



By Robert N. Stavins

The IPCC at a Crossroads

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change plays an important role in global warming policy around the world. This is largely because its reports enjoy a degree of credibility that renders them influential for public opinion, and — more importantly — because the reports are accepted as a definitive source by international negotiators working under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

But the IPCC is now at a crossroads. Its Fifth Assessment Report is complete and largely successful. But, like many large institutions, the IPCC has experienced severe growing pains. Its size has increased to the point that it has become cumbersome, it sometimes fails to address the most important issues, and — most striking of all — it is now at risk of losing the participation of the world's best scientists, due to the massive burdens that participation entails.

The good news is that this is a moment of considerable opportunity for addressing these and other challenges, because the direction of future assessments is now open for discussion and debate. In February, the 195 member countries of the panel met in plenary session in Nairobi, Kenya, to discuss — among other topics — the future of the IPCC.

Just one week before the Nairobi sessions commenced, another, much smaller meeting took place about 4,000 miles to the northwest — in Berlin. Twenty-four participants with experience with the IPCC met for a three-day workshop on the future of international climate-assessment processes. The aim was to take stock and reflect on lessons learned in past assessments in order to identify options for improving future assessment processes.

Participants included social scientists who contributed in various capacities to the Fifth Assessment Report and earlier IPCC assessments, users of IPCC reports (from national governments to intergovernmental organizations), and representatives of other stakeholder groups. Participants came from both developed and developing countries, and discussions were held under Chatham House rules, with no public attribution of any comments to individuals.

The workshop (“Assessment and Communication of the Social Science of Climate Change: Bridging Research and Policy”) was co-organized by four academic and research organizations: Italy's Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei, Germany's Mercator Research Institute on Global Commons and Climate Change, and the United States' Stanford Environmental and Energy Policy Analysis Center and Harvard Project on Climate Agreements.

Now is a moment of opportunity, because the future of the IPCC is open for discussion. In this context, two of my co-organizers — Carlo Carraro of FEEM and Charles Kolstad of Stanford — and I wrote a brief memorandum, based on our reflections on the Berlin workshop discussion. We described a set of specific challenges and opportunities facing the IPCC, and provided options for improving the process of assessing scientific research. Note that Car-

raro served as vice-chair, and Kolstad and I served as coordinating lead authors, all of Working Group III of the IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report, but our organizing of the workshop and our authoring of this memorandum were carried out in our roles as researchers, and completely independently of our former official capacities within the IPCC.

Among our recommendations were these: The IPCC should significantly reduce the number and length of meetings, and rely more on web-based communication among lead authors; it should seek to improve the scoping process to better identify relevant policy questions; reports should be made more concise and more accessible to policymakers; input from social scientists should be increased; opportunities for climate scientists from developing countries should be improved, independent of their current country of residence; and the IPCC would benefit from greater interactions with other research institutions.

Unfortunately, when the IPCC member countries met in February to discuss the future of the institution, few of these concerns were ad-

dressed concretely, if at all. As is often the case with institutions, change is difficult.

Over the coming months, we will produce a comprehensive report from our Berlin workshop in time for the IPCC's next meeting, in October, as well as the subsequent UNFCCC meeting in Paris in December, where a binding agreement is expected. When that report is available, I will bring it to the attention of readers of this column.

Robert N. Stavins is the Albert Pratt Professor of Business and Government at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and Director of the Harvard Environmental Economics Program. He can be reached at robert_stavins@harvard.edu.

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