

Purpose and function of IPCC

SIR — Your leading article, “Global warming rows” (*Nature* 378, 322; 1995) displays a misunderstanding of the purpose and functioning of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and its three working groups. You characterize these three groups as dealing respectively with “questions of climatic evidence, the consequences of warming, and with ‘advice to policymakers’”, and you write as though homogenous, closed groups of experts write the reports and the summaries. This is mostly incorrect.

The IPCC is the most extensive and carefully constructed intergovernmental advisory process ever established in international relations. Governments nominate experts — people with proven academic track records — that then form writing teams selected for breadth of expertise and geographical balance. The three working groups are not in any way constructed to give a linear path from science to impacts to policy advice. Rather, they are concerned with assessing the literature on (1) climate science, (2) technical aspects of impacts and response options, and (3) economic and other cross-cutting issues. The teams write the main chapters (and chapter summaries), which generally go through widespread peer review — with hundreds of people and groups worldwide invited to comment. The content remains under the control of the writing teams.

The ‘Policymakers’ Summary’ is not a technical summary. Although usually drafted by the experts to put all key findings ‘on the table’, the final text represents a painstakingly negotiated statement of what governments officially accept as a balanced account of the state of knowledge and reasoned judgement, based on the chapters. Governments cannot alter the chapters, and authors cannot alter the Policymakers’ Summary. In other fora (the UN Climate Convention) governments will debate appropriate policy responses, and obviously may wield the words they have agreed in the IPCC Policymakers’ Summary as ones carrying particular force. But the IPCC is precluded from making any policy recommendations, and as a body does not.

The biggest threat to rational action on climate change is ignorance on the part of governments — ignorance that would find expression in governments choosing their preferred facts and preferred experts to suit national interests or particular pressure groups. The IPCC forms a critical, mutually agreed process to establish a basis of internationally accepted knowledge, and without such a process the negotiations would be rudderless and irrational. And the process of developing IPCC reports plays at least two further roles: it

educates government delegates about the findings of research; and it stimulates critical debate between research communities that might otherwise try and ignore each other’s existence.

Your suggestion that Working Groups II and III be abandoned is extraordinary. Do you really think that negotiations would proceed better if there were no such assessment of literature on the impacts of climate change, the technical options for mitigation, or of the economic and related analyses surrounding the issue? As it happens, I have sympathy with some of the reservations expressed by governments about some of the literature on valuation of impacts (and valuation of statistical life). But I would defend absolutely both the right of the chapter authors to say what they think, and the right of governments to voice their reservations and concerns. I have had my share of intellectual clashes on other parts of the Working Group III report and the report is not as any of us would have written it alone; but all those involved — authors, government representatives, reviewers and even perhaps a few media commentators — are wiser for the experience.

Of course the IPCC is not perfect. Everyone works under time pressure. Some writing teams turn out not to encompass all valid views, and some may not do full justice to review comments; experts suffer personal preferences and other human faults. Judgements also have to be made about inclusion of important information that reaches publication only in the later stages of the process. Governments could be given a stronger hand in policing all this — but only at the risk of greater politicization of the reports. Similarly, authors could be given stronger power over the Policymakers’ Summary — but only at the cost of reducing its political authority and relevance as a governmentally agreed document. Like democracy, the IPCC is far from perfect, but I have yet to see a better system of advice in international affairs.

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SIR — I should like to clarify the situation in response to your reporting on Working Group 3 (WG3) of the IPCC (*Nature* 378, 119; 1995, and subsequent issues).

In the IPCC procedures established by the governments, lead authors prepare technical assessments of published litera-

ture on an agreed range of topics. These reports are subject to peer and government reviews. The government representatives then have an opportunity to select from these technical reports those findings of special relevance to policy-makers, or in some instances to comment on the findings. This results in a Summary for Policy Makers (SPM), which is the responsibility of government representatives to the working group. The technical reports remain the responsibility of the lead authors.

In the case of WG3, at plenary meetings of more than 70 country representatives and a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Geneva (25–28 July 1995) and Montreal (11–13 October 1995), an SPM was approved line by line, and the technical report, including all chapters, was accepted.

There was some contention, as you have reported, about matters contained in Chapter 6, “Social Costs of Climate Change: Greenhouse Damage and the Benefits of Control”, as well as several other chapters. In the approved SPM, country representatives expressed concern about the way in which the economics literature treats non-market damages, especially the risk of increased mortality (value of a statistical life). In the SPM they make it clear that “while some regard monetary valuation of such (non-market) impacts as essential to sound decision making, others reject monetary valuation of some impacts, such as risk of human mortality, on ethical grounds”. The SPM goes on to express the view that “societies may want to preserve human life in an equal way”.

The corresponding technical chapter by the lead authors draws a distinction between a “prescriptive approach” to the value of a statistical life and a “descriptive approach” (Box 6.1). A prescriptive approach asks the question, “at how much ought a statistical life to be valued according to ethical or other criteria?” The authors conclude that “[a]n obvious implication of this approach is that all lives will be treated equally”. The text then goes on to outline the “descriptive approach” by which most of the economics literature (in many fields, not just climate change) evaluates the costs that society is willing to incur to protect lives, or “the willingness to pay”. Thus, the “ethical” or “prescriptive” approach preferred by country delegates is explicitly recognized in Chapter 6, although the literature available for assessment was based on a descriptive approach. In addition, both Chapter 6 and the SPM make the point that: “For individual nations, or if alternative assumptions are made about the value of a statistical life (damage figures) could be much higher” (wording from Chapter 6).