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UN's climate panic is more politics than science



UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres addresses a session of the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos.

By JUDITH CURRY
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The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has issued a new Synthesis Report, with fanfare from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

“The climate time bomb is ticking but the latest IPCC report shows that we have the knowledge and resources to tackle the climate crisis. We need to act now to ensure a liveable planet in the future,” Guterres announced over Twitter earlier this month.



Delegates attend the opening ceremony of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in Incheon, South Korea, in 2018.

The new IPCC Report is a synthesis of the three reports that constitute the Sixth Assessment Report, plus three special reports. This Synthesis Report does not introduce any new information or findings. While the IPCC reports include some good material, the Summary for Policymakers for the Synthesis Report emphasises weakly justified findings on climate impacts driven by extreme emissions scenarios, and politicised policy recommendations on emissions reductions.

The most important finding of the past five years is that the extreme emissions scenarios RCP8.5 and SSP5-8.5, commonly referred to as “business-as-usual” scenarios, are now widely recognised as implausible. These extreme scenarios have been dropped by the UN Conference of the Parties to the UN Climate Agreement. However, the new Synthesis Report continues to emphasise these extreme scenarios, while this important finding is buried in a footnote:

“Very high emission scenarios have become less likely but cannot be ruled out.”



IPCC chair Hoesung Lee speaks during a press conference.

The extreme emissions scenarios are associated with alarming projections of 4-5C of warming by 2100. The most recent Conference of the Parties (COP27) is working from a baseline temperature projection based on a medium emissions scenario of 2.5C by 2100. Since 1.2C of warming has already occurred from the baseline period in the late 19th century, the amount of warming projected for the remainder of the 21st century under the medium emissions scenario is only about one-third of the warming projections under the extreme emissions scenario.

The Synthesis Report emphasises “loss and damage” as a central reason why action is needed. It is therefore difficult to overstate the importance of the shift in expectations for future extreme weather events and sea level rise that is associated with rejection of the extreme emissions scenarios. Rejecting these extreme scenarios has rendered obsolete much of the climate impacts literature and assessments of the past decade, that have focused on these scenarios. In particular, the extreme emissions scenario dominates the impacts that are featured prominently in the new Synthesis Report.



A child holds a sign as people gather for a demonstration in Berlin.

Clearly, the climate “crisis” isn’t what it used to be. Rather than acknowledging this fact as good news, the IPCC and UN officials are doubling down on the “alarm” regarding the urgency of reducing emissions by eliminating fossil fuels. You might think that if warming is less than we thought, then the priorities would shift away from emissions reductions and towards reducing our vulnerability to weather and climate extremes. However, that hasn’t been the case.

The IPCC has been characterised as a “knowledge monopoly”, with its dominant authority in the UN climate deliberations. The IPCC claims it is “policy-neutral” and “never policy-prescriptive”.

However, the IPCC has strayed far from its chartered role of assessing the scientific literature in support of policymaking. The entire framing of the IPCC reports is now around the mitigation of climate change through emissions reductions.

Not only has the IPCC increasingly taken on a stance of explicit political advocacy, but it is misleading policymakers by its continued emphasis on extreme climate outcomes driven by the implausible extreme emissions scenarios. With its explicit political advocacy, combined with misleading information, the IPCC risks losing its privileged position in international policy debates.



Climate Change and Energy Minister Chris Bowen in question time in Canberra. Picture: NCA NewsWire / Gary Ramage

The impact of these alarming IPCC reports and rhetoric by UN officials is this. Climate change has become a grand narrative in which human-caused climate change has become a dominant cause of societal problems. Everything that goes wrong reinforces the conviction that there is only one thing we can do to prevent societal problems – stop burning fossil fuels. This grand narrative leads us to think that if we solve the problem of burning fossil fuels, then these other problems would also be solved.

This belief leads us away from a deeper investigation of the true causes of these other problems. The end result is a narrowing of the viewpoints and policy options that we are willing to consider in dealing with complex issues such as energy systems, water resources, public health, weather disasters, and national security. The IPCC reports have become “bumper sticker” climate science – making a political statement while using the overall reputation of science to give authority to a politically manufactured consensus.

Judith Curry is president of Climate Forecast Applications Network.

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