

10

Observers

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Overview

This chapter discusses the role of NGO observers in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the extent to which they have access to and participate in the work of the Panel. Many UN institutions have arrangements for participation by NGOs and the IPCC is no exception. NGO observers include academic institutions, think tanks, civil society, indigenous peoples' organisations, and business associations. They take part in IPCC meetings and nominate their representatives to serve as authors and reviewers in the preparation of assessment reports. NGO observers' participation in the Panel is an important topic in light of the increasing emphasis on inclusiveness and diversity of views in science–policy interfaces and international institutions. The chapter also identifies related knowledge gaps and summarises the challenges and opportunities for enhanced NGO engagement in the IPCC.

10.1 Introduction

Recent international relations scholarship has shown that international institutions are transforming towards more open and inclusive participation by various stakeholders (Tallberg et al., 2013; Bäckstrand, 2015). The role of stakeholders has also been discussed in relation to global environmental assessments (GEAs). For example, scholars have suggested that GEAs should better accommodate a pluralism of views and perspectives because environmental governance is conducted not only through state-centric models, but also in a polycentric fashion with the participation of sub-national actors, cities, civil society and private sector entities (Maas et al., 2021). It has also been proposed that stakeholders' involvement in GEAs helps with the following: (i) seeking diversity of information and viewpoints; (ii) improving communication of assessment findings; (iii)

fostering dialogue and enabling learning among all actors; and (iv) building a sense of ownership over assessment reports (Garard & Kowarsch, 2017: 235). Indeed, inclusive participation and a better integration of diverse views have become a commonly accepted expectation, and even a requirement, for the design of science–policy interfaces.

The IPCC has special provisions for the participation of observer organisations. According to IPCC rules, observer organisations include: (i) participating organisations that are other UN bodies and organisations; (ii) intergovernmental organisations, for example the European Union (EU) or the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); and (iii) non-governmental organisations. This chapter discusses the third category of IPCC observer organisations, that is NGO observers. Over a hundred of them have been registered to date with the IPCC. Despite the importance of NGO participation, surprisingly little is known about which NGOs participate in the Panel, and why, nor how they influence the process, if at all. IPCC scholarship has reflected a great deal on who participates in the assessment process, but this has mostly been concerned with scientists and governments. Few papers have analysed the role of observers (Garard & Kowarsch, 2017; Yamineva, 2017).

This chapter briefly discusses the institutional arrangements for NGO access to the IPCC and the few research findings available on their participation in, and impact on, the IPCC's affairs and preparation of assessment reports. The chapter also identifies related knowledge gaps, and assesses institutional achievements, challenges and ways to increase NGO stakeholder participation in the Panel.

10.2 NGO Access and Participation in the IPCC

Like other UN institutions, the IPCC has special provisions for the access of observer organisations including NGOs. National and international organisations can acquire the status of NGO observers, but they have to fulfil two requirements in order to participate – they have to be non-profit and they must be 'qualified in matters covered by the IPCC' (IPCC, 2006a). The second requirement implies that their work should relate to the IPCC mandate, which is, conducting assessments of scientific, technical and socio-economic information on various aspects of climate change (IPCC, 2013a).

Whether NGOs meet these requirements is assessed during the accreditation process. The access of NGOs that have already observer status with the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) or the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is simplified. As a general rule, applications for observer status are screened by the IPCC

Table 10.1. *IPCC NGO observers*

This is based on the list of IPCC observer organisations as of 26 July 2021.

NGO type	Number of NGOs	Examples
Academic institutions	16	Imperial College London (UK), University of Nijmegen (Netherlands)
Think tanks	21	Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Center for International Climate and Environmental Research (CICERO; Norway), Energy Research Austria
Civil society organisations	54	CARE International (Denmark), C40 Cities Climate Leadership, Germanwatch (Germany)
Private sector associations	24	The Alliance for Responsible Atmospheric Policy (USA), Campaign for a Hydrogen Economy (UK), International Aluminium Institute

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Secretariat and considered by the Bureau before being presented to the Panel. Governments have a validating role with respect to the access of non-governmental stakeholders (Yamineva, 2017), since the final decision on acceptance of an NGOs' observer status is made by the governmental plenary by consensus. In addition, applications from national organisations are 'brought to the attention' of the relevant Panel's member states (IPCC, 2006a). In principle, this implies that individual governments can block a national NGO accessing the IPCC, although so far this seems to have happened only once, when China conditioned accreditation of the Industrial Technology Research Institute from Taiwan on it being listed as from 'Taiwan, Province of China' (IPCC, 2009c).¹ As of July 2021, the Panel had 116 NGO observers of varying nature such as academic institutions, think tanks, civil society organisations and private sector associations (Table 10.1).

NGOs' access to IPCC meetings is limited to attendance of Panel and Working Group plenary meetings, but without the right to intervene or introduce proposals. With respect to interventions, the recent institutional practice has been to give observers an opportunity to take the floor, but only if no government delegation is asking for it. In making an intervention from the floor, observers cannot support a government's intervention. The right to attend IPCC meetings does not extend to informal consultations, Lead Author Meetings, workshops or expert meetings. Experts from NGOs may, however, be invited by the IPCC Secretariat to participate in expert meetings and workshops.

In addition to meeting attendance, NGOs can nominate their experts to participate in the assessment of the literature as IPCC Lead/Contributing Authors and as reviewers of draft reports. Providing comments at the review stage has been an important channel for observers to contribute to the preparation of reports, for example through highlighting the literature which may have fallen outside of Lead Authors' attention (Yamineva, 2017: 248). In all these cases, such experts act 'in their own right' (IPCC, 2006a) and not as representatives of their organisations. They are therefore deprived of the right to represent the perspectives and concerns of their constituencies. With such limited access, NGOs often turn to informal means of influencing the IPCC process, especially at the crucial stage of SPM approval, for example through informal interactions in the corridors of meeting venues (see **Chapter 4**). Some countries also include NGO representatives as members of their national delegations, providing them, indirectly, with expanded participation rights.

Observer organisations may also be invited to submit their views on general IPCC governance issues or matters related to the assessment process, such as the IPCC scoping meetings (see **Chapter 5**). In such cases, NGO engagement remains at the discretion of the IPCC management and is not mandated by the Panel's policies. Yet, in recent years, the institutional practice has been to seek input from observer organisations. For example, the task group on the future work of the Panel – which operated between 2018 and 2020 – worked on the basis of extended participation by observer organisations *with* the right to introduce proposals (IPCC, 2018e). That said, only two civil society organisations – Climate Action Network International and the Friends World Committee for Consultation – submitted their views to support the work of this task group (IPCC, 2019e).

10.3 Evaluating NGO Engagement in the IPCC

Literature has suggested distinguishing between access to, and participation in, international institutions. While *access* concerns formal rules and informal practices allowing for the participation of specific actors, *participation* is the realisation of those access rights, or actual contribution by those actors (Tallberg et al., 2013: 8). This distinction is helpful in assessing the de facto role of stakeholders in international arenas because inclusive access does not necessarily lead to participation (Yamineva, 2017). It is not certain how many of the accredited observer organisations contribute actively to the work of the IPCC: based on analysis of formal documentation, few of them seem to have taken part in the work concerning governance issues.

Access can also be analysed in terms of depth – level of involvement – and the range of actors – can *all* stakeholders participate or only some of them according to

certain criteria? (Tallberg et al., 2013: 8). Accordingly, ‘high’ access means deep involvement of a broad spectrum of stakeholders on a permanent basis and is difficult to revoke. ‘Low’ access on the other hand implies shallow involvement extending to a narrow subset of stakeholders (Tallberg et al., 2013: 28). Low access is also temporary and can easily be revoked. From this perspective, access of observers to the IPCC can be assessed as ‘low’ because it is shallow, validated by governments, and extends only to a narrow group of stakeholders. The restricted access of non-governmental stakeholders to the IPCC can partly explain some of the challenges faced by the Panel. These would include the limited diversity of perspectives (see **Chapter 7**) and the exclusion of non-scientific insights from the assessment reports – for example those of local and indigenous knowledge holders (Ford et al., 2012: 81; Obermeister, 2017; see also **Chapter 13**) – and practitioner’s expertise (Viner & Howarth, 2014).

The IPCC therefore follows a functionalist approach to the participation of NGOs. This approach – which is prevalent in the UN system – views NGO engagement from the perspective of whether they help advance institutional goals (von Bernstorff, 2021: 135–140). From this viewpoint, NGOs are to be involved in the IPCC assessment processes only to the extent that they can contribute relevant expertise for the provision of robust, scientifically credible assessment products. The functionalist approach stands in contrast to a model of NGO engagement viewed through the prism of democratising international institutions (von Bernstorff, 2021: 141–143). The idea of deliberative interest representation is reflected in the recent expansion of multi-stakeholder forums across international arenas and a stronger focus on the participation of communities who are negatively affected by international policy and rule-making, for example, small-scale farmers and indigenous peoples.

Overall, governments and scientists have been uneasy about NGO participation in the IPCC. In the early years, this was because of fears that climate sceptic organisations would disrupt the work of the Panel. Indeed, there are accounts of how the Global Climate Coalition (GCC) – a once prominent US-based industry lobbyist group with climate contrarian views – attempted to water down previous IPCC reports (Edwards & Schneider, 1997; Franz, 1998; Lahsen, 1999). The introduction of the IPCC *Policy and Process for Admitting Observer Organisations* in 2006 was partly due to the desire to shield the Panel from organisations which could undermine its work (e.g. Gutiérrez et al., 2007: 13).

Involvement of experts from the private sector and civil society organisations in the IPCC assessments remains controversial. The Panel was, for example, criticised for the participation of a Greenpeace employee as a Lead Author for the 2011 Special Report on Renewable Energy Sources and Climate Change Mitigation. In the view of critics, this led to the endorsement by the IPCC of a high renewables’ deployment scenario, one that was also supported by Greenpeace

(Anon, 2011; Edenhofer, 2011; Lynas, 2011). In another example, the nomination of two senior employees from major oil companies – ExxonMobil and Saudi Aramco – as authors for the 2018 Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5 °C prompted wide criticism by civil society organisations and accusations of a conflict of interest (ETC Group, 2017).

The Panel's cautious sentiments towards NGOs remain today and some nations continue to warn the IPCC 'against elevating NGOs and special interest organisations to the same level as governments' (Gutiérrez et al., 2012: 8). As evidence of this, governments recently lacked enthusiasm to involve stakeholders in the AR6 pre-scoping activities (Allan et al., 2016). Expanding stakeholder engagement in government-led bodies is indeed problematic and not only in the IPCC – the same challenges have been reported for the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) (Beck et al., 2014). Such expansion does not only entail renegotiating the Panel's balance of power, but is also viewed by some governments – and by some scientists – as potentially decreasing the scientific robustness and credibility of assessment findings (Yamineva, 2017).

10.4 Knowledge Gaps

Studies of the participation of observers in the IPCC are somewhat lacking in the academic literature. Despite the number of admitted observer organisations, very few of these NGOs seem to actively contribute to the work of the IPCC. Contribution and impact of experts from NGOs in the preparation of assessment reports is also unclear. Further, NGO participation can be non-transparent and difficult to trace when it takes place informally in the corridors of meeting venues or when NGO representatives contribute to the process as members of national delegations.

Future work could shed light on the role of civil society and business associations in the IPCC, in particular the role of NGO-nominated experts in the assessment as Lead Authors and in review processes. Stepping outside of institutional boundaries, it would be interesting to know how NGOs engage with the IPCC assessment products and findings, helping in their communication and framing discourses around climate policy solutions. Similarly, NGOs sometimes exercise considerable influence in national contexts and may shape IPCC member states' attitudes towards the IPCC and its assessment findings (Franz, 1998; see **Chapter 23**).

10.5 Achievements and Challenges

NGO engagement in the IPCC has evolved towards a more structured input through the adoption of specific institutional policies and higher numbers of

organisations admitted as observers. It is doubtful that the Panel would reform its institutional arrangements in the future to allow a significant expansion of NGO access to the assessment process, since this would likely face opposition by its member states. Many additional challenges to engaging non-governmental, non-scientific actors in GEAs are discussed in the literature. For instance, some scholars have pointed out that such a move would risk reducing the scientific credibility of IPCC reports (Garard & Kowarsch, 2017). Furthermore, NGO participation in international institutions is not necessarily unproblematic because of the dominance of the Global North NGOs and private sector lobbyism (von Bernstorff, 2021: 143–147; also S nit et al., 2017). And there are also costs and other resource implications arising from significant reforms of the IPCC institutional design (Garard & Kowarsch, 2017).

At the same time, despite these challenges, the turn towards solutions in global climate policy discourse arguably suggests expanding the knowledge base of the IPCC assessments. Part of this could be reconsidering the role of NGO observers as potential holders of solutions-oriented knowledge(s). Expanding NGO participation might also address some of the challenges faced by the IPCC – as discussed in other chapters of the book – such as the legitimacy of IPCC findings (see **Chapter 6**), transparency and representativeness in modelling and scenario development (see **Chapter 15**), and inclusion of traditional forms of knowledge (see **Chapter 13**). What form such broadening of NGO participation should take is not self-evident – academic literature and policy practice does not provide straightforward answers. From the perspective of enhancing the democratic legitimacy of GEAs, some scholars have discussed creating a multi-stakeholder advisory body to coordinate stakeholder engagement and develop adaptive practices (Garard & Kowarsch, 2017). Other, more radical, suggestions include establishing ‘deliberative mini-publics’ consisting of randomly selected people from around the world to inform deliberations in GEAs (Maas et al., 2021). However, in the context of the IPCC, such ideas are unlikely to find support among governments and scientists. The experience of the IPBES also shows that striving for diversity and inclusiveness in science-for-policy institutions is challenging in the context of intergovernmentalism and consensus-seeking decision-making (Beck et al., 2014; D az-Reviriego et al., 2019).

A more realistic institutional format for expanding NGO participation in the IPCC would be establishing task groups composed of representatives of stakeholder constituencies – civil society, private sector and indigenous peoples (Yamineva, 2017; also Ford et al., 2016) – that would advise the IPCC Bureau. This would allow for a consolidated and more representative input by NGOs on a continuous basis, while at the same time maintaining an institutional boundary between the scientific assessment process and participation by NGO observers.

Establishing specific institutional arrangements for NGO contribution would also bring more transparency and accountability concerning their participation, as well as help the IPCC navigate the solutions-oriented knowledge landscape.

Note

1 China has also made attempts to keep critical NGOs out of the UN Economic and Social Council (von Bernstorff, 2021).

Three Key Readings

Franz, W. E. (1998). *Science, Sceptics and Non-state Actors in the Greenhouse*. ENRP Discussion Paper E-98-18, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. www.belfercenter.org/publication/science-skeptics-and-non-state-actors-greenhouse

This paper discusses the role of climate sceptics' and industry organisations, in particular the Global Climate Coalition, in the early years of the IPCC.

Garard, J. and Kowarsch, M. (2017). If at first you don't succeed: evaluating stakeholder engagement in global environmental assessments. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 77: 235–243. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2017.02.007>

This article assesses various modes of stakeholder engagement in GEAs, drawing on the examples of the IPCC and UNEP's Global Environmental Outlook.

Yamineva, Y. (2017). Lessons from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on inclusiveness across geographies and stakeholders. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 77: 244–251. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2017.04.005>

This article examines the involvement of developing countries and NGOs in the IPCC, building on the distinction between access and active participation.