

Reviewing Communications at the IPCC

Professor Yamaguchi Mitsutsune assesses the InterAcademy Council's call for improved understanding between the media and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Since November of 2009, events have taken place which may have adversely influenced the credibility of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports or even that of the IPCC itself. One of these, known as "Climategate," involved the unauthorized release of a large amount of data on servers at the University of East Anglia in Britain and subsequent allegations of suppression or falsification of data by some of the IPCC lead authors involved, though the allegations were later proven to be unfounded through authoritative investigation. The second involved allegedly erroneous statements in the IPCC's Fourth Assessment Report regarding the projected disappearance of Himalayan glaciers.

In response to these events, the United Nations and the IPCC asked that a review of the processes and procedures of the IPCC be carried out by the independent InterAcademy Council (IAC), which on August 30 of this year released its findings in a report entitled "Climate Change Assessment." The IAC made recommendations in five areas, including the review process and communications. This article will focus on its recommendation concerning communications.

IPCC assessment reports have played a vital role in climate change negotiations in recent years. At the same time, there has been increasingly widespread misunderstanding among leaders, the media and general public about the role of the IPCC, and this misunderstanding has had a serious impact on international negotiations. For example, some view the IPCC as having recommended, as a scientific requirement, that the average increase in global temperature should be held within 2°C com-

pared to natural levels prevailing before industrialization. This is a complete misunderstanding caused, in part, by the way the mass media would sometimes report on the IPCC's findings.

Consider the following specific examples. The leading British newspaper the *Financial Times* carried an article on December 18, 2007 stating in effect "the IPCC's conclusion that the world should try to limit warming to 2°C." Another

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article, on April 19, 2008, stated that the "IPCC... recommended last year global carbon emissions must peak by 2015 to 2020 to avoid irreversible damage."

The articles presented such statements as if they were reporting specific targets or emission pathways recommended by the IPCC. In response to my request that these claims be corrected, the reporter sent me the following response regarding the April 19 article. "Our article," she said, "took its figures from the IPCC's summary for policymakers, which did conclude that to avoid warming exceeding 2.4 to 2.8 degrees, emissions must peak by 2015 to 2020. Warming beyond that level would have undesirable consequences, according to the IPCC." She went on to say that "Dr. Rajendra Pachauri, chair of the IPCC, has repeatedly in public, and in an interview with me for the FT, very clearly recommended that governments ensure emissions peak by 2015 to avoid dangerous climate change."

The reporter's mistake in her first claim is evident. There is no such con-


clusion in the IPCC report. In the second, she has mistaken the private view of the IPCC chairman as the conclusions of the IPCC Assessment Report.

Both of the above errors stem from misunderstandings about the role of the IPCC. The IPCC Statement on Principles and Procedures states that the IPCC's "goal is to provide policy-relevant but not policy-prescriptive information" (see www.ipcc.ch/pdf/press/ipcc-statement-principles-procedures-02-2010.pdf). These have been the principles of the IPCC since its establishment. In light of this fact, it is clear that the IPCC does not intend to "prescribe" specific targets to be met. It merely provides scientific statements that to meet specific targets, what conditions should be met.

In this regard, the above IAC recommendations stressed the need for the IPCC to improve its relations with the media. "IPCC leaders," it said, "have been criti-

cized for making public statements that were perceived as advocating specific climate policies. Straying into advocacy can only hurt the IPCC's credibility."

The IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report is due for release in 2013 through 2014, and like the Fourth Assessment Report, it is likely to have a significant impact on global leaders in the context of international negotiations and other forums. If so, it is critical that the IPCC promotes and raises awareness and corrects understanding of its role among world leaders and the media.

In this regard, experts on climate change in Japan who have contributed to the IPCC activities as lead authors released a statement on September 30. Readers may wish to refer to the following: www.m-yamaguchi.jp/index.php?main=english_page/IPCC_english.pdf 

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