

Some impressions of the
IPCC Working Group I 1995 Final (Fifth) Plenary
Madrid, Spain 27-29 November 1995

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I believe there were 95 (not sure) countries represented, many with more than one delegate. There was translation into 6 different languages. We began every morning at 8:30 a.m. or earlier (for sidebar meetings), started the plenary at 09:30, lunch was about 2 or 3 p.m. Restaurants do not open for dinner until after 8 p.m. Work continued the first two days until about 8:30pm, and later still for many subgroups.

I believe the draft report, including the draft Executive Summary and the full Policy Makers Summary were in fairly good shape going into the meeting. The meeting was tasked to modify and approve these two documents, taking into account the suggestions for rewording by delegates to better convey the message. This was not achieved and, instead, there were deliberate attempts to obfuscate and undermine the documents by the OPEC nations, principally Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The procedures were governed by UN rules but there seemed to be no mechanism to move ahead other than unanimous consensus. Even with an overwhelming 93 to 2 in favor of particular wording, proceedings were delayed time and time again seeking alternative language that would satisfy everyone. Sidebar meetings were held by groups of 10 or so which were supposed to resolve wording of particular sections. But neither the Saudis nor Kuwait would participate in these and instead offered continual amendments in plenary.

On Wednesday, it became apparent that there was no hope for getting through the Policy Makers Summary and, instead, it will become a technical summary, part of the main scientific document under the lead authors but not blessed by the conference of the parties to the IPCC. The effort for almost the entire last day was devoted to just the executive summary. The lunch break was between 2 and 3 p.m. but there was no other break until the meeting closed around 12:15 a.m. the next day. The interpreters quit around 8 p.m., after which about one third of the delegates left as they could not participate without translation. Others left too so that only about 30% of the nations remained. The deadline was 1am by which time IPCC had to be out of the building. The news conference that had been called for 7 p.m. was, of course, cancelled.

In the final throes of trying to get a document of some sort, the Saudis continued with every ploy including saying there was no quorum (there is no quorum requirement) and that it was unrepresentative of all the nations (which became true). Part of the strategy seemed to be to avoid having a document at all. Instead the chairman (John Houghton) panicked and in the final few hours, all of the wording was that of the Saudis in spite of overwhelming support for alternatives. Every word was approved separately, the result was no macro perspective of the whole document or even sections. It was, at best, disappointing. The final document runs to 6 1/2 (short) pages. In one place wording was not agreed and an exception is footnoted. It was agreed in the meeting that the two exceptions (Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) would be named. This was challenged after it was all over on procedural grounds.

One casualty of this process is that is no longer a short highlighted summary up front entitled "What is new since IPCC 1990?". Instead, it was stated that the section headings would replace them. But then the section headings became mostly statements of facts rather than informative headings. A typical example is for the section on aerosols, which is now titled "Anthropogenic aerosols tend to produce negative radiative forcings" which is true but says nothing. The one most people favored was my suggestion for "Anthropogenic aerosols tend to mask global warming".

I believe I played a more prominent role in the debate than any other lead author. Accordingly, after the Executive Summary was finally completed I asked for clarification on how it was supposed to relate to the role of the lead authors and I asked rhetorically whether it was possible for the lead authors to dissociate themselves from this summary. The clarification I offered was the total disregard for lead author wishes and suggestions on the headings for the report. Subsequently, the U.S. delegation made a statement for the record expressing great disappointment in the way the meeting had been run and the disregard of the lead authors (referring to my complaint), and the lack of involvement of the NGOs (which the chairman precluded through lack of time).

All this does not augur well for the future of the IPCC. I believe it cannot continue unless substantial changes in rules of procedure are made.

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