

## United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

November 2007

In October this year, the Nobel committee has brought the scientific work of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to global prominence by awarding it the Nobel Peace Prize<sup>1</sup>.

The committee said the prize was for the IPCC's "efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change, and to lay the foundations for the measures that are needed to counteract such change."

### What is the IPCC?

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was established by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1988. At the time, it was recognised that climate change was a serious issue and that world leaders would need unbiased scientific advice - independent of national interests and corporate influence.

The IPCC is charged with providing 'policy relevant' but not 'policy prescriptive' advice to policymakers on all aspects of the climate change problem.

The IPCC is open to all member countries of UNEP and of WMO and normally meets in plenary sessions once a year. The plenary decides on the IPCC's structure, principles, procedures and work programme, and it elects the IPCC Chair and the Bureau. It also agrees on the scope of IPCC reports and accepts reports. Plenary sessions are generally attended by hundreds of representatives from governments and participating organisations. The IPCC, the IPCC Chair and the Bureau are supported by the IPCC Secretariat.

The role of the IPCC is to advise policymakers about the current state of knowledge concerning climate change by providing reliable information. It does not conduct any scientific research itself, but instead reviews the thousands of scientific and technical papers on climate change published in peer-reviewed literature every year. The IPCC summarises the 'state of knowledge' on climate change in its Assessment Reports, published every five years or so.

These reports have become standard reference works, widely used by policymakers, scientists, other experts and students. The IPCC also produces a variety of other reports at the request of governments, intergovernmental organisations or international treaties. All scientists and experts involved in producing and reviewing the IPCC's work do so on a voluntary unpaid basis.

### How the IPCC Works

The IPCC is broken down into three working groups.

**Working Group I:** "assesses the scientific aspects of the climate system and climate change". That is, it reports on what we know about climate change - if it is happening, why it is happening and how fast it is happening.

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<sup>1</sup> The prize will be presented to the IPCC – and former US Vice President Al Gore - on Monday 10<sup>th</sup> December – the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Kyoto Protocol.

- **Working Group II:** "assesses the vulnerability of socio-economic and natural systems to climate change, negative and positive consequences of climate change, and options for adapting to it". That is, it looks at to what degree climate change will impact people and the environment, and what changes might reduce its impacts.
- **Working Group III:** "assesses options for limiting greenhouse gas emissions and otherwise mitigating climate change." That is, it examines ways to stop human-induced climate change, or at least slow it down.

Each Working Group has two co-chairs, one from an industrialised country and one from a developing country, and a technical support unit. IPCC activities, including travel costs for experts from developing countries and countries with economies in transition, are financed through voluntary contributions from governments. WMO, UNEP and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) provide additional support.

### **IPCC Assessment Reports**

Assessment Reports provide comprehensive scientific, technical and socio-economic information on climate change, its causes; impacts, adaptation and vulnerability, and mitigation options. Each of the three Working Group reports includes a Summary for Policymakers (SPM), published in all official UN languages. The SPM is written so as to be understood by non-specialists.

Previous Assessments have been highly influential in determining both national and international policy on combating climate change. The first, released in 1990, led to the decision by the UN General Assembly to prepare the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The Second in 1995, provided input to the negotiations for the Convention's Kyoto Protocol.

IPCC reports are written by teams of authors, nominated by governments and international organisations and selected for a specific task according to their expertise. Several hundred experts from all over the world are normally involved in drafting the reports, with many more experts participating in the review process. About 1,000 experts were involved in drafting the last (Third) Assessment Report in 2001 and about 2,500 were involved in its review. The Fourth Assessment Report will be published in 2007.

The IPCC usually starts a new Assessment by developing a general outline. Policymakers and other users are consulted in order to identify the key policy-relevant issues. After the outline is approved, teams of lead authors are assembled to prepare each chapter. Chapter teams should include experts from all regions and represent a range of expertise and prevailing scientific and technical opinion.

IPCC reports must pass through a rigorous two-stage scientific and technical review process to ensure credibility and transparency. For the first review, the drafts are circulated to specialists with significant expertise and publications in the field. The drafts are then revised and distributed to governments and to all authors and expert reviewers. After taking into account comments from experts and governments, the final drafts are presented to the plenary session of the IPCC for acceptance of their content.

Summaries for Policymakers are prepared alongside the main reports and undergo a simultaneous expert and government review. They are then approved line-by-line in plenary session, with the agreement of the lead authors, to ensure that they are consistent with the underlying scientific-technical report.

Finally, the IPCC prepares its **Synthesis Report**. This contains the factual information about climate science which government policymakers will largely rely on for the next five years.

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