

Unpacking the IPCC Synthesis Report and what it means for COP28

Blog post by Associate Lucy Cairns, 23 March 2023

On March 20th, the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its summary for policy makers of the Synthesis Report covering the latest research on climate change and its impacts. It condenses hundreds of pages into a digestible soundbite to inform policymakers and policymaking. The resounding call is for urgent and immediate action with current national emissions targets putting us on a path for 3.2°C by 2100. At this temperature, numerous cities such as Shanghai, and Miami would be under water, the area burned by wildfires in the Mediterranean would increase by 97%, and ice-free arctic summers would be commonplace.

The report's publication coincides with the first round of pre-COP28 (Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate) meetings in Copenhagen. Historically the annual IPCC report sets the tone for the climate discussions at COPs and is heavily drawn upon for the negotiations and political discussions surrounding them. The hope is that it will drive action for delivering ambitious policymaking and international cooperation, particularly on issues such as phasing out fossil fuels, scaling up renewables and loss and damage finance for less economically developed nations.

The report itself is as much a political document as a scientific one, and it is important to remember when considering its findings that it is the product of negotiations between 196 countries. The report was originally expected to be published in October 2022, ahead of COP27. However, it has been subject to a series of significant delays. Whilst postponements were initially due to scientist strikes, subsequent setbacks were incurred as a result of disagreements from government representatives of fossil-fuel producing nations. These nations took particular issue with the reports' strong language around the phase-out of fossil fuels, instead pushing for the role that carbon capture technologies can play in reducing their climate impact. Indeed, the repeated stalling of the report's publication seems a darkly ironic inversion of its content, which repeatedly warns against delaying action, stating that 'there is a rapidly narrowing window of opportunity to enable climate-resilient development'.

The IPCC report has stated, more clearly than ever, that existing fossil fuel infrastructure without abatement is not consistent with a 1.5°C world. In light of this, many, including Simon Lewis, Professor of global change science at UCL, have argued that a 'pact to phase out fossil fuels is the only credible response to the warnings of the IPCC'. There will be significant pressure at this year's climate talks to agree a phase out of coal, and to set a pathway to phase out all unabated fossil fuels. Given that this year's COP will be presided over by the UAE, a major global Petro-state, should agreements fail to be consistent with the findings of the new synthesis report there is a risk of undermining the credibility of the entire UN process. This will place a renewed focus on ensuring

a just energy transition and will increase pressure for progress through public-private financing of Just Transition Partnerships, as has been seen in South Africa.

Whilst the report paints a bleak picture of the realities of climate change, it does offer some comfort in highlighting mitigation and adaptation opportunities that can be leveraged in the near term. The IPCC places clear emphasis on the opportunity for investment in the energy transition for driving global emissions reductions. In particular, solar and wind are highlighted as being the most cost-effective interventions. Whilst internationally, governments have committed to unprecedented investment in renewables in major packages such as the US Inflation Reduction Act and the EU's Net Zero Industry Act, the report illustrates how this progress must be replicated much more widely and rapidly to deliver the necessary emissions cuts.

Beyond energy, the IPCC further identifies reducing the conversion of natural ecosystems, carbon sequestration in agriculture, ecosystem restoration and fuel switching as interventions that can feasibly, and relatively cost-effectively result in significant emissions savings. In particular, reducing the conversion of natural ecosystems, such as turning forests into agricultural land, is estimated to lead to similar levels of emissions savings as solar power, highlighting the need for cross-sector interventions. Conserving nature is increasingly being recognised as crucial for delivering on climate goals. The spotlight on nature-based solutions in the IPCC report will likely accelerate existing momentum for investment in nature conservation and restoration, including the phase-out of damaging subsidies.

Whilst interventions have been identified, their implementation relies on international collaboration to develop ambitious and far-reaching policy. Whether this year's IPCC report will trigger a breakthrough at COP28 will depend on whether tensions underlying the negotiations can be resolved. In particular, recent years have seen increased division between the global north and south on issues such as phasing out fossil fuels and mistrust that sufficient finance to adapt to impacts and ensure a just transition will materialise.

As coined by UN Secretary General António Guterres, the 'guide to defuse the climate timebomb' is now in the hands of international policymakers, whose decisions will be under more scrutiny than ever before in light of the upcoming Global Stocktake. The Stocktake, which will take place at COP28, will enable analysis of countries' progress towards achievement of goals of the Paris Agreement. This is likely to place increased pressure on countries and sectors which are seen to be stalling progress. The recommendations seen in this report, whilst alarming, are familiar; what remains to be seen is the extent to which policymakers will be able to resolve the divisions between nations and heed the IPCC's warning.