

# Onerous for Experts, IPCC Process in Danger of Becoming Politicized

Despite attacks from climate skeptics and other opponents of action on climate change, as well as its own missteps, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is broadly viewed as the world's most legitimate scientific body that periodically assesses the natural and social science of climate change for policy audiences.

Established in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environment Program, the IPCC's purpose is to assess and synthesize scientific research on climate change, its impacts, and response options. But growing inefficiencies and other limitations have made the IPCC an increasingly problematic forum for qualified scholars.

The IPCC is governed by its Plenary, composed of representatives of member governments, a Bureau of leaders elected by the governments, and a Secretariat, all of which have distinct roles to provide oversight, develop procedures, and facilitate operation. Coverage of the

scientific literature is divided into three Working Groups that respectively assess climate change science, impacts and adaptation, and mitigation. Authors are nominated by national governments, and chosen by the Bureau.

Authors serve as Coordinating Lead Authors, with responsibility for leading the writing of a chapter, or as Lead Authors, who serve on a chapter team and participate in the writing process. CLAs and LAs participate in numerous meetings held at diverse locations around the world. Other experts serve as Contributing Authors, but the process for nominating these contributors is less formal, and the CAs typically do not participate in meetings.

The assessment cycle for each round of the IPCC begins with a scoping process, with government representatives,

together with a large group of scholars and other interested parties, drafting outlines of each chapter of the report. Following the scoping process, the IPCC Plenary approves the outlines, sometimes after some modification.

CLAs and LAs serve as volunteer labor, although some have their travel expenses reimbursed. In the Fifth Assessment Report Working Group III process, LA Meetings were convened four times from July 2011 to July 2013. These meetings took place in Changwon, South Korea; Wellington, New Zealand; Vigo, Spain; and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Over the course of the Meetings, CLAs led their chapter teams to review relevant literature and prepare text, tables, and figures.

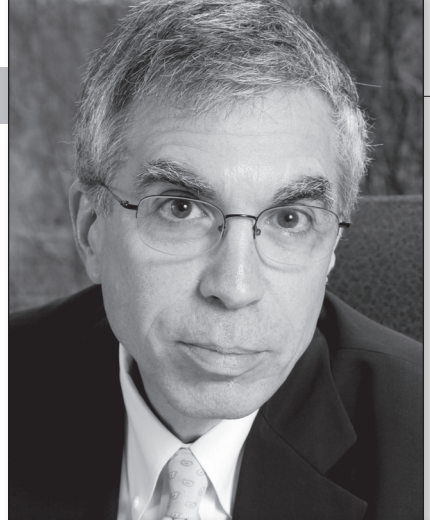
At three points during this process, external reviewers and government representatives submit detailed comments on drafts. These comments, numbering in the many thousands, are made public following the assessment cycle, and are checked by appointed Review Editors, who confirm

that authors have replied adequately to comments. After four drafting rounds, the Working Group reports are preliminarily finalized.

Toward the end of the assessment cycle, authors of each Working Group, primarily CLAs, engage in writing two summary documents for each report, a Technical Summary and a briefer Summary for Policymakers. Importantly, the latter is subject to line-by-line approval by the IPCC Plenary — that is, the national governments.

The above is a long and frequently exhausting process. Working for the IPCC is at times enormously frustrating. As IPCC authors, particularly as CLAs, scholars can at times feel as if they are inside a political process, forced to respond to critical government comments based on political sensitivity, and

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**Robert N. Stavins** is the Albert Pratt Professor of Business & Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, and director of the Harvard Environmental Economics Program. E: [Robert\\_stavins@harvard.edu](mailto:Robert_stavins@harvard.edu).

even directly negotiating text with professional climate negotiators during the government approval sessions for the Summary for Policymakers.

Despite such distractions and frustrations, however, the IPCC remains a critical institution for the communication of scholarly knowledge about climate change. Engaging governments in often detailed deliberations over climate science, economics, and policy helps build a knowledge base that is broadly based. And the process of consensus-building around the Summary for Policymakers and the work of the underlying chapters play key motivating roles in driving international climate negotiations under the climate treaty.

Going forward, the greatest risk is that scholars with sound and balanced understanding of the relevant literature may be deterred from participating as IPCC authors, and thereby surrender the process to quasi-academics with political motivations. The potential harm to the policy process (and the reputation of academia) would be very great.

To prevent this from happening, the IPCC needs to reform its operational procedures and substantive scope so that qualified scholars perceive the time investment as authors to be worthwhile. At the same time, scholars of the natural science and social science of climate change should not dismiss the opportunity to provide a significant public service by volunteering for future assessments.