



By Robert N. Stavins

## Understanding the IPCC's Products

For five years, I served as co-coordinating lead author of one part of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Fifth Assessment Report Working Group III section, "Climate Change 2014: Mitigation," namely the chapter on International Cooperation: Agreements and Instruments.

Another important product of the IPCC process is a "Summary for Policymakers," a 33-page distillation of the 2,000 pages of the WG3 report, including a section on international cooperation. The SPM is subject to line-by-line approval by the 195 countries which are members of the IPCC.

That government approval process, which took place in Berlin in April, led to the deletion of three-quarters of the text of our section, not because governments questioned its scientific validity, but because they found various passages to be inconsistent with their respective positions and national interests within the ongoing international negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

After returning from Berlin, I expressed my disappointment and frustration with the government approval process in an essay at my blog, *An Economic View of the Environment* ([www.robertstavinsblog.org](http://www.robertstavinsblog.org)). The post was widely reported in the press. Some of this coverage was accurate and reasonable, such as Pilita Clark's article in the *Financial Times*. But other press

coverage inaccurately suggested that my critique of the IPCC process was much broader. Some in the more fringe elements of the press and blogosphere quickly capitalized on the situation by distorting the message of my post to meet their own objectives — by stating or implying that I found fault with the overall IPCC process and reports themselves, that I was an opponent of the important work of the panel, and even that I am a skeptic of the science of climate change!

The central purpose of the IPCC assessment reports is to survey and synthesize the best published research on climate change, including its causes, consequences, and potential mitigation. Each of the last several reports has therefore consisted of three volumes, prepared by separate scientific working groups, which address respectively: research from the natural sciences on climate change — whether, how, and to what extent it is happening; the impacts of climate change on natural systems and on human society — and how society might adapt to climate change; and approaches to the mitigation of climate change, including, importantly, policy options for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Hundreds of the world's leading scientists conducting research on the various topics addressed by the IPCC's assessment reports spent countless uncompensated hours over several years preparing the reports, motivated only by a commitment to scientific rigor and the desire to better understand climate change and its implications.

In addition to being divided into three volumes along substantive lines, the assessment reports are presented in three different "packages": the full volumes, each of which consist of multiple chapters totaling about 2,000 pages; the technical summaries, which condense the full volumes into documents of less than 100 pages each; and the

SPM, which at one-third the length of the technical summaries was the focus of my concerns.

None of the deletions in the section on international cooperation in the 33-page SPM had any effects whatsoever on the key, foundational products of five years of work on the Fifth Assessment Report WG3: the Technical Summary (three times the length but no more "technical" than the SPM), and — most important — the 2,000 pages of the 15 underlying chapters, including Chapter 13, International Cooperation: Agreements and Instruments (with 79 pages of text, and 57 pages of references). Only the SPM is subject to the (line-by-line) government approval process.

Even the severe cuts to the section on international cooperation in the SPM should be understood in context. The government representatives were doing their job: looking out for the interests of their respective countries. Any text that was considered inconsistent with their countries' interests and positions in multilateral negotiations was treated as unacceptable. The problem is not personal, but structural.

My concerns about the effects of the government approval process on one section of the SPM should be considered in the much larger context of what is an exceptionally valuable scientific resource for those concerned with climate change. The IPCC's three-volume reports — including the recent Fifth Assessment Report — largely succeed in accurately and objectively synthesizing the best scientific research. The reports are, as a result, absolutely essential resources for both understanding climate change and formulating responses to it.

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*The panel's reports are essential resources for responding to climate change*