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The IPCC's Mistaken "Science-First" Approach to Climate Change



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The first of four separate reports comprising the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) was released today. This is the [report of Working Group 1 \(WG1\)](#), '[The Physical Science Basis of Climate Change](#)'. It makes for dramatic headlines and grabs attention. But the WG1 report also begs the most important questions about climate change: what policies and how implemented? By publishing WG1 a full six months ahead of the policy-oriented reports of AR6, and more than a year in advance of the Synthesis Report, the IPCC perpetuates a "science-first" approach to climate change. This sequencing might benefit climate scientists and world governments. But it does not do justice to the ambition of the IPCC to be policy-relevant. Nor does it reflect the Chairman's stated objective to make [the IPCC more "solution-oriented"](#).

The government-approved WG1 Report of the IPCC's AR6 was released today. As predictable, it has spawned a cascade of print, broadcast and social media headlines on climate change adopting the trope of anxiety, fear and terror. For example, the BBC's headline: The IPCC Report is '[Code Red for Humanity](#)'. Yes, humans are changing the

climate and this is creating discernible physical effects in the atmosphere, cryosphere and oceans. The IPCC has been reporting this for two decades now.

But what to do about the challenges thus revealed?

The problem the IPCC has is that the other reports of AR6 are still months away. WG2 on 'Impacts, Adaptation, Vulnerability' does not report until next February, WG3 on 'Mitigation of Climate Change' not until next March and the final Synthesis Report – which brings all this information together in one assessment – not until September 2022, a full 13 months away.

This drip-feed of IPCC reports over more than a year has advantages. It offers up four reports over a 14 month cycle for the world's news and social media to bite. But, as the IPCC has always done, by releasing the WG1 report first – the physical science – it starts the cycle of reporting climate change through the lens of science, not through the lens of responses or solutions.

More than a decade ago, after the release of the IPCC's AR4, I pointed out in the pages of *Nature* magazine the same dangers of [letting the physical science of climate change drive headlines](#). And as I pointed out in a fuller analysis of the reporting of the 2007 AR4 Report: "Greatest attention in the print media is paid to the conclusions of WG-1 (problem oriented) compared to those of WG-3 (solutions-oriented) simply because WG-1 reports first and hence captures the 'newsworthy' tag most powerfully". (See my chapter: 'Mediating the messages about climate change: reporting the IPCC Fourth Assessment in the UK print media' in [Climate Change and the Media](#) edited by Tammy Boyce and Justin Lewis, 2009).

By releasing WG1 first, the IPCC perpetuates a "science-first" approach to understanding and responding to climate change. My latest book, '[Climate Change \(Key Ideas in Geography\)](#)', [published last month by Routledge](#), points out the problems with such a "science-first" approach to climate change.

Climate change is no longer first and foremost an issue of incomplete or imprecise scientific knowledge. It was understandable for the initial mandate given to the IPCC by the UN in 1988 to assess the scientific knowledge of a changing climate. For AR1 (1990) and AR2 (1996), and to some extent for AR3 (2001), evaluating and giving prominence to scientific evidence was important.

But even in the 1980s and 1990s, [an argument could be made](#) to reframe the issues raised by climate change not as those of climate change attribution and climate prediction, which are science-driven. Rather, the practical issues demanding a policy response were questions about sustainable energy and equitable development and about sustainable societal adaptation to extreme weather.

The case now for such a re-framing is even more powerful. The challenges are those around energy, land use and adaptation, long-standing political questions which a changing climate has brought into clearer focus. But they raise many questions which extend well beyond climate science to answer.

The incoming IPCC Chair – Ho-Sung Lee – [said in 2015](#) that he wanted to make the IPCC more solutions-oriented: “The actions on the part of policy makers to tackle climate change will be much more energised on the basis of opportunities and solutions ... I believe that will be the next phase.” If this were so, then Lee should have sought permission from the world's governments to inverse the publication order of the three IPCC AR6 reports. To first publish 'mitigation' then to publish 'adaptation' and only thereafter to publish the physical science basis as a supplementary report to these 'solutions-oriented' assessments.

The current situation highlights [the fundamental contradiction the IPCC faces](#) between wanting to be *both* policy neutral *and* policy relevant.

By continuing to publish their reports in the sequence they do – physical science, then adaptation, then mitigation — the IPCC perpetuate two myths. The myth that more *precise* climate prediction – even though not necessarily more *accurate* prediction – is necessary for policy to take shape and be implemented. And the myth that the obstacles to innovating and implementing climate policies are scientific *before* they are social, cultural, technological or political.

They are not. The obstacles to change are fully political, cultural, ethical, psychological – not a deficiency in scientific knowledge or public understanding of climate science. Yet it is convenient for the world's governments – and also beneficial to climate scientists – to sustain these myths. A “science-first” approach to climate change implies the obstacles to policy are epistemic rather than political ... ‘More and better science will pave the way (eventually) for better and easier policies’.

This is wrong.

It is time the IPCC put the cart (science) *after* the horse (energy and adaptation policies).

Mike Hulme, Cambridge, 9th August 2021

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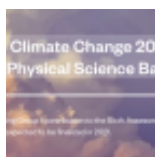
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