

## Extreme Events, Climate Change, and Us: A New IPCC Report for Policymakers

As this issue of *Weather, Climate, and Society* was going to press, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its Special Report on Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation, an awkwardly lengthy title condensed to SREX in IPCC parlance. The report was a short summary for policymakers and will be followed by a larger and fuller scientific report on the subject in 2012. As in the past, the release of this IPCC summary was followed by press coverage that emphasized the report's findings on our changing climate, in this case linking climate change to the risk of weather extremes such as recent floods in Asia and Australia and this year's droughts, heat waves, wildfires, and other natural catastrophes in the United States. True to form, press coverage of the report inevitably mentioned the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the IPCC and the public outrage over minor errors of fact in recent IPCC reports. Somewhere in most articles, a climate change skeptic was consulted to disparage the conclusions of the report. The pattern has become very familiar to us all.

What is missing in press coverage of the SREX, however, is an appreciation not only of the very real accomplishments of the IPCC over the past 20 years but also of specific goals and approaches of the IPCC, which can be seen so clearly in this report. For example, one of the motivating goals of the IPCC is communication with policymakers. It could be argued that this is an impossible task, that the attention of policy makers is so strongly fixed on the immediate problems of the European economy, elections in the United States, or disasters in Southeast Asia that a well-written, 27-page report by scientists will never attract their attention. However, it could also be argued that private sector policy makers, working in a different time frame than national leaders and with a different constituency, are paying attention to the IPCC reports. It can further be argued that the audience of policy makers is found at many levels of government and that outside the narrow circle of national policy makers there are many who are paying attention to the IPCC. In addition, in a democracy, all voters are, to some limited extent, policy makers by forcing their leaders to pay attention to issues of concern. In that respect, the audience for the policy makers' summary is extremely broad and the IPCC is right to give precedence to publishing its policy makers' summaries. Too often, scientists give lip service to communicating with policy makers but rarely engage in it. The IPCC provides a model for effective communication with decision makers.

A second area in which the IPCC deserves our respect is its inclusiveness. IPCC reports are the result of a consensus-driven process that involves hundreds of authors from over 60 countries. Its reports go through an extensive review process. This inclusiveness extends to the content of the reports as well. Conflicting claims, seeming contradictory research findings, and differing methodological approaches are all considered in preparing IPCC reports. Potential differences are the focus of extensive discussion during the preparation period. The result is a series of reports that reflect the conclusions of the international scientific community. Moreover, in 62 countries, policy makers and the public have to recognize that the IPCC reports are consensus reports that their own scientists, not just the scientists in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries; Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC); or the United Nations, support.

A third area in which the IPCC deserves our appreciation is its focus on the interactions of the climate system with society. This is central to the concerns of *Weather, Climate, and*

*Society*. Over the years, the IPCC has increasingly acknowledged the role of humans in climate change. In this report on extreme events and climate change, the IPCC emphasizes the interactions of climate extremes, exposure to risk, and population vulnerabilities. Specifically, the just-released report is concerned with “the interaction of climatic, environmental, and human factors that can lead to impacts and disasters, options for managing the risks posed by impacts and disasters, and the important role that non-climatic factors play in determining impacts” (Allen et al. 2011, p. 1). Recognition of the significance of the interactions of climate and weather with society led the American Meteorological Society to establish this journal. The scientific importance of that decision is confirmed by the IPCC emphasis on interactions with society in its latest report.

Standardized press reports on the latest IPCC report to policymakers are valuable because they alert the public and public officials to the release of the report and give a flavor of recent research results and the evolving scientific consensus about the critical interactions between weather, climate, and society. The release of the report, however, should also be an occasion for breaking the mold and reflecting on some of the broader benefits and accomplishments of the IPCC reports, such as those discussed here. Ultimately, the reports will be most useful if they are read by those individuals and groups who are in a position to act on what they learn. For that purpose, a short newspaper article is inadequate. The IPCC—and the scientific community—has a responsibility to ensure that the IPCC reports are distributed to local, state/provincial, and national leaders; to heads of organizations in civil society; and to leaders of special interest groups so that they can all move beyond what are necessarily brief press reports and can understand better the extent (and limits) of what we know at the present time about the complex interactions among extreme events, climate change, and us.

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#### REFERENCE

- Allen, S. K., and Coauthors, 2011: Summary for policymakers. *Special Report on Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation*, C.B. Field et al., Eds., Cambridge University Press, 30 pp.