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### **IPCC Communications: Experiences from the AR5**

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The AR5 saw a substantial increase in commitment to effective IPCC communications. New investments included features of the IPCC reports designed to increase accessibility, IPCC-produced outreach products, and sophisticated partnerships with other organizations. Some of the new or enhanced investments were introduced by individual working groups. Others came from the upgraded profile of communications within the management of the IPCC, including both the development of a comprehensive communications strategy and the prominent role of a head of communications and media relations.

Overall, the AR5 experience with increased emphasis on broad communication was successful, though not yet transformative. While it is hard to be confident in cause and effect, we are convinced that improved IPCC communications played an important role in shaping the science narrative that shifted emphasis away from responding to challenges from skeptics and toward enabling the strong agreement from COP21. The success of the Paris Agreement has many contributors beyond the effectiveness of IPCC communications. Still, it is notable that major keystones in the Paris Agreement come directly from the AR5. The urgency of mitigation to limit climate change, implied by the finite anthropogenic carbon budget (from WGI), a strong long-term goal (from WGII), and substantial near-term emissions reductions (from WGIII) are now fundamental features of the climate-change landscape. To the extent that there are still criticisms of IPCC communications, they were mostly from the perspective that still more can be done, especially in the areas of making SPMs easier to read and further emphasizing communications investments that go beyond the reports.

Throughout the AR5, effective communications was a topic of almost constant discussion. Most of the early emphasis of the WG and ExCom leadership was on dealing with attacks on the IPCC during 2009 and 2010. This was a period when negative media coverage was pervasive. Most of the attention focused on accusations of scientific misbehavior (in the SAR, TAR, and AR4) based on emails stolen from an archive at the University of East Anglia and on accusations of unwarranted alarmism in the AR4, especially with the error related to Himalayan glaciers. While most of the attacks were groundless, irrelevant, or minor, they spiraled into a torrent of negative stories and, to put it mildly, widespread questions about the motivations, integrity, and quality control in the IPCC.

The attacks of 2009 and 2010 caught the IPCC deeply unprepared. The absence of a sophisticated communications strategy resulted in responses that were sometimes constructive but at other times slow or unhelpful. A number of misconceptions were amplified in a media echo chamber. The shortage of effective objective reporting partly reflected limited investments by the IPCC in engaging with journalists. The attacks encouraged the IPCC to engage communications professionals to assist with both strategy and tactics. While those experiences were mixed, especially where they concerned

responsiveness of the IPCC, that period established an institutional recognition of the value of a sophisticated, professional communications enterprise. This was ultimately triggered by a push for external review and reform that came out of the IPCC Working Groups. The recognition for the need for improved communications was cemented in the recommendations of the 2010 review of the IPCC conducted by the InterAcademy Council. Positive, durable lessons from the interactions with communications professionals led to an increased willingness, in the IPCC leadership, to commit to media training and to engage more actively and constructively with reporters. These lessons, at the start of the AR5 cycle, had a strong influence on the IPCC communications strategy through the end of the AR5.

At the conclusion of the AR5 cycle, this commitment to engaging constructively with media was an established and hugely constructive element of IPCC communications. Many authors had at least one, and for many individuals several, sessions of media training. Responses to media were generally quick and thoughtful.

Below, we structure the presentation of IPCC communications in the AR5 around (1) changes to reports, (2) introduction of IPCC-produced outreach products, and (3) working through partnerships with other organizations.

### **1. Changes to reports**

Structurally, the AR5 reports are quite similar to those from previous cycles. But they differ in several important respects. First, all of the reports (SRREN, SREX, the three WG reports, and the SYR), have an overall structure and narrative intended to reflect increased attention on effective communication. Second, all of the reports benefitted from a consistent design, layout, and graphical style. Many of the most important changes were in the SPMs, which introduced the headline statements (WGI), strong conceptual figures (in WGII), and simple graphical representations of important findings.

The headline statements introduced in the WGI SPM, and then adopted for the SPM of the Synthesis Report, provided in simple and accessible language a complete narrative of the entire SPM. The headline statements, approved language by the governments, could be lifted from the SPM and represented the final distillate of the scientific assessment. As such this proved to be a very effective communication tool. Simple affirmations such as "Human influence on the climate system is clear, and recent greenhouse gas emissions are the highest in history" or "Limiting climate change would require substantial and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, and together with adaptation, can limit climate risks", are examples from headline statements in the Synthesis Report.

Some of the most memorable features of the AR5 are the strong, clear figures. Notable examples are the risk "propeller" figure in SREX (Figure SPM.1), the observed warming in WGI (Figure SPM.1b), the technical potential figure in SRREN (Figure SPM.4), the cumulative emissions figure in WGI (Figure SPM.10), the observed impacts map in WGII (figure SPM.2), the regional key risk table in WGII (Box SPM.2, Table 1), and the "grand synthesis" in the SYR (Figure SPM.10). Each of these conceptual and data figures reflects a large investment in thinking about, testing, evaluating, and refining for clarity. To a much greater extent than in earlier assessments, these figures demonstrate an emphasis on clarity that did not compromise accuracy and scientific information content.

Careful wording, chosen to emphasize clarity and communicate effectively, was a priority across the AR5, though with different manifestations and levels of ambition across the components. In WGI, the focus was on a series of headline statements each consistently summarizing the subsections and sections of the WGI SPM. WGII placed more emphasis on the clarity and communications impact of individual findings. The characterization of risks climate change impacts that are “severe, pervasive, and irreversible” creates a defining phrase and a lasting memory. WGIII embedded the goal of effective communications in the way it framed the issues in the report and through the perspectives of the author team, especially concerning topics that are intrinsically value-laden.

## **2. IPCC-produced outreach products**

The AR5 hosted a large expansion in the range of IPCC-produced outreach products. Most of these were initiated for the SREX through very effective partnership that involved additional funding from the government of Norway, support from the UK Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN), and WGII. Strong commitment from the government of Norway and deep involvement of several of the individuals representing it was critical for the success of this effort.

New products introduced in the SREX roll-out included professionally produced web site, video, and slide deck, all developed in close collaboration with the WGII and WGI TSUs and authors to assure accuracy. In addition, the SREX roll out involved an international series of outreach meetings, designed to connect academics, practitioners, NGOs, the private sector, youth organizations, and governments with the scientific conclusions. In addition, the SREX release involved the IPCC’s first experiment with an early embargoed release of the SPM to professional media.

These elements, first road-tested with SREX, were all very successful. All were integrated into the IPCC communications strategy and further developed with the release of the AR5 WG and SYR reports.

A few additional products came to maturity with the release of the later reports. These included separate printing of fact sheets, FAQs, the WGI headline statements, the WGII top-level findings, and regional climate and key-risk summaries, plus the translation and printing of several WGII executive summaries into regional languages, including Swahili.

## **3. The role of partnerships with other organizations**

One of the major realizations in the development of the AR5 communications strategy was the importance of going beyond the IPCC for relevant expertise in communicating scientific results. The first experiences were with communications professionals who provided assistance in responding to the attacks of 2009 and 2010. Some of these were hired through Working Groups. Others were hired independently. Some of the communications assistance came from organizations that donated expertise. The absence of reliable funding mechanisms through the IPCC secretariat was a source of consequential stumbling blocks early in the process.

For SREX, funding from the government of Norway facilitated the engagement of professionals to assist with web site, video, and slide deck. The government of Norway also played an essential role in supporting travel by IPCC authors as well as stakeholders/participants. In kind funding from CDKN was

essential in organizing international outreach events. Volunteer contributions by many SREX authors were the final critical element for successful outreach.

Funding from the Villum Foundation supported much of the communications and outreach for the AR5 WG and SYR reports. Management of the funds by the UN Foundation provided a professional communications interface to support a wide range of activities. These included both personal consultation about communications issues and replication and extension of the SREX innovations. One of the most important extensions was the deployment, initially for WGII releases, of a roll out strategy that included a carefully managed embargo, an extensive set of coordinated interviews, and deployment of a satellite studio at the approval venue.

### **Concluding thought**

During the AR5, the IPCC transitioned from viewing communication as a bother and risk to seeing it as an essential component of delivering on its mandate. The process of making the transition involved some components that were reactive, deployed in crisis-management mode, and others that were proactive. The emergence of a sophisticated communications enterprise is a work in progress, with many elements that are experimental. Many components of the vision are not yet complete. This reflects the still uneven appreciation, among countries, of the value of communications and the challenge of building a deployment under the complicated operating procedures of the IPCC. For future reports, an even greater emphasis on sophisticated, ambitious communication will be a prerequisite for success.