



Communication is a main instrument to use to protect climate



Interview with Jim Skea, IPCC Chair

Jim Skea was elected the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Chair for the Seventh Assessment cycle in July 2023. From 2015 to 2023, he was co-chair of Working Group III of IPCC, focusing on climate change mitigation. He was also part of the scientific leadership for the IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5C. He was a Professor of Sustainable Energy at Imperial College London from 2009 to 2023. His research interests are in energy, climate change and technological innovation. Skea was Research Councils UK's Energy Strategy Fellow and President of the Energy Institute between 2015 and 2017. He was Research Director of the UK Energy Research Centre from 2004-2012. Jim Skea read Mathematical Physics at Edinburgh University, followed by a PhD in energy research at Cambridge University's Cavendish Laboratory. With almost forty years of activity in researching and communicating the science of climate change, Jim Skea is one of the leading authorities on the international scene and this is the interview he kindly granted to our magazine.

Mr Skea, you were elected president of IPCC at the end of July 2023. Which have been the main issues you had to deal with?

“One should not think of IPCC as behaving very reactively to circumstances in terms of dealing with issues. We already knew the kind of things that we wanted to do in this cycle and we had already set them out. Firstly, it is incredibly important that we are policy-relevant and we are working on that, that the science provided by IPCC is useful for policy makers, and that applies at all levels, should there be international negotiation, what is happening at the level of countries and what is happening within countries. For example, we are doing a lot of work on city level actions in this cycle.

“Science is useful for policy makers at all levels”

Secondly, we have to pay a lot of attention to the interaction between the different types of science that we do. We have three Working Groups, one on physical science, one on the impacts of climate change and one on mitigation or reducing emissions and we need to make sure that there is proper communication within these groups and they collaborate with each other. Furthermore, we are really working hard on what you might call inclusivity to make sure there is an appropriate representation of developing countries and also ensure there is gender balance in IPCC activities, as well.

So, these are the three things that we are really focusing on: the policy-relevance, the interdisciplinarity collaboration between the different branches of science, and inclusiveness”.

Can you, very briefly, explain how IPCC is organized and works?

“Very briefly, the key thing is ‘I’, which stands for ‘inter-governmental’. The governments are the members of IPCC. They elect a scientific leadership, which is 34 scientists from different countries and the Chair is elected among them. But the hard work is done by the voluntary authors, the scientists who get together and write the reports, and these are also nominated by the governments and then selected by the elected scientific leadership”.

Notwithstanding the scientific understanding of human induced global warming provided by IPCC, the

international community is falling short in meeting the mitigation goals of the Paris Agreement. Are we still in time to change direction?

"It's not just the mitigation goal that we're missing out: we are also falling short on meeting the goals on adaptation and the goal on finance as well. Nevertheless, there will never be a time when it does not make sense to reduce emissions. Even if we were to exceed 1.5 degrees warming, it makes sense to do it. Understanding if we are still in time or if we may run out of time, for example, to limit warming to 1.5 degrees, does not mean that we should stop taking action to reduce emissions: it will always make sense to do that because the costs of mitigation are less than the avoided benefits from the reduced impacts, should you take action".

“It will always make sense to take action to reduce emissions”

So, adaptation is also a critical area of intervention. You said: “There are gaps between aspiration and action across the goals of the Paris Agreement”. You also pointed out the risk of maladaptation actions. Can you explain this concept to our readers?

"I'll do it very simply, but just to say the key thing for me is to focus on adaptation measures and what should positively be done. Still, there are measures that bring you short-term benefits for adapting to climate change, but may not help you in the long term. For example, if you build some houses on a coastal area, and you build a seawall to protect them from rising seas, that may work for a time. But it may be that, as the decades go on, those seawalls are not up, and you cannot protect the area any longer. So, maybe you should never have built the houses in that area in the first place. So, building these houses and building a seawall with a limited lifetime would be an example of maladaptation, as it were. I hope that explains the concept: it is adaptation that works in the short term but won't necessarily work forever".

Concerning the finance goals, you observed that “there are manifest gaps between tracked climate finance and what is needed to put us on low emis-

sions and climate resilient development pathways. Only between 4 and 8 per cent of tracked climate finance is allocated to adaptation, and more than 90 percent of adaptation finance comes from public sources”. Is it possible to change such a trend and how?

"It is less difficult to find financing for mitigation than it is for adaptation, because there's a very simple measure of mitigation, and that is the cost in terms of carbon dioxide equivalent. On the contrary, there is no such single metric for adaptation, that you can invest against events. The other thing is that many adaptation measures are tied into economic development more generally, and into planning new infrastructure. For example, the way that you design a new city could make you more resilient to climate change. If you build in green and blue infrastructure, that's more vegetation, more trees, more areas of lakes or rivers can really help to adapt to climate change, but that's part of general development. So, it is much more difficult to get private finance into adaptation.

“It is much more difficult to get private finance into adaptation”

Could you provide some examples of possible private initiatives in adaptation?

For example, the insurance sector may have an interest in helping to finance adaptation because it will protect itself against future losses, or the food supply chains, which are potentially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. It may well be that food retailers or people that manufacture processed food may have an interest in investing in climate resilience, because it will protect their supply chains. Finally, there are also areas in which some kinds of actions can help both reduce emissions and make local communities more resilient to the effects of climate change. That would be particularly the case for land-based measures, for example, in agriculture where agricultural techniques that build up carbon in soils will help to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, that can also make you more resilient to the



effects of climate change. If private companies invest in these types of measures with both mitigation and adaptation benefits, they will have to pay for the mitigation, but some adaptation will occur because of that at the same time.

In your speech at the United Nations Environmental Assembly you underlined that the “world is not really listening to science”. You then said “we have further work to do” to provide actionable information and communicating it to the right audiences while at the same time “stopping to sound like a broken record”. What are the most urgent steps to be taken in this direction?

“I would probably refine that statement slightly and say the world is not acting on the basis of science, and whether that's because the world is not listening or because they have heard and they choose not to act is something you need to ask the people who are not acting at the moment. I can't really speak for them. I think, though, that it's very important that when we produce our IPCC reports, we think about how to write them in the ways that we send very clear messages to policy makers, and the wider public, and civil society about the possible consequences of climate change, but also positively the actions that we can take in the future.

“To meet all the goals of the Paris Agreement requires a very substantive change in direction”

In the last cycle of IPCC, we produced 10,000 pages of reports: I have not read these 10,000 pages consecutively and I don't think anybody has. So, it's incumbent on us to summarize them and communicate that overall science in a very clear way so that people can readily appreciate the risks of climate change and the opportunities for action to deal with it. We will be thinking more about that in the coming cycle, about the way we draft our reports and the way we subsequently communicate them”.

One last question. Why do you think that we are falling short in meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement?

“To meet all the goals of the Paris Agreement requires a very substantive change in direction. As we have said, for mitigation you need systemic level transformations in energy, transport, and the way that we manage land. I think many governments are finding that challenging in light of other pressures, for example issues like energy security also get priority on public budgets. So, I think that's the difficulty and that's why it's important for us to communicate the risks of climate change and the consequences of climate action, many of which have other benefits as well in terms of the sustainable development goals. If we don't communicate this effectively, I guess it's much less likely that we will get ambitious climate action. Communication is one of the main instruments you have to use to protect climate.”