

Where next for the IPCC?

The influence of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on the construction, mobilisation and consumption of climate-change knowledge has been considerable. It has profoundly shaped the way in which politics around the world has engaged with the idea of climate change. In 2007, the IPCC received, jointly, the Nobel peace prize for “its effort to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change and to lay the foundations for the measures that are needed to counteract such change”.

Yet early in 2010 the IPCC came under unparalleled public and political scrutiny following the exposure of a small number of errors, over-interpretations of evidence and poor academic referencing in its Fourth Assessment Report published in 2007. The situation was compounded by tardy and high-handed responses from the IPCC leadership. The UN, which originally in 1988 gave the mandate for the creation of the IPCC, felt compelled to act and commissioned the Inter-Academy Council to report into its processes and procedures. The council’s report was published on 30 August.

This is the first time that an independent body has scrutinised the way the IPCC works. It is overdue and the council makes some strong and radical recommendations: a stronger and more professional executive team; greater transparency in governance and in the selection of experts; more explicit representation in IPCC reports of uncertainties and areas of disagreement and ignorance; less policy advocacy. These changes are to be welcomed and the IPCC governing body meeting in South Korea in October would do well to implement them in full—delaying IPCC’s Fifth Assessment Report, due in 2013-14, if necessary. A new chairman or woman would also be desirable—as implied (diplomatically) by the council but not explicitly demanded.

More widely, however, I believe it is necessary to ask what does society now need from the knowledge community in relation to climate change? Will more climate science make policymaking any easier? Is the problem that the scientific consensus forged by the IPCC is not strong enough? Or is it that the IPCC—and climate scientists generally—are not very good communicators? More science! A tighter consensus! Better communication! Bring on the fifth report!

The IAC Committee were not mandated to critique the overall shape, content and timing of IPCC reports—least of all consider the necessity of the IPCC—but they do imply that the ‘traditional’ model is dated. They suggest

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that there is a need for more creative thinking about the ways in which appropriate knowledge of climate change is assessed and brought into public spaces. I fully concur. Compared with 1988, the political world of 2015 will need something radically different from the ever-widening scholarly study of climate change.

So the answers to each of the questions posed above is ‘no’—for reasons set out in my recent book *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*. Climate change has become a synecdoche for the troubling and endemic dilemmas facing a growing population with material aspirations making ever-greater resource demands on a physically finite planet. Facing and circumventing these dilemmas is about creating and mobilising—and negotiating among—different human visions, values and virtues. If I am right then science has little to offer on these matters, least of all purely physical science which is expected (by some) to offer a clear and shining light about what the future holds and what we should therefore do. It is not about more certain science more skilfully communicated. Does anyone really believe that the Copenhagen meeting failed last December because scientists had not done their job properly?

The study of climate change started off as an endeavour of geographers, climatologists, meteorologists and then Earth system scientists and economists. But it now demands an engagement with those human practices of argumentation, reflection and persuasion where human meaning is created and authenticated—philosophy, the creative arts, religion and politics.

THE IPCC IN ITS present form offers little insight into these domains of praxis. There is an inverse relationship between the growing bureaucratic effort each successive report requires and the diminishing incremental value these mega-assessments bring to public debate and political decision making.

But if this is too radical a proposition for you, then let me offer these three additional challenges for the IPCC as it considers its response to the IAC’s report.

The IPCC needs to rethink its role in consensus building; it must recognise and embrace ignorance, diversity of judgement and dissent in its knowledge assessments;

The IPCC needs to reconsider how it navigates the science-policy interface; it should distance itself from explicit or implicit claims that climate science should or can in anyway determine climate policy;

The IPCC needs to be responsive to new ways in which scientific knowledge is validated and made authoritative for public use; it must be particularly sensitive to differences in these practices across different cultures. More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com