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9

Governments

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Overview

This chapter explores the role of governments in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), how this is theorised, and how government participation in the organisation has changed over time. One of the most distinctive features of the IPCC is its intergovernmental character. While some scholars criticise government membership of the IPCC, many IPCC actors see this as key to ensuring the political relevance of the assessment. But what does government membership mean? What do member governments do in the organisation? And who are IPCC delegates and focal points? This chapter addresses these questions and identifies how member governments have deepened their involvement in the IPCC over time as their knowledge has grown and as the stakes in climate politics have risen. However, participation between countries remains uneven and the chapter explores how concerns about developing countries' capacity to contribute has shaped the IPCC and assessments of climate change.

9.1 Introduction

The IPCC is composed of member governments that meet once or twice a year in plenary session. Membership to the Panel is open to all member countries of the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and there are currently 195 member countries. However, of this number, only half regularly send representatives to plenary and about one quarter could be described as active participants (IPCC, 2009b). The Panel is involved at every stage of the IPCC's assessment practice, which enables governments to have considerable influence over the organisation and its work. Although member governments are not directly involved in authoring the reports, they approve the report outline, nominate authors, elect the Bureau review draft reports, and accept

and approve the final products, including the Summaries for Policymakers (SPM) (see **Chapter 20**). Financially, the IPCC is dependent on donations from governments, and all IPCC expenditure is agreed upon by the Panel, which gives governments the final decision over the organisation's continuation, its assessment activities, and the expert meetings and workshops that inform these.

In this chapter, I explore how the role of governments in the IPCC is understood and theorised, and how government participation in the organisation and its assessment activities has changed over time. One of the distinctive features of the IPCC as a global environmental knowledge body is its intergovernmental character (Agrawala, 1998a). While some scholars have been critical of government membership of the IPCC (Haas, 2004), many actors within the organisation see this as a key feature for ensuring the policy relevance of the reports produced and their impact on government action. As a result, this model has been emulated in newly established global environmental assessment bodies, such as the *Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (IPBES). I use the lenses of the 'epistemic community' model and the 'boundary organisation' (BO) concept to unpack how science and policy are intertwined in the IPCC. This approach illuminates the avenues member governments have open to them to influence the organisation and its assessment process. The chapter identifies how governments have deepened their involvement in the assessment practice of the IPCC, as their confidence in the organisation and its process has grown and as the stakes in climate politics have increased. I also highlight how asymmetries between 'developed' and 'developing' country participation persist.

9.2 From Epistemic Community to Boundary Organisation

Two main perspectives informing the study of governments and the relationship between science and politics in the IPCC are the epistemic community model and the boundary organisation concept (Hughes, 2015; Lidskog & Sundqvist, 2015; Hughes & Paterson, 2017). An epistemic community is defined as 'a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area' (Haas, 1992: 3). These transnational communities of scientists and other experts are said to play a critical role in helping states to identify their interests in complex and uncertain issue areas, framing them for collective debate, proposing specific policies and identifying salient points for negotiation (Haas, 1992). This approach has been influential in exploring the establishment of the IPCC (Lunde, 1991; Boehmer-Christiansen, 1994a,b; Paterson, 1996; Bernstein, 2001; Newell, 2006). Matthew Paterson (1996: 144), for example, concluded that 'the

international development of climate as a political issue ... can plausibly be interpreted in terms of the effect of the development of an epistemic community on the subject' and that 'in the IPCC we can see the epistemic community at its most organised' (Paterson, 1996: 146).

Although the epistemic community model has been used to explain the origins of the IPCC and the politicisation of climate change, Peter Haas (2004) is sceptical of its applicability to the IPCC. He has been critical of the intergovernmental nature of the Panel, suggesting that it stifles the epistemic community's ability to function as theorised. In fact, Haas considers the IPCC an attempt by governments to gain control *over* the scientists and the diplomatic process, which had ascended too quickly up the political agenda in the 1980s under the epistemic community's influence (Haas & McCabe, 2001; Haas, 2004). From this theoretical approach, science and politics are, and should remain, separate realms (Lidskog & Sundqvist, 2015).

The boundary organisation approach, on the other hand, takes the organised intertwining of science and politics in the production of scientific knowledge for political action as its starting point (Guston, 2001). A BO is identified by its location between the distinct social worlds of politics and science, by the participation of actors from both sides, and by the distinct lines of accountability to each (Guston, 2001: 399–400). From this perspective, relevant knowledge emerges from the productive collaboration between the institutions of science and politics. Empirical studies informed by the BO concept highlight the importance of maintaining a distinction or a 'boundary' between science and politics during the production of assessments. They illuminate how this is achieved in practice through IPCC activities (Skodvin, 2000b; Fogel, 2005; Gustafsson & Lidskog, 2018b) (see also **Chapter 24** for the related idea of boundary objects). As the study of the IPCC has matured, 'boundary organisation' has emerged as the most important concept for characterising the nature of the IPCC, with the IPCC identified as 'the preeminent boundary organisation on climate change' (Adler & Hirsch Hadorn, 2014: 663; O'Neill et al., 2015: 380). From this perspective, the IPCC reflects in equal measure the scientisation of politics and the politicisation of science (Hoppe et al., 2013), but it is not considered tainted by its intergovernmental nature.

However, when the role of governments is explained, and their deepening involvement in the work of the IPCC and its assessment practice are documented, Haas' criticism of government interference cannot be completely dismissed. Maintaining the distinctiveness and boundary between science and politics within the IPCC, either discursively or in knowledge products, has become increasingly difficult as the stakes in climate politics have risen (Beck & Mahony, 2018a; Livingstone et al., 2018; Livingstone & Rummukainen, 2020; De Pryck, 2021a). The potential effect of IPCC reports on climate negotiations within the UN Framework

Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) means that governments invest at every stage of the assessment to control the potential ‘weight’ or effect of IPCC knowledge on global climate policymaking. This is most observable during the approval of the report’s key findings in the SPM (Hughes & Vadrot, 2019; see also **Chapter 20**). Furthermore, sometimes overlooked in this focus on the relationship between science and politics, is the asymmetries in participation between developed and developing countries. These asymmetries shape both the intergovernmental character of the organisation and assessment authorship. While there is a growing body of literature documenting the effects of this on the assessment reports (Hulme & Mahony, 2010; Ho-lem et al., 2011; Corbera et al., 2016; Hughes & Paterson, 2017), it is less well studied within member government relations (see Siebenhüner, 2003; Hughes, 2015; Yamineva, 2017).

9.3 Governments as Panel Members and Focal Points

Member governments effectively have two roles within the IPCC: the first, inward facing, as members of the Panel, and the second, nationally facing, as national focal points. Returning to the establishment of the IPCC allows us to examine how government participation in these roles has evolved and how the issue of developing country involvement has been addressed. The IPCC’s establishment in 1988 was led by a relatively small group of individuals identified as representatives of government, the parent organisations (WMO and UNEP), and prominent members of the international climate science community (see **Chapter 2**). The First Assessment Report (AR1) was originally envisioned as an exercise for a small group of core members, and although all WMO and UNEP members were invited to the IPCC’s first Panel session, only 30 countries sent delegates (IPCC, 1988).

However, the organisational leadership quickly realised it would need to increase developing country participation if the assessments were going to be recognised and accepted as *global* assessments of climate knowledge. As acknowledged by the first IPCC chair, Bert Bolin, in the oft-cited quote: ‘Right now, many countries, especially developing countries, simply do not trust assessments in which their scientists and policymakers have not participated. Don’t you think global credibility demands global representation?’ (Schneider, 1991: 25). To address this, a Trust Fund was established to financially support one representative from each of the developing countries and countries with economies in transition to attend plenary meetings of the Panel and for appointed experts to attend author meetings (Agrawala, 1998b). The issue over developing country involvement, however, was not solved with the establishment of this fund. It would become a defining feature of the IPCC’s work in the years ahead and an issue that remains on the organisational agenda today for reasons explored later.

The organisational distinction between government members of the Panel and scientific experts on the Bureau was also blurred in the early years of the IPCC. This is reflected, for example, in the principle that ‘to provide for the best possible coordination, the Chairmen and vice-Chairmen of the Working Groups (WGs) should be, where possible, Principal Delegates of their respective countries in [the] IPCC’ (IPCC, 1988: 6). From the perspective of some of the founding members, this blurring between Bureau and Panel actors was a unique feature of the IPCC and one that enabled ‘the harmonious resolution of difficult situations which arose in the work of the panel’ (Zillman, 2007: 877). Today, however, the Bureau and the Panel have more distinct memberships and tensions exist between Panel member governments and Bureau members. One of the most publicised incidents of this was the Bureau election in 2002, when incumbent IPCC chairman, Dr Robert Watson, was not re-elected for a second term in an election process that divided opinion within the Panel (Lawler, 2002; Zillman, 2007: 875).

This was the first time in the IPCC’s history that it was necessary for the Panel to take a vote on the position of chair. The two most cited reasons for this struggle highlight how political dynamics and developing country participation shape the organisation and its work. The first was that the USA – under the George W Bush administration – opposed Watson’s re-election because of his advocacy on climate action (McRight & Dunlap, 2010: 120), and the second, was that it was necessary for the chairmanship to be held by a developing country member, after it had been held by two developed country experts for three assessment cycles (Bolin, 2007: 185–187). However, this struggle over Bureau elections also indicates how important Bureau membership is to governments, as evidenced by the pre-election manoeuvring that was revealed during AR5 by Wikileaks (Guardian, 2010a,b,c). Bureau membership can offer an important source of information to government delegates in position-taking on issues concerning the Panel. Countries with Bureau members may also attend Bureau meetings, which gives them further knowledge and insight into IPCC processes and may help them make authoritative interventions during decision-making and the approval of text.

In addition to being members of the Panel, government participants have an outward-facing role as national focal points. In this role, they act as conduits between the organisation, the national government and national scientific communities. The appointed focal point alerts the relevant community of scientists at the start of a report process, nominates authors, and coordinates national review processes for draft reports and input into other relevant IPCC documents and assessment activities (see **Chapters 3** and **9**). Governments’ capacities to invest and fulfil these activities, and thereby actively participate in and shape the process, provides further insight into the asymmetries between developed and developing country involvement and its effects.

9.4 Why Are Levels of Participation between Governments Unequal?

One of the reasons that the Trust Fund was unable to ‘solve’ the issue of developing country participation is because attending an IPCC panel meeting is not the same as being able to meaningfully participate (see Box 9.1). The differences between levels of involvement by governments in IPCC activities can be discerned by taking a closer look at what makes an authoritative Panel member. In order to be able to wield influence over the organisation and its assessment activities, it is essential to have knowledge of the process. This knowledge is attained over time and through investment and participation in the IPCC and through cultivating relations with the Bureau, Secretariat and other members of the Panel. This knowledge of the process translates into influence during plenary proceedings through informed interventions on the issue or text under discussion.

This investment in the IPCC is also a reflection of a government’s interest in the climate issue. At a national level, this could be identified as *self-interest*, with both

Box 9.1

Why delegates’ levels of participation vary

Why is the interest and investment in the IPCC by governments so uneven between countries? The dynamics around country participation are complex and multifaceted. Countries are identified as either ‘developed’ or ‘developing’ within the IPCC, but this classification can mask significant variation in the number of authors in the report and of government involvement in the Panel – for example when comparing Brazil, China or Saudi Arabia to Bolivia, the Maldives or Mali.

The following anecdote sheds light on some of the structural forces that shape participation for some developing countries, even for those at the ‘more’ developed end of the spectrum. In 2010, I attended the 32nd plenary of the Panel in Busan, South Korea. One of the things that I became aware of was that during proceedings the room was less than half-full and that interventions were dominated by a small group of countries highly immersed in the process (see Table 9.1). In contrast, several developing country delegates appeared disinterested and were entering and leaving in the middle of the proceedings. I asked one long-term observer why this was the case, and he responded that for some the trip to Busan was ‘probably a political favour’ and that they had ‘come for the shopping’.

This response was similar to comments that widely circulate about developing country participation within the IPCC. But these comments often overlook the substantial human resources and economic investment that IPCC activities require and the historical order of intergovernmental relations that condition the availability of such.

Box 9.1 (cont.)

Table 9.1. *Top ten countries by frequency and total time of interventions at the 32nd Plenary Session of the Panel, hosted in South Korea, October 2010*

(Data collected by author; only interventions from the floor were counted, and not presentations by delegates or Bureau members chairing contact groups)

Top country by number of interventions	Number of Interventions	Top country by total time of interventions	Total Time (seconds)
1. US* (WGII)	50	1. Switzerland* (WGI)	4,849
2. Switzerland* (WGI)	43	2. US* (WGII)	4,240
3. Saudi Arabia*	33	3. Saudi Arabia*	3,218
4. Australia*	28	4. Australia*	2,854
5. UK*	25	5. UK*	1,960
6. Belgium*	24	6. Russia*	1,532
7. Germany* (WGIII)	24	7. Netherlands	1,288
8. Netherlands	23	8. Germany* (WGIII)	1,222
9. Austria	14	9. Austria	1,062
10. Sweden	12	10. Brazil*	942
Totals	276 (representing 64% of all interventions)		23,167 (representing 69% of total time)

WG designation indicates which country hosted the respective Technical Support Unit.
* signifies member countries with a Bureau member.

a scientific and political dimension. On the science side, many developed countries have well-established, well-funded natural and social science communities producing knowledge on climate change. Members of this community are well represented in the authorship of the reports and in the knowledge assessed (Corbera et al., 2016; Hughes & Paterson, 2017). Focal points mobilise these communities during author nomination and expert review processes to ensure national representation and input in the assessment. On the politics side, governments are increasingly aware of the potential influence that IPCC assessments have on UNFCCC negotiations. They actively participate in

appointment, review and approval processes to keep abreast of this knowledge and its potential impact on future climate policymaking.

Interest in Panel activities is, in part, conditional on being able to participate meaningfully, which at a national level requires having the economic resources to invest in the IPCC and, relatedly, the human resources to undertake membership activities. Without the time and resources to invest in commenting on draft outlines, initiating a search for national expertise, and undertaking a government review of draft reports, member governments as delegates are effectively excluded, or at least limited in their capacity, to meaningfully participate in IPCC proceedings. This is evident in the approval of SPMs, where informed position-taking on the technical framing of climate change requires the expert knowledge generated through the review process and/or housed within the national delegation.

Nationally, this also requires recognition of the impact that IPCC assessment findings have on climate negotiations and coordinating IPCC participation accordingly. For example, the location of the focal point is important to ensure coordination between IPCC and UNFCCC participation and to enable cross-departmental input into the government review of reports. However, the focal point is more commonly within the meteorological service in developing countries than in dedicated environment and/or climate change departments as in developed countries (from list of focal points, IPCC, n.d.(b)). Furthermore, if a different delegate is sent to every meeting, the lack of continuity prevents knowledge of the process and procedures and the cultivation of good relations with other Panel, Bureau and Secretariat members. It requires personal time commitment, and national recognition and support, to enable the same delegate to attend every meeting, undertake focal point duties, initiate review processes and coordinate with the national UNFCCC delegation. While the Trust Fund has enabled a stronger developing country presence, the resources available are insufficient to enable the full participation of all countries. The effect of this is that the capacity to influence the Panel reflects broader global distributions of economic resources and the political order that are tied to colonial legacies and histories of dispossession.

9.5 Achievements and Challenges

Within IPCC scholarship, knowledge of member governments' role and participation within the organisation has been informed by the concepts of epistemic community and boundary organisation. The concept of boundary organisation illuminates the productive tensions between science and politics within the IPCC, which enables government members' interests in climate change to inform and shape knowledge products and ensure their relevance, at least for the active participants of the IPCC. Over time, governments have become more

autonomous actors within the organisation, although still dependent on the Bureau for realising the assessment. Furthermore, as the stakes in the climate issue and negotiations have risen, so has member government investment in IPCC activities. This has led to increased tension at key moments when science and politics are brought together, such as during Bureau elections and the approval of report outlines and key findings in the SPM text (see **Chapter 20**). Here, it is the epistemic community model that enables the questioning of whether, within the IPCC, the level of government involvement is creating usable knowledge for political action – or whether the intergovernmental process is being used to facilitate political delay.

Both the epistemic community model and the boundary organisation concept focus on the relation between science and politics. This can mask the unequal governmental capacity to shape the organisation and the direction and content of the IPCC's assessment reports. While the establishment of the IPCC Trust Fund in the 1990s sought to facilitate developing country involvement, the economic and human resources required to conduct IPCC activities means that considerable asymmetries persist. Understanding these asymmetries, and reasons for their persistence, is an important area for future research.

Three Key Readings

- Agrawala, S. (1998a). Context and early origins of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *Climatic Change*, 39: 605–620. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005315532386>
- Agrawala, S. (1998b). Structural and process history of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *Climatic Change*, 39: 621–642. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005312331477>

These two papers provide an excellent account of the IPCC's establishment.

- Bolin, B. (2007). *A History of the Science and Politics of Climate Change: The Role of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511721731>

Bolin's book offers an interesting account of the organisation from the perspective of the first IPCC Chair.

- Ho-Lem, C., Zerriffi, H. and Kandlikar, M. (2011) Who participates in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and why: a quantitative assessment of the national representation of authors in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *Global Environmental Change*, 21: 1308–1317. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.05.007>

This article presents a quantitative examination of developing country participation within the IPCC.