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Climate Knowledge and International Politics: The Future of the IPCC

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MIKE HULME, OCT 13 2013

This week (14-18 October 2013) the 37th plenary session of the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) takes place in Batumi, Georgia. One of the main items on the agenda is discussion about the future of the Panel. After 25 years of work, five full scientific assessments and much public and political visibility, what does the future hold for the organisation? Are more knowledge assessments needed or has the IPCC accomplished its mission? And how do such global assessments of climate science alter the politics of climate change?

Two weeks ago, the IPCC published the first of its three Working Group reports on climate change, the fifth such global assessment since the organisation was constituted in 1988 by a Resolution of the UN General Assembly. The latest published Working Group report focused on the physical science of climate change; the other two Working Group reports to follow in March and April 2014 will focus, respectively, on impacts and adaptation and on energy, engineering and economics.

The headline message from this Working Group report was that scientists judge – with a 95 per cent level of confidence – that human activities are now the dominant influence on the evolving climate system. Six years ago their subjective confidence level for such a statement was 90 per cent. The report also refines the IPCC's understanding of the relative importance of a range of human and natural influences, updates projections of future global climate and sea-level change based on a range of emissions scenarios and adjusts its estimates of what changes in regional weather and climate extremes may occur.

Views on the IPCC

But many are now questioning the overall value of such a huge assessment effort – and for whom exactly does it *have* value: governments, citizens, scientists, advocates? Governments of course 'own' the IPCC. It is an *intergovernmental* panel. So it was government officials, as well as scientists, who attended the final negotiating session last month in Stockholm to agree the text for the Working Group I Summary for Policy-Makers. There is little doubt that governments will use this latest assessment of climate science to refine or adjust their national and international negotiating positions on climate change policies, although whether this will make policy decisions any easier to implement is a different matter.

On the other hand not too many members of the public worldwide will have taken much notice; they will have variously considered that the risks of climate change are vastly overblown; that it is an urgent global threat demanding radical policy interventions; or, for the majority, that climate change is a concerning issue, but rather distant from their everyday concerns. As for the 259 contributing authors who were involved in the production of the first Working Group report, for every scientist who felt positive about the experience, there was another one who felt that the effort was too demanding and that they may or may not participate again under the same terms.

The Future of the IPCC: Knowledge versus Politics

So where does this leave the future of the IPCC? Are such global assessments of climate knowledge still useful?

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And if so, is the chosen means of six-yearly mega-assessments the best design? The recent Working Group I report alone comprised over a million words in more than 2000 pages. There is no doubt that the IPCC has exerted significant influence in bringing political and public attention to the role of human activities in altering climates around the world. But this accomplishment does not mean it should continue unaltered. The future of the IPCC may follow one of these four scenarios: more of the same; a change in topical structure; a change in assessment process; discontinuation.

Designing the most appropriate future scope and structure of the IPCC depends on how the following three questions are answered: What should be the role of knowledge in political life? What should be the place given to peer-reviewed scientific knowledge in the overall deployment of knowledge? Are global knowledge assessments what the politics of climate change needs? Let me consider each in turn.

Since its founding in 1988, the value of the IPCC has been predicated on the argument that decision-making about political responses to climate change should benefit from the latest and best-accredited scientific knowledge. This argument is what is now referred to as 'evidence-based policy-making'. A few might dispute the self-evident value of such a position, although two things about the evidence brought forward by the IPCC should be noted. It is a science assessment that is owned and operated by governments, not one that is run by independent scientific academies. Second, the IPCC has consistently created and promoted consensus-based knowledge claims, rather than embracing more conflict-based assessments.[1]

Neither of these two characteristics of the evidence being made and brought forward by the IPCC is inevitable. And neither is it the case that policy-making around climate change is especially sensitive to evidence at all. At the very least, the stated importance of evidence in political life varies from country-to-country; and even in countries that laud the principle of evidence-based policy-making, in practice it can be interpreted and applied in many different ways.

My second question concerns what counts as valid evidence—how are the questions for which the IPCC seeks answers being framed; and what forms of knowledge count as offering relevant evidence to answer them? Some have questioned the primacy which the IPCC has given to the geophysical sciences and economics.[2] Others have questioned the framing of climate change in terms of the paradigms and models of Earth System science.[3] The IPCC across all three of its Working Groups has given great weight to peer-reviewed science, implicitly marginalising forms of knowledge – for example, tacit, indigenous, religious – which are not authenticated in this way.

Third, it is important to reflect on the relationship between knowledge assessments and political jurisdictions. A global assessment process as constructed by the IPCC fits well the framing of climate change as a collective action problem with the solution requiring coordinated global policy. This has been the framework within which climate politics has emerged these last 25 years. However, it has not met with great success! Clark Miller amongst other STS scholars has drawn attention to the disjuncture between the domain of IPCC knowledge-making – global – and the continuing primacy of the nation state in political action. Maybe the global is not the scale at which effective climate policy implementation is most likely to occur. In which case, maybe the IPCC's global knowledge assessments are bringing forward inappropriate forms of knowledge to inspire and guide policy.

Move Beyond Science and the Nation State!

My view is that the current IPCC model has served its time and purpose. Something else is now needed. There are many different suggestions for re-design on the table in Batumi this week, submitted by over thirty different governments. Some call for radical re-structuring; most for mere tinkering. I would offer the following four suggestions:

- The relationship between the design of knowledge assessments and the framing of policy challenges needs more explicit consideration and by a wider range of extra-governmental stakeholders. Climate change need not be framed as a global collective action problem in which nation states are the prime actors;[4]
- Future assessments should do more to achieve a balance between consensus and dissensus; they should embrace a wider diversity of paradigms and values beyond Earth System science and include local

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- knowledge and diverse forms of cultural attachment;
- Knowledge assessments should be regionalised, at least assessments of knowledge that extend beyond the geophysical sciences, such as pertaining to adaptation, culture, land use and energy;
- The process of knowledge assessment must recognise the changing norms and less deferential practices of public interaction with scientific expertise.

Perpetuating the IPCC in its current form will continue the pretence that the challenges of confronting human manipulation of the planet are first and foremost cognitive: 'We need to know the precise extent of our influence in the present or in the future and that predictions about the future will lead to political, structural or behavioural change'. I do not believe this to be the case. The challenges are both evaluative—entraining diverse values and interests—and practical—requiring a pragmatic and agonistic politics.[5] Knowledge matters, as does the form of public knowledge assessments that are made. But for too long creative policy and cultural responses to climate change have been distracted by arguments about climate science—and the IPCC in its present form unwittingly has been partly responsible.

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Mike Hulme is professor of climate and culture in the Department of Geography at King's College London. His work explores the idea of climate change using historical, cultural and scientific analyses, seeking to illuminate the numerous ways in which climate change is deployed in public and political discourse. His most recent book *Exploring Climate Change Through Science and In Society* (Routledge) was published in August. He is the author of *Why We Disagree About Climate Change* (CUP) and from 2000 to 2007 was the Founding Director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research.

[1] See Rescher, N., 1993, *Pluralism: Against the Demand for Consensus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

[2] Bjurström, A. & Polk, M., 2011, *Climatic Change* 108(1-2), 1-22

[3] Beck, S., 2011, *Regional Environmental Change* 11(2), 297-306

[4] (see the 2010 Hartwell paper)

[5] (see Machin, A., 2013, *Negotiating climate change: radical democracy and the illusion of consensus* Zed Books, London)

About the author:

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