

Clearing up the climate

WHEN the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is in the throes of producing one of its periodic assessments of the science of climate change, its plenary meetings can be a sight to behold, with all the brinksmanship, skullduggery and last-minute compromises that aficionados of foreign policy could wish for. In between times, these meetings of the governments that give the IPCC its name, and mandate, are of little note. That may change, though, at the plenary scheduled for Busan, in Korea, this October.

Prominent on that meeting's agenda will be the results of a report on the IPCC produced under the auspices of the InterAcademy Council, an umbrella group for the world's national academies of science, which was released today. The report, written by a committee chaired by Harold Shapiro, a former president of Princeton University, was commissioned in March by the UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, and the IPCC chair, Rajendra Pachauri, after errors were spotted in the most recent IPCC report last winter. While expressing admiration for the IPCC's achievements to date, the Shapiro committee offers sharp criticisms of the way the panel organises itself and calls for reforms.

The report finds problems with the way the IPCC handles reviews of its work, the degree to which it shows fairness when considering areas that are disputed, and the way it communicates the certainty, or lack of it, wherewith it speaks. It calls for new rules on conflict of interest (or more accurately, it calls for rules—at the moment the panel has none), a new full-time leadership position and a new executive committee. Perhaps most strikingly, the report can also be read as a call for Mr Pachauri to resign, though neither Mr Pachauri nor Mr Shapiro have characterised it in quite that way.

First, a quick IPCC primer. The panel provides various types of report and analysis, most famously a series of vast "assessment reports" on the state of scientific and academic knowledge about climate. Each report comes in three volumes produced by three different working groups, one that deals with the physical science of climate change, one that deals with the impacts of change, and one that deals with ways of reducing the amount of change to be expected. Each working group consists of hundreds of authors under the leadership of two (or sometimes more) co-chairs, one from a developed country, one from a developing country. The fourth assessment report was published in 2007; the fifth is slated to come out in installments starting in 2013 and finishing in 2014.

The Shapiro committee's report points out that the IPCC has to a large extent sat out the "governance revolution" in accountability and transparency that charitable, educational and other organisations have been dealing with in the two decades of the panel's existence. One way to start getting up to date, it suggests, is to create a new executive committee able to act in the panel's name between the plenary sessions that actually bring the member governments together. This could make the IPCC a lot more responsive and communicative.

The committee would consist of the IPCC's chair, the co-chairs for each of the three working groups, an executive director (a newly created post) and three others appointed by the governments to whom the IPCC is answerable, with at least one of these council members coming from outside the world of climate science. The executive director would be a full time appointment (the chair and the working group co-chairs are part-time roles), a job for a senior scientist who could command at least as much respect within the community as the co-chairs, and who would do most of the work involved in actually running the panel.

The sting in the tale of this suggestion is that the report recommends that the IPCC insider members of this executive committee should serve for only one term—that is, they should make their contributions over only one of the six-year assessment-report cycles. Between the

end of work on the fourth assessment report and the beginning of work on the fifth all but one of the working group co-chairs did in fact change over. Mr Pachauri himself, though, did not; he is now well into his second term. Mr Shapiro refused to be drawn on whether the idea that Mr Pachauri should go was the logical conclusion of the report's argument that "A 12-year appointment is too long for a field as dynamic and contested as climate change," allowing only that it was "one possible logical response". Mr Pachauri said that he had taken up a burden, and that putting it down was a matter not for him, but for the Busan plenary.

In a further move towards transparency, the report says the IPCC should start clearly defining the criteria by which it selects authors and others, including the chair and the new executive secretary, and documenting the steps it takes to ensure that all relevant scientific points of view are being represented or at least addressed. It should also make sure that regional assessments benefit from global expertise, not just that of those living in the regions in question. This will go some way to meeting the worries of those who see clear signs of "groupthink" in the panel's workings, though some of those critics might still press for the entire process of author selection to be made transparent.

Beyond organisation and personnel, the Shapiro panel also has things to say about the reports themselves. The drafts attract thousands of comments from expert reviewers and governments—last time round working group II's volume alone attracted over 36,000. Dealing with them piecemeal, as is now the case, does not make the most of the insights they express, and allows things to slip through the net, such as the now-infamous erroneous claim about Himalayan glaciers vanishing in the next three decades. From now on review editors should be more forceful in identifying major issues in the comments and getting pertinent responses from the authors.

The report also highlights what might be called the political epistemology of the IPCC. In the summaries for policymakers that each working group provides, assessments of how likely an outcome may be do not always communicate the amount of evidence and the level of understanding on which that assessment is based. Mr Shapiro and his colleagues suggest that in the working group II summary, in particular, this led to statements being given a confidence level they did not deserve. A related problem was high confidence given to statements, such as "Nearly all European regions are anticipated to be negatively affected by some future impacts of climate change, and these will pose challenges to many economic sectors," too vague to be assessed in any rigorous way.

Mr Pachauri and his colleagues welcomed the report at a press conference, but what actions it will lead to remain to be seen. The authors for the next assessment report have already been chosen. To deselect them and go through the process again would be time consuming and erode the goodwill on which the unremunerated process depends. Other reforms, though, could be set in train more easily, if the plenary wants to do so. The IPCC is a unique and remarkable institution; the governments that make it up will soon have the opportunity to improve it, if they can agree about just how much reform they want, and who they want to lead it.

Fonte: The Economist, Aug. 30th 2010. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>.
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