3

Procedures

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Overview

Since its creation in 1988, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has taken increasing care to formalise its procedures. IPCC procedures define the creation and role of the IPCC Bureau, Task Forces and Working Groups (WGs), as well as the steps that must be taken by experts when preparing reports, and by administrators for overseeing the institution's funding. Increasingly detailed over time and now running over several dozen pages, the IPCC procedures are not a boring part of IPCC studies. They are key observation points of the main issues that the IPCC has had to address over time. They reflect the compromises it has made in its efforts to give the greatest political efficiency to its reports, while ensuring that their scientific robustness remains irreproachable. The procedures therefore constitute a site from which many of the issues addressed in this book can be read. However, they should not be taken as descriptions of *actual* practices: their implementation is open to interpretation and thereby to debate. The drafting and amendment of procedures therefore remains an open process.

3.1 Introduction

At the first session of the IPCC, held at the joint initiative of the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) and UN Environment Programme (UNEP) in Vienna in November 1988, the participants agreed on the tasks entrusted to the newly formed body – the constitution of three WGs, the governance of the Panel and its WGs, and the importance of letting experts from other international organisations attend as observers. These issues were addressed without much detail in the minutes of the session or in the 'Terms of reference for the working groups' annexed to it. In 1991, the Panel adopted the *Principles governing IPCC work*, a relatively brief text composed of 12 points, to be reviewed annually.

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The *Principles governing IPCC work* are still the main procedural framework for the work of the IPCC. Over the years, they have been continuously developed and refined (Agrawala, 1998b; Siebenhüner, 2002; Bolin, 2007; Provost, 2019). The current version of the *Principles governing IPCC work* was adopted in 1998 and it has been amended several times since then. They now include three appendices, which may themselves include annexes, devoted respectively to *Procedures for the preparation, review, acceptance, adoption, approval and publication of IPCC reports* (Appendix A), *Financial procedures for the IPCC* (Appendix B) and *Procedures for the Election of the IPCC Bureau and any Task Force Bureau* (Appendix C). In addition, the Panel adopted an *IPCC policy and process for admitting observer organisations* (2006), an *IPCC Conflict of interest policy* (2011), an *IPCC Communication strategy* (2011), and an *IPCC Gender Policy and Implementation Plan* (2020). Occasionally, IPCC procedures also refer to UNEP and WMO procedures (e.g. the participation in the IPCC is determined with reference to WMO and UN membership).

The IPCC is not an international organisation with legal personality and so the formal procedures do not legally constitute international treaties (Ghaleigh, 2016: 59). Moreover, they coexist with a multitude of informal and unwritten procedures and 'ways of doing things' (Farrell et al., 2001) which often differ from one WG to another according to the disciplinary cultures of their members. These 'ways of doing things' have sometimes been incorporated in the formal procedures and at other times have been resisted. The decision to formalise a procedure has strategic implications. Although it reduces the authors' room for manoeuvre, the formalisation of procedures is a central lever for the IPCC to ensure its legitimacy and the credibility of its reports (Sundqvist et al., 2015). Procedures are one of the main ways by which the IPCC has been institutionalised and has established itself as a central player in global climate governance. All IPCC procedures are available on its website. The IPCC gradually recognised that it is not only important to follow procedures, but also to publicise them. IPCC procedures have served two main functions over time, which this chapter describes successively. On the one hand, they have been a crucial channel through which the IPCC has sought to establish a balance, always subject to discussion, between science and politics (see **Chapter 21**). On the other hand, the procedures have been pivotal in strengthening the IPCC's legitimacy and credibility when both are challenged.

3.2 Balancing Science and Politics in the IPCC

IPCC procedures reveal which matters and methods the Panel and governments have found necessary to establish and formalise. First of all, the procedures state the mandate of the IPCC: 'the role of the IPCC is to assess on a comprehensive,

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objective, open and transparent basis the scientific, technical and socio-economic information relevant to understanding the scientific basis of risk of human-induced climate change, its potential impacts and options for adaptation and mitigation' (*Principles governing IPCC work*, §2). Sometimes referred to as a 'boundary organisation' (Agrawala et al., 2001; Miller, 2001b; Sundqvist et al., 2015), the IPCC is always seeking a balance between the scientific robustness of the assessments carried out under its aegis and the relevance of its reports for governments policies, the international negotiations on climate change, and the wider public. As the *Principles governing IPCC work* state, 'IPCC reports should be neutral with respect to policy, although they may need to deal objectively with scientific, technical and socio-economic factors relevant to the application of particular policies'.

The balance between science and politics that is inherent to the IPCC's mandate has been intensely debated (Skodvin, 2000b; Siebenhüner, 2003; Miller, 2004; Beck, 2011b; De Pryck, 2018). The procedures are indicative of where the Panel places the cursor, both in establishing the IPCC organs and in determining their prerogatives and working methods. Members involved in its governance (Bureau, WGs Bureaux, Bureau of the Task Force), and the experts involved in the preparation of its reports (Lead Authors, Coordinating Lead Authors, Review Editors, Contributing Authors), are in general chosen for their scientific competence. The *Principles governing IPCC work* nevertheless reconcile this imperative with maintaining a role for states: while the appointment of experts is decided by the Bureaux of the WGs, states are responsible for proposing the names of competent persons through their Government Focal Point. Similarly, the *Principles governing IPCC work* specify that the experts must reflect a range of scientific, technical and socio-economic views and expertise; geographical representation (ensuring appropriate representation of experts from developing and developed countries and countries with economies in transition); a mixture of experts with and without previous experience in IPCC; and gender balance (see **Chapter 7**). With regard to the elaboration of IPCC assessment reports, the *Principles governing IPCC work* establish a complex procedure involving experts as authors in the crafting of draft reports, followed by a first external review by experts and a second review by both governments and experts (see Figure 3.1).

Eventually, the report must be endorsed by the countries represented in the Panel. Depending on the nature of the report in hand (see **Chapter 5**), this entails a more or less thorough examination ranging from 'acceptance' (the material as a whole presents a comprehensive, objective and balanced view of the subject matter), 'adoption' (the material is discussed and endorsed section by section by the Panel) to 'approval' (the material is discussed and agreed to line by line).

By specifying the role of the different actors involved in the IPCC's work – scientists, states, non-governmental actors – and by organising its working

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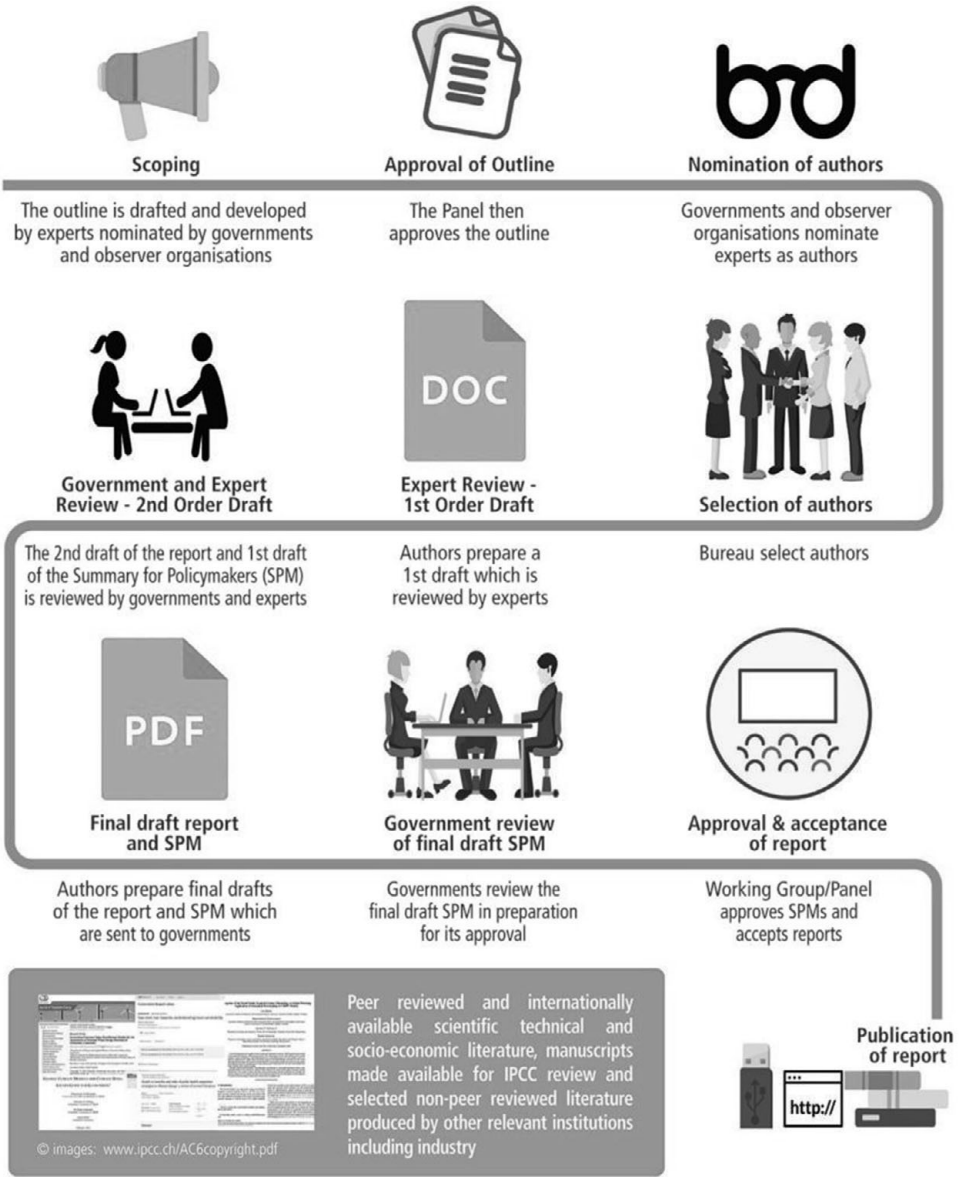

Figure 3.1 A schematic illustration of the preparation of IPCC reports.
Source: IPCC 2021 [www.ipcc.ch/about/preparingreports/]

methods, the procedures have served as a constitution for the IPCC. They have established the identity of the IPCC and have made it a unique body of expertise at the interface of science and politics. The working procedures established by the Panel depart from the classical representation of a 'linear model of expertise' (Leclerc, 2009; Beck, 2011a) in which a knowledge phase precedes a decision

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phase. Instead, the procedures organise an iterative process linking scientific assessment to political questions and international negotiations on climate change.

3.3 Strengthening the Legitimacy of the IPCC

IPCC procedures have been the target of constant discussion, criticism and suggestions for change (Farrell et al., 2001; Boehmer-Christianson & Kellow, 2002; Hulme et al., 2010). Few plenary sessions of the Panel do not include a review of its formal procedures. The criticism to which the IPCC is regularly subjected has been a powerful driving force for the development or modification of its procedures. Very early in the IPCC's existence, its legitimacy and credibility were contested by some economic and governmental actors concerned with limiting international climate action. The institutional response of the Panel to these concerns was not only to demonstrate the accuracy of the information contained in its reports, but rather also to strengthen its procedures. The increasing proceduralisation of the assessment process therefore appears to be a prime means of responding to the criticisms levelled at the IPCC.

This procedural rather than substantive response by the IPCC to criticisms has not always been easily adopted however. The scientific background of the Panel's Bureau officers and experts meant that their training and instincts would have led them to engage in discussion and argumentation about scientific substance, not about procedures. This is all the more true because a number of criticisms of the IPCC were made by actors who were clearly interested in manufacturing doubt and countering the adoption by states of measures limiting greenhouse gas emissions (Dunlap & McCright, 2011). Nevertheless, the Panel could not afford to ignore criticisms widely reported in the media; otherwise they would risk being accused of 'tribalism' (Beck, 2011b). Agreeing to undergo procedural strengthening, rather than defending the institution solely on the basis of science, therefore reflects a cultural shift for many IPCC officers (see **Chapter 6**). On a subject as politically important as climate change, expert assessment of knowledge could not remain governed by the informal rules of the scientific community.

Criticism of the IPCC has led to a significant proceduralisation of new areas of IPCC work. The areas in which the Panel has formalised or strengthened the procedures are indicative of the fundamental difficulties it has encountered. These difficulties are undoubtedly familiar to most expert bodies working in areas of public controversy (Social Learning Group, 2001; Oppenheimer et al., 2019), but because of the high political stakes involved in international climate negotiations they have been acute in the case of the IPCC. Two episodes had a particularly significant impact on the IPCC's procedures (see **Chapters 11** and **16**). The first occurred in 1996 during the adoption of the IPCC's Second Assessment Report

(AR2). Strong criticism was raised by several American scientists, and relayed by pressure groups such as the Global Climate Coalition (GCC), claiming that some IPCC Lead Authors had not respected the Panel's procedures and had deliberately undermined sceptical views on the anthropogenic origin of climate change (Skodvin, 2000b: 215; Miller & Edwards, 2001; Oreskes & Conway, 2010: 201). In response, the IPCC created the new function of 'Review Editors' charged, for each chapter, to 'assist the WG/Task Force Bureaux in identifying reviewers for the expert review process, ensure that all substantive expert and government review comments are afforded appropriate consideration, advise lead authors on how to handle contentious/controversial issues, and ensure genuine controversies are reflected adequately in the text of the Report' (*Principles governing IPCC work*, Appendix A, Annex 1, §5).

The second and more significant episode was triggered late in 2009. Emails of scientists at the University of East Anglia were made public which critics believed revealed a willingness by some of them – who were also IPCC Lead Authors – to 'hide' data or to present it in a way that would support the view that global warming is primarily caused by human activities. Around the same time, the Chair of the IPCC, Rajendra Pachauri, was accused of a conflict of interest, since he was the director of a research centre – The Energy and Resource Institute in India – which provided consultancy to companies interested in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. And finally early in 2010, a gross error in AR4, published more than two years earlier, was made public. This concerned the melting rate of Himalayan glaciers. Some of these criticisms were found, after investigation, to be unsubstantiated (House of Commons, 2010; PBL, 2010). Nevertheless, after a delay in responding to the critique (Beck, 2011b), the IPCC commissioned the InterAcademy Council (IAC) to evaluate its procedures and make recommendations (Paglia & Parker, 2021).

In its report, released in October 2010, the IAC first encouraged the IPCC to make better use of the procedures already adopted at its Panel sessions or in its WGs. For example, with regard to the review of draft reports, 'the IPCC should encourage Review Editors to fully exercise their authority to ensure that reviewers' comments are adequately considered by the authors' (IAC, 2010: 3). The IAC also reaffirmed the need to unify the wording used by IPCC WGs to describe the levels of uncertainty affecting the statements, in accordance with the guidelines already adopted in 2005 (IPCC, *Guidance Notes for Lead Authors of the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report on Addressing Uncertainties*, 2005; see **Chapter 17**). The IAC report also suggested that the Panel strengthen the procedures it had previously designed for using 'grey-literature' (*Principles governing IPCC work*, Appendix A, Annex 2, *Procedure for using unpublished/non-peer-reviewed sources in IPCC*, 2003). Other IAC recommendations called on the Panel to adopt new procedures – the creation of an executive committee to take decisions between Panel sessions; the election of an

executive director to head the secretariat; improved communication; and the adoption of 'a rigorous conflict of interest policy that applies to all persons directly involved in the preparation of IPCC reports' (IAC, 2010: 46).

The assessment made by the IAC was welcomed and acknowledged by the Panel. Many of its recommendations were immediately implemented at the 32nd Session of the IPCC in 2010, or else at subsequent plenary sessions of the Panel following the publication of the reports of the IPCC Task Groups on Procedures, Governance and Management, Conflict of Interest Policy and Communication Strategy – task groups set up by the Panel to further implement the IAC's recommendations (see also **Chapter 6**).

3.4 Achievements and Challenges

The IPCC's procedures describe in detail the different functions of the IPCC and the work processes to be followed. Whether to learn from difficulties in its operation or to respond to criticism, the Panel has refined and expanded the IPCC's procedures considerably, covering an ever-widening range of issues. The procedures have thus played a key role in making the IPCC a major player in global environmental governance. IPCC procedures also emerge as a model for 'governance by scientific assessment' (Biermann, 2011). They served as a reference for the drafting of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) *Rules of procedure for the plenary of the platform* (2012) (Futhazar, 2016). The procedural convergence between the IPCC and the IPBES has greatly facilitated their joint assessment on the relationship between climate change and biodiversity loss (Pörtner et al., 2021).

However, IPCC procedures are not immune from criticism. It is interesting that the procedures established for the IPBES – although clearly modelled on those of the IPCC – have departed from them on certain points. For example, the IPBES allows for the possibility of using a fast-track procedure for carrying out expert assessments, which gives it a responsiveness that the IPCC lacks. The strengthening of IPCC procedures has sometimes resulted in extremely complex decision schemes, as illustrated by the *IPCC Protocol for Addressing Possible Errors in IPCC Assessment Reports, Synthesis Reports, Special Reports or Methodology Reports* (*Principles governing IPCC work*, Appendix A, Annex 3). To help users navigate the many steps in the process, the IPCC had to prepare explanatory diagrams in decision-tree form. The necessary caution with regard to claims that authors have made a mistake, and the no less legitimate concern to involve them in the implementation of the error protocol, may ultimately be detrimental to the effectiveness of the process.

Similarly, the IPCC deviates from most expert bodies in deciding that the Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form filled in by experts remains confidential. They

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limit the form to three broadly formulated questions relating to professional activities, significant and relevant financial interests, and 'anything else that could affect [the] objectivity or independence [of the experts]' (*IPCC Conflict of interest policy*). Greater transparency would have demanded that the forms be more detailed and accessible. Nevertheless, the Panel must take into account that experts involved in the IPCC's assessments volunteer their time without financial compensation. Procedural requirements that are considered too stringent could discourage participation. This concern is explicit in the *Conflict of interest policy*: 'The Panel recognizes the commitment and dedication of those who participate in IPCC activities. The policy should maintain the balance between the need to minimise the reporting burden, and to ensure the integrity of the IPCC process'.

The IPCC's procedures are constantly being re-assessed in the academic literature, by the IPCC and in the media. The underlying idea is that the right procedural configuration must be found to ensure the IPCC's continuing legitimacy. In addition to the fact that opinions differ on what the ideal procedural configuration should be, it is questionable whether the procedures can fully meet the expectations placed on them. Indeed, procedures are references and do not describe actual social practices. Moreover, they need to be implemented to produce an effect. It is notable that the IAC review in 2010 emphasised the need for the IPCC to better implement the procedures that already exist. However, the implementation of the procedures leaves some room for interpretation by the actors, and can be challenged by others. The balance achieved by the procedures at any given time can therefore only be temporary and fragile. The drafting of the IPCC procedures is bound to remain an open-ended process.

Three Key Readings

Agrawala, S. (1998). Structural and process history of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *Climatic Change*, 39: 621–642. http://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005312331477

This article provides an early overview of how the IPCC procedures were constructed.

InterAcademy Council (2010). *Climate Change Assessments. Review of the Processes and Procedures of the IPCC*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: IAC. Available at: https://archive.ipcc.ch/pdf/IAC_report/IAC%20Report.pdf

In this report issued in 2010, the IAC thoroughly appraised the IPCC procedures and suggested a range of modifications.

Hulme, M., Zorita, E., Stocker, T. F., Price, J. and Christy, J. R. (2010). IPCC: cherish it, tweak it or scrap it? *Nature*, (463): 730–732. http://doi.org/10.1038/463730a

This article proposed a wide range of alternative institutional and procedural arrangements for the IPCC and illustrates the variety of views on what these procedures could be.