

“Current plans are insufficient to tackle the threat of climate change”. Interview with the Secretary of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

“Los planes actuales son insuficientes para enfrentar la amenaza del cambio climático”. Entrevista con el Secretario del Grupo Intergubernamental de Expertos sobre el Cambio Climático

“Os planos atuais são insuficientes para lidar com a ameaça da mudança climática”. Entrevista com o Secretário do Painel Intergovernamental sobre Mudanças Climáticas

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**Abstract:** Interview with Abdalah Mokssit, secretary since 2016 of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). A mathematician and meteorologist born in Morocco (1961), he has worked since 1987 at the National Meteorological Department of his country, of which he became director in 2009. The IPCC is the internationally accredited authority on climate change and produces reports that receive the agreement of leading climate scientists and the consensus of participating governments. Among other awards, the IPCC received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007. The interview covers the history of the IPCC, the current and future situation regarding climate change and reflects on the role of science and technology in this regard.

**Keywords:** climate change, climate justice, global action, United Nations.

**Resumen:** Entrevista con Abdalah Mokssit, secretario do Painel Intergovernamental sobre Mudanças Climáticas (IPCC) desde 2016. Matemático e meteorologista nascido no Marrocos (1961), ele trabalha desde 1987 na Direção Nacional de Meteorologia de seu país, onde se tornou diretor em 2009. O IPCC é a autoridade internacionalmente reconhecida em mudanças climáticas e produz relatórios que contam com a concordância dos principais cientistas do clima e com o consenso dos governos participantes. Entre outros prêmios, o IPCC recebeu o Prêmio Nobel da Paz em 2007. A entrevista discute a história da instituição, o status atual e futuro da mudança climática e reflete sobre o papel da ciência e da tecnologia na mudança climática.

**Palabras clave:** cambio climático, justicia climática, acciones globales, Naciones Unidas.

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**Palavras-chave:** mudança climática, justiça climática, ações globais, Nações Unidas.



Source: IISD/ENB (International Institute for Sustainable Development/Earth Negotiations Bulletin, 2022)

**The IPCC was created in 1988 by a decision of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Can you describe how it works, what is its composition and what are its goals?**

The IPCC is the UN body for assessing the science related to climate change. Our work spans the full spectrum of disciplines – from physical sciences to life and social sciences. It includes assessments of scientific research in applied areas such as agriculture, health, urbanization, transport, energy and economics, and many more. We are policy-relevant. We lay out options for response action by 195 governments in the IPCC, and other stakeholders, but without being prescriptive.

**In what sense does the IPCC represent a model of interdisciplinary, mission-driven and socially engaged science?**

The IPCC embodies a unique opportunity to provide rigorous and balanced scientific information to decision-makers. It is a unique interface between science and policy. Participation in the IPCC is open to all member countries of the WMO and the United Nations. IPCC assessments are written by hundreds of leading scientists who volunteer their time and expertise as authors of the reports. Our reports undergo multiple rounds of drafting and review to ensure they are comprehensive and objective and produced in an open and transparent way. Thousands of other experts contribute to the reports by acting as reviewers, ensuring the reports reflect the full range of views in the scientific community. Importantly, all IPCC decisions are reached by consensus.

**What have been the most significant achievements of the IPCC in this 35-year history?**

The IPCC is the most authoritative voice for climate science. Since its inception 35 years ago, it has produced six full assessment reports. Just the latest, Six Assessment Report consists of four major contributions dedicated to the physical science basis, to impacts, adaptation and vulnerability and to climate change mitigation. All the key findings are reflected in a final Synthesis Report. In addition to the main assessments, the IPCC has published 14 special reports on various topics such as *Global Warming of 1.5°C* (2018), *Climate Change and Land* (2019), *The Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate* (2019), and *Renewable Energy Sources and Climate Change Mitigation* (2011).<sup>1</sup> The IPCC has also developed nine Guidelines for national greenhouse gas inventories encouraging the widespread use of common methodology in this important process. All this work has been possible thanks to the IPCC member states and IPCC authors. This huge body of scientific knowledge is used by decision-makers at all levels in every part of the world. For this work, the IPCC was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007, together with the former US Vice - President Al Gore.

**In March 2023 the IPCC published, after eight years of work, the Sixth Assessment Report on climate change (AR6). What were the main conclusions?**

The science is clear. Driven by human-caused emissions, many of the changes observed in the climate are unprecedented in thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of years, and some of the changes already set in motion—such as continued sea level rise—are irreversible over hundreds to thousands of years. Climate change is a global challenge and a threat to the health of the planet and humanity. It affects all countries and every part of our globe. The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report confirms that the pace and scale of what has been done so far, and current plans, are insufficient to tackle climate change. Deep, rapid and sustained emissions reductions and accelerated adaptation action are required, now, in this decade, to address climate change. But the report also emphasizes that effective and equitable climate action now can lead to a more sustainable, resilient and just world. The report points to multiple, feasible and effective options available now to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change. The report identifies tried and tested policies and practices that can work in diverse contexts to reduce emissions and advance climate resilience. We all have a role to play in tackling climate change, particularly those in positions of power to shape climate policies and actions. Every fraction of warming matters, every action matters, every year matters.

**Recently, in July, there were statements by the United Nations Secretary, António Guterres, stating that “we have moved from the era of global warming to that of global boiling.” How alarming is the situation?**

Climate change is an existential threat to human wellbeing, to our livelihoods, the global economy and to nature on which we rely to survive and thrive. The Synthesis Report confirmed that current trends are incompatible with a sustainable, equitable world. The extent to which current and future generations will experience a hotter and different world depends on the choices made in this decade. These choices will impact life on Earth for thousands of years.

**Since the entry into force in 1994 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), what have been the main steps?**

Besides providing science-based information for national policymaking, IPCC assessments underpin international negotiations on climate change. In its thirty-five-year history, the IPCC has played a crucial role for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and its processes. We have produced six full assessment reports. The First Assessment Report in 1990 led to the creation of the UNFCCC. The Fifth Assessment Report, completed in 2014, provided the scientific input for the climate negotiations in 2015 that led to the Paris Agreement. The publication of the latest IPCC report, the Synthesis Report, is timely for the upcoming climate conference in Dubai as it will feed directly into the first Global Stocktake. This will be a valuable contribution to help with decision-making.

**How do the obstacles to progress on the issue relate to pseudoscientific positions? Are there organized denialist campaigns? What is the IPCC’s position and actions in this regard?**

Awareness about climate change and the need to take action vary widely by region and community, and there are multiple reasons for this. As an institution, the IPCC will continually improve the way it communicates its findings so that we advance understanding not only about the threat of climate change but the options we have for taking action. The IPCC will continue to prepare assessments of the science related to climate change, its impacts, possible future risks and options for responding to it, as requested by the governments of our member states. The IPCC also contributes to broader UN efforts to tackle misinformation and disinformation and how to advance communication on Climate Change.<sup>2</sup>

**Was there any progress at the last United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 27)? What can we expect from the COP 28 to be held in Dubai at the end of this year?**

The Conferences of the Parties (COPs) are organised by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The IPCC through its institutional links and relations with the UNFCCC contributes its scientific findings to the negotiations and decision-making taking place at the COPs. For instance, at the Climate Conference in 2022 the IPCC presented two major reports on Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability and on Mitigation of Climate Change. The publication of the latest IPCC report, the Synthesis Report, this March is timely for the upcoming climate conference in Dubai as it will feed directly into the first Global Stocktake. This will be a valuable contribution to help with decision-making. Furthermore, during the Sixth Assessment cycle, for the first time, the IPCC had pavilions at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conferences (since COP24) providing a hub with various events, interviews and meetings and with dedicated staff and experts at a space available to discuss the IPCC and climate change science. We will also be present in the next COP in Dubai with a rich programme

of activities and events. I hope the science we provide will continue to guide decision-makers in politics and businesses to build on it in their efforts to tackle climate change.

**The 2015 UNFCCC Paris Agreement designed an instrument to assess the progress of projected reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, called the “Global Stocktake”. The first results will be presented at COP 28. What can you anticipate from this report?**

The Global Stocktake is an important process under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change at the time humanity is facing the growing and pressing climate change challenge. The process will closely examine what the Parties have done so far, the state of our planet and point to the pathways towards solutions and draw the timetables to achieve them. It is meant to ensure that all Parties are keeping in line with their commitments, they understand the direction they need to take and how fast they will meet the collectively agreed goals of the Paris Agreement. Obviously, our most recent report, the Synthesis Report of the Sixth Assessment Report will provide essential, timely and valuable input for the First Global Stocktake.

**Many scientists and public figures think that “developed” nations bear historical responsibility for climate change and that the poor countries of the Global South will suffer the most severe effects. What is the IPCC’s position on this issue?**

Our Synthesis Report released in March clearly states that human activities, principally through emissions of greenhouse gases, have unequivocally caused global warming, with global surface temperature reaching 1.1°C above 1850-1900 in 2011-2020. Global greenhouse gas emissions have continued to increase, with unequal historical and ongoing contributions arising from unsustainable energy use, land use and land-use change, lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production across regions, between and within countries, and among individuals. Keeping warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels requires deep, rapid and sustained greenhouse gas emissions reductions in all sectors. Emissions should be decreasing by now and will need to be cut by almost half by 2030, if warming is to be limited to 1.5°C. Changes in the food sector, electricity, transport, industry, buildings and land-use can reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In our diverse world, everyone has different responsibilities and different opportunities to bring about these transformational changes. Some can do a lot while others will need support to help them manage the change.

**Given this situation, how can we move towards greater climate justice? What is the IPCC’s contribution in this regard?**

IPCC findings bring into sharp focus the losses and damages we are already experiencing and will continue into the future. The most vulnerable people and ecosystems are hit especially hard. Taking more comprehensive and more determined climate action now could result in the transformational change essential for a sustainable, equitable world. Climate justice is crucial because those who have contributed least to climate change are being disproportionately affected. Today, nearly fifty percent of the global population inhabits regions that are highly vulnerable to climate change. In the last ten years alone, deaths from floods, droughts and storms were 15 times higher in highly vulnerable regions. The solution lies in climate-resilient development. This involves integrating measures to adapt to climate change with actions to reduce or avoid greenhouse gas emissions in ways that provide wider benefits.

## **What can you tell us about the present and future impact of climate change in Latin America and the Caribbean?**

During the past cycle we have given greater attention to regional findings and information. Our findings show that across Central and South America mean temperatures have very likely increased in all sub-regions and will continue to increase at rates greater than the global average. Mean precipitation is projected to change, with increases in North-West South America (NWS) and South-East South America (SES) and decreases in North-East South America (NES) and South-West South America (SWS). Compared to global mean sea level, over the last three decades, relative sea level has increased at a higher rate than global mean level in the South Atlantic and the subtropical North Atlantic, and at a lower rate in the East Pacific. Relative sea level rise is extremely likely to continue in the oceans around Central and South America, contributing to increased coastal flooding in low-lying areas and shoreline retreat along sandiest coasts. Marine heatwaves are also projected to increase around the region over this century.



## **What is being done in Latin America to avoid the effects of climate change? In particular, what impact did the Peoples' Agreement, established in 2010,<sup>3</sup> and the recent Escazú Agreement, the first regional intergovernmental treaty on the topic, have had?**

We are the UN body for assessing the science related to climate change. Our job is to assess on a comprehensive, objective, open and transparent basis the scientific, technical and socio-economic information relevant to understanding the scientific basis of risk of human-induced climate change, its potential impacts and options for adaptation and mitigation. While agreements in question fall outside our remit, we encourage policymakers to build on the best available climate science in their collective national and regional efforts to lead the transition and accelerate transformational changes already underway.

**In peripheral countries, many socio-environmental conflicts are marked by a dichotomy. On the one hand, the possibility of attracting investment, generating foreign exchange and creating jobs, and on the other, the environmental consequences they generate. How true is this dilemma and what can S&T contribute to overcome it?**

Accelerated climate action is critical to sustainable development. Potential conflicts between reducing emissions and sustainable development, particularly around employment and ensuring access to, and affordability of, food, water and energy, can be managed with well-implemented mitigation and policies. Accelerated and equitable climate action in mitigating, and adapting to, climate change impacts is critical to sustainable development. Scaling up climate finance is crucial, especially in developing countries where the finance gaps and opportunities are the largest. Increasing finance to climate investments is important to achieve global climate goals. There is sufficient global capital to close gaps if existing barriers are reduced. Governments, through public funding and clear signals to investors, are key in reducing these barriers. Investors, central banks and financial regulators can also play their part.

**Science and technology are at the basis of modern techniques for exploiting and manipulating nature. But they also allow us to know, foresee and act. Are S&T both part of the problem and part of the solution to the environmental crisis? How can we generate greater social, environmental and political responsibility in the S&T sector?**

The next few years will be critical, but there are ways to improve our chances of success. Assessing the potential benefits and risks of different technologies and approaches, understanding their implementation at scale and identifying what stands in their way, are key to effective decision-making. For example, solar energy, electrification and greening in cities, energy-efficient appliances, improved forest- and crop management, and reduced food waste, are technically viable, increasingly cost-effective, and generally supported by the public, enabling deployment in many regions.

**Beyond the responsibility for the results of S&T investigation that we have as researchers, how can science activism strengthen actions on climate change?**

In many countries activism is part of the public dialogue and debates. Given the increased awareness about climate change we are witnessing also greater and diverse engagement across many sectors but also from the general public. I stress that the IPCC work and reports are focused on assessing science relevant to climate change and providing policy-makers with timely and actionable information, helping them to shape their climate policies and actions. Critical to this is the constant advancement of new scientific research and remaining policy relevant for all 195 governments constituting the Panel. Our neutrality and the non-prescriptive character of our work is essential for fulfilling our mandate.

**During 2020, at the peak of COVID-19 contagions, there was a sharp slowdown in the global economy. In that context, hopeful images were seen in relation to nature's capacity to recompose itself. Do you think that the pandemic produced a favorable change in social and political awareness of the structural causes of environmental problems?**

What we have observed over the past 35 years has been a continued and rapid growth of scientific research on climate change, which went hand in hand with the increasing involvement and engagement of our key stakeholders – the governments. In parallel, we have also been witnessing over decades the growing public awareness about climate change. Perhaps the global pandemic has sharpened our focus further. It required a joined-up international response to another pressing global challenge prompting fast and profound changes to our lifestyles everywhere. It pressed us to adapt and mitigate in order to avoid the worst outcomes. Given that human-induced climate change is a threat to human wellbeing and health of the planet, it warrants the same urgency of action. Taking action now can secure our future.

**It has been suggested that the solutions to the very serious ecological crisis in which we find ourselves and the risk to the future of life on the planet cannot be found within capitalism. What is your opinion in this regard? Can the capitalist mode of production and consumption be environmentally sustainable?**

Regardless of ideology, economic and political systems, all human activities need some source of energy. What IPCC reports clearly state is that more than a century of burning fossil fuels as well as unequal and unsustainable energy and land use has led to global warming of 1.1°C above pre-industrial levels. This has resulted in more frequent and more intense extreme weather events that have caused increasingly dangerous impacts on nature and people in every region of the world. As I already stressed, our reports point to the solutions lying in the climate-resilient development. But climate resilient development becomes progressively more challenging with every additional increase of warming. This is why the choices made in the next few years will play a critical role in deciding our future and that of generations to come. To be effective, these choices need to be rooted in our diverse values, worldviews and knowledges, including scientific knowledge, Indigenous Knowledge and local knowledge. This approach will facilitate climate-resilient development and allow locally appropriate, socially acceptable solutions.

**Are you optimistic about the human capacity to act on climate change?**

We are facing an enormous global challenge. For small island states and low-lying areas climate change is an existential threat. There should be no mistake about how serious the current state of health of our planet is. IPCC reports have vividly brought to global attention and have ensured a better understanding, around the whole world, of the scope, complexity and urgency of the climate change challenge we all face. Today, we are not on track to limit the warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius. Having said that, it is critical to see and embrace IPCC reports as a message of hope because they clearly show that we, collectively, as humanity have the agency in shaping our future. We have the technologies, we have the know-how and we have the finance to tackle climate change. We need to put them to good use. Only concerted, comprehensive, determined climate action now can secure the future for all.

## NOTAS

- 1 These IPCC Special Reports, as well as the Assessment Reports and other documents, are available on the IPCC website: <https://www.ipcc.ch/reports/>
- 2 On the subject, the interviewee suggests consulting: <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/communicating-climate-change>
- 3 Document of the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth (Cochabamba, Bolivia, April 2010), known as the "People's Agreement", available at: <https://www.cancilleria.gob.bo/webmre/node/1112>