

ipcc

INTERGOVERNMENTAL PANEL ON climate change

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OTHER BUSINESS

Potential Study of the IPCC Process

(Submitted by the Chair of the IPCC)

IPCC Secretariat

c/o WMO • 7bis, Avenue de la Paix • C.P. 2300 • 1211 Geneva 2 • Switzerland
telephone : +41 (0) 22 730 8208 / 54 / 84 • fax : +41 (0) 22 730 8025 / 13 • email : IPCC-Sec@wmo.int • www.ipcc.ch



OTHER BUSINESS

Potential Study of the IPCC Process

1. General criteria for assessing IPCC assessments by scientific bodies

To promote greater transparency for the IPCC process and also to ensure that awareness is created among the scientific community and the public in general about the manner in which the IPCC carries out its activities, encouraging objective study and assessment of the IPCC process by credible scientific groups would be desirable. In the recent past two requests have been received for carrying out such assessments, the first from Oppenheimer et al on behalf of the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the second from Dr Michael Hulme. Dr Hulme has for the present decided not to pursue his original intention, but Oppenheimer et al would like to carry out this exercise from the beginning of a potential Sixth Assessment (AR6) process if the Panel agrees. While considering Oppenheimer et al's request it would be useful to lay down some general criteria governing consideration of such requests in the future. With this in view some broad criteria are provided below for the information and approval of the Panel.

1. Such requests should be entertained from groups which have credibility and standing within the scientific community. To this extent, some due diligence may be attempted by the Executive Committee of the IPCC (ExCom) before considering and recommending such requests.
2. In the implementation of such an assessment of the IPCC assessments, it should be ensured that in no way must the IPCC process be disrupted or disturbed.
3. Any such observation of IPCC activities in progress and the persons involved in it must require the permission and agreement of all concerned, including authors of IPCC reports, etc. whose work is intended to be covered.
4. Products from any assessment carried out and reporting on it should first be presented to the Panel for its information before it is made public. The Panel, of course, would not in any way interfere with or alter either the process followed by the investigators or the product that they produce. However, it would be helpful for the Panel to be presented with any report that is produced as a result of the assessment process, so that it is in a position to respond to the public if queries are received and questions are raised about the IPCC and its activities.
5. Without prejudice to these broad criteria and guidelines, permission for any exercise of this nature will have to be provided by the Panel on a case to case basis.

2. Overview – Assessing Assessments

The Chair of the IPCC was approached by a team of highly regarded independent investigators "Oppenheimer et al" with grant support from the NSF in 2012 about the possibility of the IPCC process becoming subject to a study called "Assessing Assessments", possibly in the context of the Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) or perhaps the AR6. The Chair introduced this proposal to the ExCom at its Fifteenth Meeting (5 December 2012, teleconference). Oppenheimer et al and biographical information are provided in Annex 1. The ExCom agreed that the AR5 preparations were too advanced for undertaking such an exercise, and emphasized the fact that informed consent of the IPCC authors for having scientists observe their work at meetings was a prerequisite.

The Chair informed Oppenheimer et al on behalf of the ExCom that such a study may be feasible only for the AR6, and Oppenheimer et al agreed. The ExCom requested Oppenheimer et al to send a detailed proposal (Annex 1) to be reviewed by the ExCom and submitted to the Panel at the Thirty-Seventh Session of the IPCC (P-37) for decision. At its Twenty-first meeting the ExCom (7 August 2013, teleconference) recommended that this proposal be reviewed by the IPCC on the basis of its merit, with careful consideration of how it might impact the work of the Panel, and lay down clear ground rules in terms of independence of the study and respect of the conditions that authors may require.

The ExCom noted that this request reflects the level of importance that requires it to be brought to the Panel. It also agreed that a decision on this request should not be delayed till after completion of the AR5 because the continuity of the IPCC is such that key decisions on procedures and substantial changes in operations should unfold on a time horizon that includes crossing assessment cycles. The ExCom agreed that if a final decision on this were to be delayed till the next Bureau is formed, a lot of time would be lost and the option of a study of the entire AR6 cycle might get lost altogether. Therefore, the ExCom suggests to the Panel that a decision is taken at P-37 on whether the IPCC agrees to the study of its process being undertaken by Oppenheimer et al over the AR6 cycle. If the Panel does agree, the ExCom suggests that the Panel discusses the appropriate steps to take in order to move this project forward, and so that arrangements can be put in place to implement this plan for the AR6 smoothly.

Specifically, and as mentioned in the detailed proposal submitted by Oppenheimer et al (Annex 1), the investigators seek permission to observe the deliberations of one or more chapter author teams during preparation of the AR6 for the next phase of their ongoing research project “Assessing Assessments”. Informally, Oppenheimer et al have sought permission to observe a Plenary session before the completion of the AR5 cycle as this would not raise the same issues as observing authors, and then to begin proper observations at the AR6 scoping meeting.

The ExCom believes that “Assessing Assessments” would be a worthwhile exercise which would strengthen the credibility of the scientific community as being transparent and objective. It would fill the knowledge gap which exists within the scientific community about how the IPCC functions. In addition to being of academic interest, it could also help the IPCC improve and innovate the process of assessment.

The Panel is invited to consider this request and provide further guidance.

ANNEX 1 – OPPENHEIMER ET AL DETAILED PROPOSAL

Assessing Assessments - Project Justification

Society today faces many serious problems whose identification and solution depend, at least in part, on scientific judgments. In diverse domains, scientists have either been asked by society to provide those judgments, or have volunteered them. But how do scientists decide which facts from an indefinitely large population are worthy of highlighting for the attention of others? How do they judge the status of insecure or competing factual claims? When scientists are asked to assess knowledge for the purposes of public policy, how, exactly, do they do that? **Our project seeks to understand how assessments are conducted, and how expert judgments are made in the scientific assessment process.**

While there are procedures in place to answer these questions from a technical perspective, our research seeks to deepen our understanding of the intellectual and social dynamics at work in making expert judgments in scientific assessments. For the past six years, our team has been studying the assessment process through a combination of historical and observational studies, including a post-hoc analysis of one aspect of IPCC AR4. Our project garnered substantial support from the US National Science Foundation (NSF), and in 2010, we expanded the project to include observations of assessment panels of the U.S. National Research Council. For the next stage of our project, we seek to expand our understanding of the IPCC process through direct observation of one or more IPCC chapter author teams during the Sixth Assessment.

Through the ethnographic study of the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, our research aims to: 1) understand the institutional framework within which science-based environmental assessments are conducted, 2) understand the process of assessment creation from planning to publication, 3) analyze the complex cultures of writing groups and assessment organizations, 4) characterize the ways in which assessors handle consensus formation and conflict among experts, both in the assessment writing process and in the final texts, and 5) contribute to and expand upon society's understanding of how major international assessments provide policy-relevant information regarding important societal problems of immediate interest to policy makers. Therefore, we respectfully ask permission to observe the deliberations of one or more chapter author teams during preparation of the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for the next phase of our ongoing research project.

The Research Team “Oppenheimer et al”

We bring to the table a very highly experienced and knowledgeable research team, with expertise in earth science, history and philosophy of science, anthropology, oral history, and ethnography. Oppenheimer et al is led by three senior researchers: Naomi Oreskes, Harvard University, Michael Oppenheimer, Princeton University, and Dale Jamieson, New York University) and two outstanding young scholars: Jessica O'Reilly (College of Saint Benedict/ Saint John's University) and Matthew Shindell, Harvard University). Two of us (Oppenheimer and Oreskes) have also been participants in scientific assessments.

Why IPCC?

IPCC reports are highly credible across nations and communities, and have for some time framed public discussion of climate change. This is a remarkable accomplishment, particularly given the size, scale, and complexity of the scientific community and technical knowledge involved. Indeed, the IPCC has arguably the largest and most expansive peer review system in the history of science. At the same time, IPCC conclusions do not go uncontested, either within or beyond the scientific community. How do IPCC scientists manage the large volume of scientific information relevant to their charge? How do they assess information that is conflicting, changing, or incomplete? How do scientific experts come to agreement within the specific structures of the IPCC process? And how do they manage external pressures that they may encounter? Our research seeks to provide answers to such questions.

Benefits to IPCC

Public visibility and stature brings with it, for better or worse, public interest, curiosity and scrutiny. **Our research will contribute to visibility, transparency, and legibility of the IPCC and its reports, helping policy-makers, scientists in other disciplines, and the public at large to better understand the intellectual basis for IPCC conclusions.**

Our study's findings will be published first and foremost in peer reviewed scientific journals, but we will also seek to communicate in venues where our results will reach policy makers and interested citizens. Our work will clearly explain the IPCC process and findings as well as analyze some of the innovative and challenging features of the IPCC. Most publicity about the IPCC comes from the IPCC itself or its detractors: our research team provides a neutral vantage point from which to educate the public and experts on the dynamics of climate assessments. **This will also facilitate comparison to other assessment processes as well as provide avenues for discussion of possible improvements in institutional procedures, where appropriate.**

Protection for the IPCC as an Organization and for Individual Participants

Social science research methods are unobtrusive and ethics-driven. Ethnographic observations of IPCC meetings will be conducted only with informed consent, after the ethnographer has explained our research methods and objectives. All members of Oppenheimer et al have undergone training in research ethics, and sensitive issues are discussed among the group as needed. The project as a whole is reviewed by each of the investigator's Institutional Review Boards to meet (or exceed) best research practices involving human subjects.

The ethnographer will observe the meetings, write detailed, anonymous notes, conduct interviews, and keep all notes and interview transcripts in a secure location. Any publications emerging from observations will be circulated to research participants before publication for comment. Participants are not identified. There are no demonstrable risks (e.g., reputational) to individuals participating in this project, and there can be satisfaction in knowing that one's work is contributing not just to science itself, but to a better public understanding of that science.

We have an excellent model and precedent for what we are proposing in the work we have done to date observing panels of the U.S. National Research Council (NRC) and interviewing its staff. Before beginning our research with the NRC, we discussed the project at some length with NRC management and staff, and collaborated with them to establish mutually agreeable ground rules, including strict confidentiality guidelines. If the IPCC agrees to cooperate with this research, we would propose a similar collaborative approach for establishing ground-rules and protocols for our study.

Thank you for your consideration,

The Assessing Assessments Research Group

Dale Jamieson, Jessica O'Reilly, Michael Oppenheimer, Naomi Oreskes, Matthew Shindell