the protocol grew and how it became the global standard for accounting for greenhouse gas emissions," says David Moorcroft. "I felt some pride and certainly a satisfaction that something taking off from this small piece of a conversation in a pub, between two people, had born such fruit."

The Protocol also showed the value of ambition. "It changed the mindset of what we could do, the realms of possibility," says Janet. "Think about some of the things that followed: New Climate Economy, the Global Commission for Adaptation, these large, multi-stakeholder initiatives. It took WRI's ambitions to another



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level. Now we have people, nature and climate, WRI's focus on changing entire systems. Yeah, we haven't stopped. We kept going there and getting more and more ambitious."

The entire team remembers the years when they worked on forging and launching the Protocol as hard work, but deeply rewarding. "It was successful not because of me or WRI really," says Janet. "But because of all these people that came in and turned it into a success. They owned it, they ran with it. They rolled their sleeves up, they worked those long hours. They were out there doing the outreach, they were selling it. They were building it into the next generation of climate initiatives. It was everywhere. It was like acorns turning into oaks everywhere."

The success of the GHG Protocol was not just its initial adoption, but also the foundations that it provided for what was to follow. "It would have amazed me at the time to know that it would become the basis of policy," says Cynthia Cummis. "That was always the goal, but I'm not sure I believed it would ever happen. That is the ultimate success, the ultimate level of achievement that GHG Protocol set out to achieve."

Janet Ranganathan may have been certain that the GHG Protocol was always going to happen, but that does not diminish the scale of the team's achievement. "To look back today and see like, yeah, the backbone of nearly every climate initiative, nearly every Fortune 500 company is using this. It's pretty humbling that we were able to do that, but we did."

Stories That Changed the World is a look back at some of World Resources Institute's most challenging, impactful and inspiring initiatives of our 40+ year history.

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