

IPCC - Should its mandate be broadened?

Science and policies

by [Materne Maetz](#)

The IPCC and its detractors

Since its creation in 1988, the IPCC has attracted a lot of criticisms. They have multiplied as and when the importance given to its work increased in the media and among political decision makers.

The most important of these criticisms had to do with errors, insufficient coordination leading to inconsistencies and a few conflicts of interest [\[read\]](#). The IPCC was also criticized on its way of dealing with uncertainty [\[read\]](#) and, more generically of being a closed club using unreliable data and manipulating them. Similarly it was sometimes accused of playing politics instead of doing science. All these points received answers [\[read in French\]](#). Finally, the IPCC was a continuous *bête noire* of all sorts of naysayers who, for various reasons, refuse to accept the reality of climate change [\[read\]](#).



A prescriptive IPCC?

In an article soon to be published, an ex-member of the IPCC makes new criticisms and suggests to broaden the Panel's mandate so as to allow it to make prescriptive conclusions.

After rejoicing over the excellent work done by the first working group of the IPCC, focused on climate science, designed to provide solid evidence on the urgency to act in the face of climate change, the author strongly criticizes the work conducted by the second and third groups supposed respectively to inform on solutions for adapting to climate change and for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

The author blames these two groups for not being prescriptive enough, for not comparing strategies adopted and policies implemented by various countries and their outcomes, in order to put forward the most effective actions for adapting to the changing climate and reduce GHGs. He also criticizes them for not sharing with decision makers some information pertaining to actions that are most likely to help cope with the climate crises, even though they can be found in the thousands of pages produced by the IPCC in its [six majors successive assessments](#).

In particular, he laments that the documents for policy-makers and the general public are the result of political (and not scientific) compromises in which, in addition to scientists, political representatives of 195 countries are involved. He explains this by the intergovernmental nature of the IPCC. Finally, he proposes, as an example, solutions which he finds effective in the field of agriculture - of which he is a specialist - but which have not been suggested by the IPCC, putting this shortcoming on the account of its mandate.

But what precisely is this mandate?

According to the IPCC website, the Panel was established "to provide policy-makers with regular assessments of the scientific basis of climate change, its impacts and future risks, and options for adaptation and mitigation". IPCC reports "provide a scientific basis for governments at all levels to develop climate-related policies, and they underlie negotiations at the UN Climate Conference." They are "policy-relevant but not policy-prescriptive ... and discuss the implications of response options, but they do not tell policy-makers what actions to take" [[read](#)].

It is this very last point that is heavily criticized by the author, as making the IPCC's work more prescriptive would, according to him, contribute to a faster and more efficient implementation of measures that could help to cope better with the climate challenge.

A prescriptive IPCC would be weaker to face its critics

Is the author's perspective of a more effective IPCC, if prescriptive, plausible? Nothing could be less sure.

Indeed, a more prescriptive IPCC would be more likely to be criticized on its recommendations than it is now on the scientifically established facts that it gathers. More criticisms would create a risk to see the whole of the Panel's work challenged and accused

by its most hard-hitting opponents to try and give a “pseudo-scientific” basis to ideologically motivated policy recommendations¹.

By turning prescriptive, the IPCC would stop limiting its work to the domain of science to enter a new territory, that of the design of policies (economic, social, environmental, etc.) and of actions to be implemented. This is an activity that is more an art than a science (see below).

Moreover, by putting forward global policy prescriptions grounded on its scientific work, the IPCC could be accused of trying to make believe:

- That solutions to the climate crises are technical and “general”, while in reality, they are mainly context-related and political, as they must be adapted to local conditions (e.g. social, economic, environmental and political) in order to be simultaneously efficient and politically feasible.
- That solutions proposed could be applied whatever the prevailing conditions (one size fits all), while in reality local conditions are all “specific” as illustrated by decades of policy recommendations, the most emblematic being the uniform recipes put forward during the structural adjustment period and their often dismal failure in economic, social and environmental terms.
- That governments do not have the capacity, based on the scientific information presented in IPCC reports and in the publications on which they rest, to make a sovereign decision on how they prefer to act.

These plausible allegations would contribute to discredit IPCC recommendations, as they did in the past for those made by international financial organizations such as the IMF and World Bank.

In addition, it would be easy to demonstrate that a particular prescription is not adapted to specific conditions (environmental, social, economic, historical, political, technical - especially available resources and implementation capacity) prevailing in a given country. A clear example is that of energy: the industrial history of France made possible the emergence of the current consensus on the role of nuclear energy in the context of the reduction of GHG emissions. The consensus is quite different in Germany, Japan, South Africa or Bhutan. In each of these countries, the consensus is influenced by history, social structure and internal balance of power.

All these criticisms could have as a result the weakening of the scope and credibility of IPCC’s scientific work and its conclusions. This would be catastrophically counterproductive.

¹ This was one of the criticisms made to the international financial organizations (IMF and World Bank) and their economic policy prescriptions during the structural adjustment period.

Of counterproductive consequences of recommendations on the reading of a document

When I first saw the author's paper, I went directly to its conclusion, as I often do. There, I found a recommendation suggesting that to combat climate change: "Rich countries should co-subsidize fertilizer in developing and less developed countries, so as to make them more accessible to small farmers in these countries".

My personal experience provided me with several arguments against this recommendation: (i) nitrogen fertilizers have with time, under certain conditions, a negative impact on production because they may acidify soils and also because of the resulting decrease of soil biodiversity; (ii) the use of fertilizer is risky in case of drought, and drought is likely to increase in the intertropical zone with climate change; (iii) fertilizer subsidies benefit mostly to large fertilizer users - the richest farmers who can buy large quantities, and not poor farmers who cannot afford fertilizers even when subsidized - and they can sometimes cause overuse of fertilizer.

In addition, limiting measures to improve productivity and reduce GHG emissions from agriculture to increasing mineral fertilizer applications only, as does the author [on p. 9 of the article] is an excessive and dangerous simplification, because there are many other ways (agricultural practices, crop mix and others) for improving crop living conditions and productivity while reducing GHGs [read [here](#), for example].

My arguments, for what they are worth, have had as consequence - and this is what matters here - to create doubt in my mind on the quality of the totality of the author's article and its underpinning reasoning. For this, a small sample was enough of what could generate controversies - a characteristic of any recommendation for action, as will be seen here below. This doubt was sufficient, in a first reaction only (luckily), to discourage me from reading the 37 pages produced by the author.

My reaction, questionable as it is, illustrates the risk created by putting forward general recommendations that can be easily challenged in specific circumstances. This risk would be that incurred by the IPCC if its mandate were modified as proposed by the author of the article.

Action is an art, not a science

We have had an earlier opportunity for discussing the issue of science and for identifying the main attributes of scientific work: observation, measurements and experiments, production of theories and related testable predictions, as well as the independence of statements made of whom formulates them [[read p. 2](#)].

In the realm of action and policies that guide it, the situation is radically different. There, it is difficult to forecast with certainty the result of a planned action. It is even as awkward to attribute confidently a result to an implemented policy (or policy package). This makes objective evaluation of a policy quite problematic (so many factors are involved that can absolutely not be controlled, contrarily to what occurs in a scientific experiment) [[read pp. 20-22](#)].

Indeed, the human environment - contrarily to a lab - is an uncontrollable and chaotic environment. It is made of a myriad of "wicked" problems. Those are problems for which:

- It is difficult to make a problem statement;
- The search for solutions never stops;
- There is no objectively 'right' or 'wrong' solution;
- It is complicated to measure the effectiveness of solutions proposed;

- A solution, when implemented, cannot be undone (there is no possibility to use a trial-and-error approach);
- There is no limit to the set of potential solutions;
- Every problem is unique;
- The problem is intertwined with other problems and difficult to be dealt with separately;
- Many stakeholders are involved who have different views and who, therefore, propose different ways of resolving it;
- Decision-makers have no right to be wrong (they bear the consequences of their decisions) [[read. p. 9](#)].

Consequently, this world differs radically from the scientific world, in particular because rigorous scientific experiments are impossible², predictions cannot be tested and statements made are not independent from those who make them...

In the world of action, everything is a sort of art - and not a science. By venturing on that track, the IPCC would enter a new area in which their production would likely backfire.

In this world, it is even practically impossible to agree on an objective, and thus even less on what should be done to achieve it. If IPCC members reached a consensus on what should be done, it would immediately be contested by a multitude of stakeholders, some of whom could use this opportunity to challenge the Panel's scientific work and even its very existence.

In this world - ours - everyone thinks in his/her own perspective and the consensus - if it can be reached in words - is the result of a balance of power and not of a scientific process. It can therefore not be optimal in the scientific sense of the word. Simply, it has the advantage of being "feasible" in so far as it has the support a coalition of stakeholders that is sufficiently strong to push for its implementation.



² Some tried to conduct such experiments, but their work is contested even though they were given a Nobel prize!

In this world, it is even difficult to define the objective to achieve; to define what the general interest is; whether there is a need for growth; or for a growth for the rich tempered by a trickle down process to the benefit of the rest of the population. Or a growth for the poor, a redistribution of wealth with the risk, seen by some, that there would remain insufficient incentives for the most dynamic to contribute with their full potential. Or, finally, the preservation of the environment to ensure long-term continuation of humanity...

While speeches sometimes gives the impression that a consensus is possible, action, on the other hand, shows that it is only exceptionally translated into facts. This is precisely what occurred with the United Nations' [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), that the UN itself now thinks impossible to achieve by 2030 [\[read\]](#) ... because of a lack of concerted actions.

No, definitely, the IPCC should rather remain within the domain that has been his! At most, it could review possible solutions and their results obtained in particular contexts to draw some inference on the circumstances in which they could have the best chances of succeeding and produce expected outcomes³.

Last point, to conclude: it is a daring bet to believe (and make believe) that absence of action is due to lack of formulation or implementation capacity of a particular solution. Rather, it generally reflects an unfavourable balance of power. This point is well illustrated in the case of food and of the inequalities that characterize it [\[read\]](#).

Further readings:

- Riedacker, A., Pourquoi le mandat du GIEC devrait-il maintenant être élargi pour contribuer réellement à la réalisation de la neutralité carbone d'ici à 2050 : illustration avec le secteur de l'agriculture, de la foresterie, de l'utilisation des terres et des produits dérivés, Actes de l'IFSDAA, (International Fondation for Sustainable Development in Asia and Africa) 12ème Conférence sur la gestion des ressources pour l'alimentation, l'agriculture, l'environnement et la santé durables, Göttingen (Soon available in both French and English).
- Maetz, M., [Background notes on food policy](#), Master course on Human Development and Food Security, Università Roma Tre, Roma, 2022
- GIEC, [IPCC FACTSHEET - What is the IPCC?](#), GIEC (online).

Selection of articles on hungerexplained.org related to this topic:

- [Inequality in food systems - Is it realistic to believe that food systems could become more equal in an unequal society?](#) 2023.
- [Science, what science ? A problem or part of the solution? When the industry doctors science for profit](#), 2023.
- [When dealing with complex and intertwined crises, mainstream economic solutions prove ineffective and generate more inequalities - The case of the climate crisis](#), 2022.
- Opinions: [Climate Injustice at Glasgow Cop-Out](#), by Jomo Kwame Sundaram and Anis Chowdhury, 2021.

³ As attempted by the FAO's Guide for Policy and Programmatic Actions at Country Level to Address High Food Prices published in 2011 [\[read\]](#).

- [Climate is changing.... food and agriculture too, 2021.](#)
- [The dangers of a “partial” impact analysis: the example of a study on the impact of a 100% conversion to organic farming in England and Wales, 2019.](#)