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Governmental Approval

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Overview

The reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are not produced by scientific experts disconnected from policy. They are produced within a political framework. The governmental endorsement of IPCC reports is a key element of the perceived success of the organisation. In particular, the approval of the Summaries for Policymakers (SPMs) makes the member states of the IPCC active participants in the assessment process and creates ownership of their content. At first sight, the involvement of governments in the IPCC reveals a genuine exercise of co-production between science and politics. It is expected to make the reports more legitimate and policy-relevant. Yet a closer look at the practices through which governmental ownership of IPCC reports is produced shows that governments may in some cases contribute to making them policy-*ir*relevant.

20.1 Introduction

Presenting the Fourth Assessment Report (2007) (AR4) at the United Nations Summit on Climate Change in 2009, the former chair of the IPCC, Rajendra K. Pachauri (2009) stated that 'the uniqueness of this mammoth exercise lies in the fact that all the governments of the world – your own governments – approved of this report, and therefore have full ownership of its contents'. More recently, Chris Field and Vicente Barros (2015: 36), two former members of the IPCC Bureau, praised the 'added value' of IPCC approval sessions, which 'generate broadly shared ownership of scientific knowledge on climate change – a key contribution to the influence of IPCC reports'. These quotes are illustrative of the 'perceived binding force' (Riousset et al., 2017: 263) that emerges from governmentally negotiated documents like the SPMs. It is generally expected that, once approved,

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the summary statements cannot be questioned in other multilateral fora, and in particular in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

For a long time, the IPCC approval process was presented by its leadership as exempt from political interference. For instance, another Bureau member, Sir John Houghton (2007: 14), argued that 'it can be said with confidence that no wording was included or added, and no changes were made [in the SPMs] for political or ideological reasons'. Social scientists, however, have increasingly challenged such views and presented a more complex, social and political analysis of the approval process. It has been argued that such a process, while creating a 'shared scientific understanding' of climate change (Lidskog & Sundqvist, 2015: 12) can also be conflictual and lead to 'least-common denominator generalities' (Vardy et al., 2017: 59). It has also been suggested that the approval process offers the member states of the IPCC (i.e. the 'principals') much scope to shape the knowledge and policy perspectives put forward in the SPMs (Compagnon & Bernstein, 2017).

This chapter discusses how governmental ownership is forged through the approval process and ultimately how IPCC member states contribute to shaping the meaning of climate change. In this chapter we understand the IPCC as we would any other UN organisation, i.e., one that remains 'accountable to governments, its founders and funders, both individually . . . and collectively' (Ghaleigh, 2016: 69). This does not mean that IPCC authors and Bureau members do not have agency in shaping the SPMs. Quite the contrary. But IPCC authors do need to take governments' multiple and sometimes contradictory interests into account while drafting the reports.

This chapter thus explores how the scientific 'facts' presented in the SPMs are translated into diplomatic 'facts' (Ruffini, 2017: 120). It shows that the SPM approval process reveals disagreements about scientific interpretations and policy relevance. But it also shows that, crucially, when statements contained in the SPMs become entangled with interstate relations and UNFCCC negotiations, the approval reveals multilateral diplomacy at work. The chapter is based on the available literature, on participants' accounts, as well as on the author's own observations of plenary sessions of the Panel (2014–2022). The following sections discuss governmental approval as a process, as a negotiation and as an output.

20.2 Approval as Process

Governmental ownership is not only created at the end of the assessment process, when IPCC authors submit their reports, but through the whole process (see Chapter 3). First, governments agree on whether or not to produce a report and

decide on the timeline for its production. Following a scoping meeting – which brings together representatives from governments, observer organisations and academia – a first outline is submitted for approval to the member states of the IPCC. This outline sets the overall narrative of the report and contains chapter titles and indicative bullets. The approval of the outline offers an opportunity for governments to define the mandate of the reports and to suggest policy-relevant questions. It is also a moment in which the messages and terminology proposed in the document are scrutinised and may become enmeshed in controversies.

During the approval of the outline, government representatives may ask for clarifications and changes in the structure and the bullet points. Because they come from diverse national institutions (e.g. from meteorological agencies or ministries of foreign affairs), their interventions can be both scientific and political. Some government representatives may want the IPCC to address specific scientific and technical debates or to discuss issues relevant for their domestic and international policies. Others may also seek to raise issues in the IPCC in order to move forward discussions in the UNFCCC because of the historical proximity between the two institutions (see **Chapter 2**).

At this stage, much time is already spent 'weighting' (Hughes & Vadrot, 2019) the terms and concepts proposed in the outline, by testing how they can be interpreted by different audiences and assessing whether they have a 'policy context' – for example, whether they relate to policy documents beyond the IPCC. Governments may also seek to *prevent* certain topics from being discussed in the IPCC. For example, references to terms such as 'fossil fuel' or 'Nationally Determined Contributions' (NDCs) have sometimes been opposed, because oil-producing countries wanted to divert attention from the main drivers of climate change or because of unresolved conflicts in the UNFCCC (Hermansen et al., 2021). While the outline still leaves much leeway to authors in how they address each topic, its approval reflects struggles over the control of the narrative of the reports and of the assessment process more broadly. These struggles often re-emerge in subsequent meetings of the IPCC.

Following the approval of the outline, authors then work autonomously in their Working Groups (WGs) and draft the reports. Governments get involved in the review process by providing comments on the Second Order Draft (SOD) of the reports, as well as on their SPMs (see **Chapters 5** and **11**). At that stage, they may ask for clarification and additional information, make suggestions to improve the text, but also express disagreement with certain statements. The governmental review process helps authors and Bureau members identify issues that are likely to become controversial in the approval session of the SPMs. They assess whether each statement or figure is grounded in well-founded and traceable reasoning – and are thus 'defendable' – and make sure it does not constitute

Figure 20.1 Plenary Session of the IPCC Member States, UNESCO, 24–28 February 2020.
Photo by IISD/ENB Leila Mead

a 'red line'. This may lead to self-censorship, but authors and Bureau members may also decide to go forward with their analyses and 'fight' for it in plenary (Broome, 2020).

The approval of the SPMs usually takes one week, two weeks when approved online (see **Chapter 4**, Box 4.1). These sessions are performances of multilateral diplomacy where government delegates scrutinise the document line by line and agree, in dialogue with the authors, on a common position that satisfies them all. The IPCC uses deliberative procedures that have been refined over 30 years and closely follow UN practices. These include the arrangement of the main plenary room (Figure 20.1), where delegates are seated in alphabetical order by country, the use of the track-changes mode to amend the draft documents, and the availability of breakout rooms to pursue parallel discussions in smaller and less formal settings. At the same time, the detailed scrutiny that the SPMs undergo is unique. Few other international institutions give member states such control over their outputs.

Sitting on a podium, the authors – usually the Coordinating Lead Authors or Lead Authors, see Chapter 7 – and the Bureau members assess the requests made by governments and suggest more consistent formulations. Arguments put forward concern issues of 'clarity of the message', 'scientific accuracy', 'balance',

'policy-relevance', 'policy prescriptiveness' and 'procedural consistency' (Petersen, 2011: 3). In other words, statements contained in the SPMs must be clear and consistent with the underlying literature reviewed in the WG reports. Statements also need to be balanced in such a way that they do not single out particular perspectives, and yet are deemed relevant to a wide range of policymakers, while leaving unconstrained the range of development pathways and policy options (to avoid policy prescriptiveness) (see Chapter 21). While government comments are sometimes politically motivated, when their countries' interests are at stake, most contribute to make the SPM clearer – and provide at times a much needed 'reality check' to some of the theoretical and abstract statements proposed by the authors.

The SPMs must be approved in a transparent process that does not leave any country behind. The approval process renders visible the tensions between two views of consensus that coexist more generally in the IPCC (see **Chapter 19**). On the one hand, is the view in the singular. This type of consensus tends to reduce the diversity of perspectives by converging on the most robust and unanimous conclusions. On the other hand, consensus is also viewed in the plural. This view seeks to accommodate the concerns of all parties and to balance a variety of perspectives. This second type of consensus abides by principles of pluralism to ensure that 'everybody is on board' (Kouw & Petersen, 2018).

20.3 Approval as Negotiation

Studies of intergovernmental expert bodies like the IPCC – but also of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) – have conceptualised SPM approval sessions as 'negotiating sites' (Hughes & Vadrot, 2019: 15). The SPM 'negotiations' involve much arguing, a great deal of compromising and some bargaining (De Pryck, 2021a). The deliberations are generally dominated by a small group of countries (see **Chapter 9**).

The approval process is complex (Figure 20.2), contingent on the negotiating capabilities of delegates *and* authors and is influenced by a variety of factors. These include: the epistemic features – for example whether quantitative or qualitative knowledge is under discussion – and 'controversiality' of the sentence or figure under scrutiny; the strength of the arguments raised; the scientific and political resources of the delegations supporting/opposing it; and the personality and argumentative skills of the delegates, authors and chairs of the sessions. In general, the modification of a statement without the consent of the authors cannot be accepted without exposing the organisation to severe criticism. Yet, authors are strongly encouraged to seek consensus and accept compromises, even if they might not always want to.
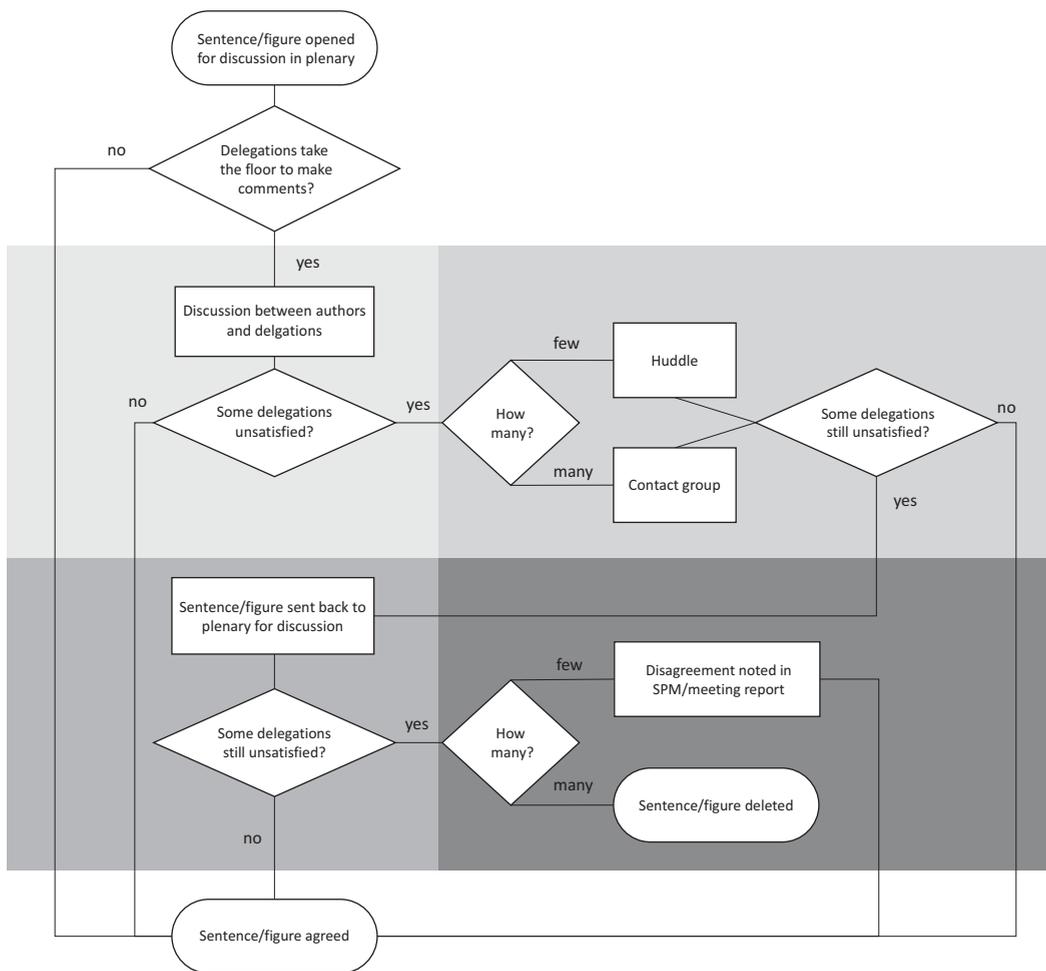
Figure 20.2 Flowchart representing the process of negotiating an SPM sentence or figure.
The shades of grey show the level of controversiality.
Flowchart produced by the author

The authors and Bureau members use various strategies to respond to governments' comments. They may enjoin governments to respect the voice of the authors or ask for additional time to consider their requests. When an issue cannot be resolved in plenary, the discussion with disagreeing parties is moved to 'a contact group', a formal parallel meeting in a dedicated room, whose proceedings are carefully communicated. Or 'a huddle' may be formed – an informal meeting, decided on the spot, which generally takes place in the back of the plenary or in the corridors. The choice of one or the other of these devices is made at the discretion of the chair of the session and depends on the number of disagreeing parties. Contact groups are chaired by two government delegates – one from a developed country and one from a developing country – mandated to remain neutral and bring parties to an agreement. They can span several days and generally multiply towards the end of the week. When a consensus is found, it is brought back to the plenary and accepted.

When a compromise consistent with the position of the authors *cannot* be found, the IPCC procedures allow for the diverging views to be acknowledged in the document, for example in a footnote. Government delegates are, however, reluctant to be publicly named in the SPMs and generally request to see their reservations expressed in the minutes of the session. Governments may also consensually agree to delete the contentious issues from the document, a decision that generally creates great frustration among the authors. John Broome (2020), for example, recalls a moment in which a paragraph on climate justice in the AR5 Synthesis Report came close to being deleted by governments. Yet, when the authors threatened to resign from the process, 'this made the delegates suddenly more cooperative. They did not really want us to go. Consequently, agreement was reached following some shuttle diplomacy between the two camps the next day' (Broome, 2020: 105).

Closure is reached when silence fills the room, in the absence of delegates asking for the floor. It reflects their agreement to let a document stand as the position of the group and the 'suspension of disagreement . . . signalled by the absence of objections to a consensus proposal' (Moore, 2017: 127). Once approved, the SPMs become a 'black box' that masks the disagreements that went into the deliberations. Their conclusions are widely disseminated in the media, through outreach events in different countries and at UNFCCC side events (see **Chapters 22** and **26**). In the UNFCCC, they are discussed in the Subsidiary Body of Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) and in other ad hoc mechanisms – for example, in the Structured Expert Dialogue (SED). Yet, agreement on *which* conclusions to identify as most relevant for the UNFCCC and *how* they should be integrated in decisions of the Conference of the Parties (COP) is generally difficult to reach (Lahn & Sundqvist, 2017).

20.4 Approval as Output

In general, the approval of the SPMs is deemed necessary by many participants and researchers for whom such a process reflects a delicate exercise of co-production between scientists and government representatives to produce 'usable knowledge' (Haas & Stevens, 2011). There is no doubt that it generally helps increase its policy relevance and speak to a wide range of perspectives. At the same time, questions have been raised about the implications of the approval on the framing of climate change. In the early work of the IPCC, observers have documented numerous attempts by Saudi Arabia and the United States to focus the debate on the remaining uncertainties related to anthropogenic climate change in order to delay action (Franz, 1998). It has also been suggested that governments may seek to weaken the language of the SPMs by inserting vague and consensual terms, caveats and qualifications that render statements too generic.

Social scientists have also drawn attention to the 'epistemic selectivity' (Vadrot, 2017: 69) at play in intergovernmental expert bodies – the dominance of 'specific forms of knowledge, problem perceptions, and narratives over others' – and to the tendency to put forward a global and technical framing of environmental problems. It has been suggested that governments contribute, as much as scientists, to presenting an abstract and global story of climate change, which downplays more regional and local information and asymmetries (Livingston et al., 2018). Such language also avoids implicating actors or sectors and contributes to framing climate change in a non-political manner (Victor, 2015). Researchers have also challenged the tendency of some governments to privilege a technical framing of climate solutions by down-playing the political feasibility and socio-economic implications of certain technologies (Fogel, 2005).

Finally, social scientists have elucidated the challenges that the IPCC faces when introducing issues that have implications for the UNFCCC, because governments are unlikely to accept statements that could compromise their positions. For example, in the approval of the AR5 WGIII SPM, conflicts arose over a graph showing anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions aggregated by country-income groups (Victor et al., 2014) and a paragraph on the effectiveness of the Kyoto Protocol (Stavins, 2014). Both examples carried important implications for the ongoing negotiations of the Paris Agreement that several governments did not want reflected in the SPM. In response to the controversy, authors shared this frustrating experience, suggesting that the SPM had become a summary *by* policymakers rather than a summary *for* them (Wible, 2014).

20.5 Achievements and Challenges

The endorsement of IPCC's reports by its member states and, in particular, the approval of their SPMs, is a unique institutional feature of the organisation. It is undeniably one of the main reasons for the IPCC's high legitimacy among policymakers. Because of the perceived success of the IPCC as a science–policy interface, several other global environmental assessments have adopted a similar framework. Both IPBES and UNEP (in its Global Environmental Outlook) submit SPMs for the approval of their member states.

At the same time, as this chapter shows, social scientists have increasingly highlighted the limits of these governmentally negotiated documents. First, the approval of key scientific conclusions does not mean that governments accept them and will take more informed decisions. For instance, following the approval of the Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5 °C (SR15), the United States – under the administration of Donald J. Trump – requested to insert in the report of the meeting a statement noting that the 'approval of the SPM . . . should not be understood as U.S. endorsement of all of the findings and key messages included in the SPM' (IPCC, 2018c: 16). Later, at COP24, the United States, with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Russia, opposed 'welcoming' the report out of concern that it could be used to call for more stringent action.

Second, despite its intergovernmental nature, the IPCC has increasingly been struggling with meeting the multiple information needs of policymakers. On the one hand, IPCC reports tend to produce decontextualised knowledge that is difficult to translate at the national, regional and local levels. On the other hand, by shying away from some of the most relevant (geo)political aspects of climate change, they may contribute to supporting the international status quo and the ossification of the UNFCCC. In that context, the policy-relevance of the IPCC has been questioned. Interestingly, however, other actors, and civil society groups in particular, have started to leverage the political status of the SPMs, using them for instance as legal evidence in climate change litigation.

Social and political pressure on the IPCC is likely to intensify in the context of an increased interest in solutions to climate change. If the IPCC is to meet these challenges and remain policy-relevant, it will need to rethink how governmental approval is produced. Several researchers have proposed giving more visibility to the individual chapters of the WG reports and to the Technical Summaries, whose language and scope is less likely to have been tuned down (Victor et al., 2014). Others (Hulme et al., 2010; Victor, 2015) have suggested that the most controversial political questions should be addressed in parallel processes independent from the IPCC and from governmental influence.

Three Key Readings

Broome, J. (2020). Philosophy in the IPCC. Chapter 7 in: Brister, E. and Frodeman, R. (eds.), *A Guide to Field Philosophy Case Studies and Practical Strategies.* London: Routledge. pp. 95–110.

This chapter provides a witty account of the IPCC approval process from the perspective of a philosopher involved as Lead Author.

De Pryck, K. (2021). Intergovernmental expert consensus in the making: the case of the Summary for Policy Makers of the IPCC 2014 Synthesis Report. *Global Environmental Politics*, 21(1): 108–129. http://doi.org/10.1162/glep_a_00574

This chapter draws on ethnographic methods to study the SPM approval process, using the case of the IPCC AR5 Synthesis Report.

Hughes, H. and Vadrot, A. B. M. (2019). IPBES and the struggle over biocultural diversity. *Global Environmental Politics*, 19(2): 14–37. http://doi.org/10.1162/glep_a_00503

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of the SPM approval process in the IPBES and draws parallels with the IPCC.