

Backgrounder

Climate change; Governance

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Sandra Leticia Guzman Luna, Mexico, speaking on behalf of the ELG in a 'Science is not negotiable' t-shirt.

Credit: IISD/Kiara Worth (enb.iisd.org/climate/sb50/27jun.html)

The critical role of science in guiding UN climate negotiations

Controversies over the scientific evidence threaten to impede global climate action

Governments first agreed to initiate a coordinated global response to climate change in 1992, in the face of mounting scientific evidence that human activities had caused global temperatures to rise, increasingly impacting natural ecosystems and humankind. They established the UN Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) to 'stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system'. Since then, the role of scientists in informing and guiding the UN climate change negotiations has been critically important — albeit at times controversial. The most recent report on holding global temperature rise to 1.5°C received a particularly contentious response within the UN decision-making body. In the face of an escalating climate crisis,

governments must use the best available science to take rapid and proportionate action.

Science in the negotiations

Formed in 1988, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s first assessment report provided the evidence base for the negotiation of the UNFCCC. The IPCC assessment reports present latest findings on climate change, its impacts and how future risks can be reduced through adaptation and mitigation. The IPCC also produces more frequent 'special reports' on key topics related to climate change.

After a report's release, the UNFCCC's governing body — the Conference of the Parties (COP) — considers its findings and determines which elements should inform global policy on climate change. Over the

KEY TERMS

Adaptation: the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate change and its effects. Adaptation seeks to reduce the vulnerability of ecological, social and economic systems to climate change.

Mitigation: an intervention to reduce emissions and/or enhance the sequestration of greenhouse gases to slow the pace of climate change.

Paris Agreement: an international agreement adopted in 2015 that builds on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It brings together member states in efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects, with enhanced support to developing countries. Parties are required to submit their plans to reduce emissions and adapt to climate impacts in Nationally Determined Contributions.

Global stocktake: a process by which governments will periodically evaluate their implementation of the Paris Agreement and assess their collective progress toward achieving its purpose and long-term goals.

VITAL STATISTICS

The IPCC releases regular scientific assessments of climate change:

- 1990: First Assessment Report — played a decisive role in creating the UNFCCC
- 1995: Second Assessment Report
- 2001: Third Assessment Report
- 2007: Fourth Assessment Report
- 2014: Fifth Assessment Report — provided input to the Paris Agreement

years, different Parties within the COP have had divergent responses to this important body of evidence.

In 1996, many Parties viewed the IPCC's Second Assessment Report 'as a basis for urgent action', while others highlighted data uncertainties and ultimately blocked consensus on specific conclusions. In 2007, there was disagreement over whether to just take note of the Fourth Assessment Report or respond in more detail. The COP eventually 'welcomed' the report and urged Parties to use it both in negotiations and in developing national policies. The response to the Fifth Assessment Report in 2014 was similar.

Special report on 1.5°C

The UNFCCC negotiations initially aimed to limit global warming to 2°C. However, a 2015 report by the UN's structured expert dialogue suggested this threshold did not align with the Convention's goal to 'prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system'. There was a big push, especially from the most vulnerable countries, to set a lower limit, ultimately leading to the Paris Agreement goal.

As a result, the Paris Agreement aims to hold the increase in global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

In 2015, the COP invited the IPCC to prepare a special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related greenhouse gas emission pathways. This was the first time the UNFCCC had requested an IPCC report to serve a specific policy question.

The report, published in October 2018, made clear that every fraction of warming matters, with the impact of temperature rises between 1.5°C and 2°C being hugely significant for hundreds of millions of people and a wide range of ecosystems. It also confirmed that limiting warming to 1.5°C is scientifically possible, though it would require rapid and far-reaching transitions in energy, land, infrastructure and industrial systems that are 'unprecedented in scale' and 'imply deep emissions reductions in all sectors'.

A contentious response

Parties' responses differed dramatically when the special report was presented at the 2018 COP, with several opposed to even 'welcoming' it.

Deferred to the following negotiations in June 2019, the discussions remained polarised.

Many Parties praised the report's 'robust and useful' science, highlighting how it had already influenced their national policies. Some wanted to discuss the report in depth during workshops while others opposed, stating a need for further research.

After weeks of tense negotiations, Parties could only agree to thank the IPCC for preparing the report. Countries were not urged to make use of its findings in negotiations nor in developing national policies. At the session's close, several Parties expressed their frustration with the outcome, repeating the mantra 'Science is not negotiable'. The Least Developed Countries and the Alliance of Small Island States expressed disappointment that not all Parties could 'accept the messages of science' while their nations face the existential threat of climate change.

Looking ahead

While the scientific community continues to alert the world to the dire consequences of rising temperatures, Parties remain polarised and are not responding in proportion to the growing body of evidence. Without commitment to action, the world will continue its trajectory to dangerous levels of unprecedented warming.

In 2023, the IPCC reports are meant to inform the first global stocktake of the Paris Agreement's implementation — including the Sixth Assessment Report set for finalisation in early 2022. It is time for Parties to fully comprehend and respond to the scientific evidence by preparing ambitious and realistic national climate plans (known as Nationally Determined Contributions). This process can be accelerated by workshops bringing together experts and government practitioners to improve scientific understanding and formulate robust climate policy. Reviews of the Paris Agreement's implementation also need to be highly rigorous and based on the science.



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

- 2018: Special Report, Global Warming of 1.5°C
- 2022: Sixth Assessment Report — will inform the first global stocktake of the Paris Agreement's implementation.

KEY SPACES

The **UNFCCC** is an international treaty that legally binds its signatories to cooperate in limiting global temperature increases, and in addressing the adverse effects of unavoidable climate change. Adopted in 1992, negotiations of the UNFCCC's work have convened the 197 Parties to the Convention at least twice a year. The UNFCCC is headquartered in Bonn, Germany.

The **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)** is the UN body for assessing the latest science related to climate change. Created in 1988, the IPCC is an organisation of 195 member countries. Thousands of scientists and experts from across the world evaluate published scientific papers to provide regular assessment reports.

The **Conference of the Parties (COP)** is the supreme decision-making body of the UNFCCC. Since 1995, its 197 Parties have met annually at locations around the world.



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FIND OUT MORE

Our work on the UN climate negotiations is being undertaken by the Climate Change Group. Find out more about IIED's efforts to support the Least Developed Countries to achieve equitable and ambitious outcomes in these negotiations at www.iied.org/stepping-global-ambition-stay-below-15degc. Information about the IPCC (www.ipcc.ch) and UNFCCC reporting is made available by the Earth Negotiations Bulletin (<http://enb.iisd.org/enb>).