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IPCC communications issues – constraints and opportunities
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The IPCC has encountered criticism from users, including policymakers – its main target audience – and from communications experts that its reports are hard to understand and navigate. Its language is full of jargon, conclusions are hedged about with diplomatic and scientific reservations, and the reports do not always address the priorities of stakeholders.

In responding to this criticism, the IPCC faces many constraints. Some are common to any organization trying to communicate science to various non-specialists. Others arise from the unique nature and function of the IPCC.

General challenges in communicating science

- The science relating to climate change, encompassing a wide range of disciplines, is often complicated. Complex findings cannot always be simplified for communication purposes without distorting them or sacrificing precision.
- Scientists are trained to describe their findings by marshalling large amounts of evidence and building to a conclusion. This is the opposite to communication in media, which in its simplest form starts with a conclusion, supports it with context and one or a few outstanding pieces of evidence and backs it with interpretation that is often emotional or colourful. Many people are used to receiving information the media way.
- Science is rarely 100% certain, and to be accurate many scientists need to communicate the uncertainty associated with their findings. Even if the probability of an outcome is highly relevant to policymaking, the communication of uncertainty can mask the clarity of a finding for policymakers and the public.

Still, other scientific bodies manage to overcome these obstacles, and there seems no reason why with effort and good will, IPCC scientists cannot work with people with communications expertise to do so too.

Consider then the problems specific to the IPCC, arising from its unique nature.

What is the IPCC?

- The IPCC was set up in 1988 to tell policymakers what we know, and what we don't know, about climate change, its impacts, possible future risks, and potential solutions to tackling it.
- It is an assessment body. It does not conduct its own research or measure data. It can only cover a topic if there is already a body of research on it.
- It is policy-relevant without being policy-prescriptive. It does not campaign or advocate particular actions, though it may lay out policy options.
- This policy-neutrality underpins the IPCC's credibility, and so a perceived departure from objectivity could undermine that credibility.
- IPCC reports rely on time and expertise volunteered by its authors and elected officials. Even if many IPCC scientists, especially in developed

countries, are supported e.g. in terms of time by their home institutions, the volunteer nature of the organization creates a capacity constraint.

- The IPCC is a partnership between the governments that set the rules and endorse the reports, and the scientists that write the reports.
- The Summary for Policymakers, which is the part of the report that receives most attention from non-specialists, is edited in a dialogue between representatives of the governments that requested the report and will use it and the scientists that drafted it. Editing changes sought by governments must meet a consensus of all governments present, and be endorsed by the scientists as scientifically accurate and in line with the underlying full report.
- While scientists have the last word in this discussion, the language of the Summary for Policymakers is vulnerable to editing that adds ambiguity in the interests of diplomatic compromise. Otherwise the approval process generally strengthens the clarity and consistency with the underlying report of the Summary for Policymakers.
- Because the findings of the IPCC, as contained in a Summary for Policymakers, are presented after undergoing this formal approval process, it is impossible for the IPCC to comment spontaneously on scientific matters after a report is released, although authors and elected officials can do so as experts in their own right.
- The status of this approved language in the Summary for Policymakers makes it difficult for the IPCC to issue official versions of the report in simpler language targeting different stakeholders, as such versions may not be supported by some member states.
- As presently constituted, and confirmed for the Sixth Assessment Report cycle, the IPCC includes three working groups, each of which issues its own contribution to an assessment report separately, before the findings are integrated into a Synthesis Report. This means that the problems of climate change may be presented months before the potential solutions.

It will be seen from the above that efforts by the IPCC to communicate more clearly or deliver more direct messages to policymakers risk compromising the accuracy of the science of the organization's credibility, and may be opposed by some members.

And the opportunities?

Despite the criticisms about clarity and access, the IPCC's reputation as the gold standard for the science related to climate change is stronger than ever. The IPCC's reports were one of the key inputs into the Paris Agreement.

The criticisms are in fact positive – stakeholders want to engage more closely with the IPCC's work. This conference will explore how we can overcome the obstacles to realise the opportunities.