

Interview with Jean-Pascal van Ypersele - IPCC Chair candidate

The IPCC must be the strongest voice of climate

In a few weeks, the IPCC will elect the members of its Bureau who will be in post for several years - until the conclusion of the next assessment report. The 34-member body is in charge of managing the report-writing process and advising the Panel of Member States on decision-making, as well as overseeing the quality of scientific work and communication.

Jean-Pascal van Ypersele is a candidate for the position of Chair of the IPCC, with the support of Belgium. We asked him to explain his motivations and his vision for the IPCC.



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Interview : Alain Tondeur and Soumaya Majdoub [*]

Hello Professor. The election for the next IPCC Chair will take place at the end of July. You're in the middle of the election campaign, just back from Nairobi and Bonn, and preparing for a busy schedule in Morocco. What's motivating you?

JP van Ypersele: I intend to put my long experience of climate change at the service of the international community, in the North, in the South, everywhere, in order to try to move things forward. Because climate change is a growing emergency in an increasing number of countries. It is becoming a vital and even an existential issue for some countries. Hundreds of millions of people are already at risk today and will be even more so tomorrow. The IPCC assessment reports summarise our knowledge of climate change. I would like to ensure this science serves to ensure the best decisions are made.

Your campaign leaflet talks about a more relevant IPCC. At a time when climate change is progressing rapidly and the 2030 deadline is fast approaching, some people are questioning the relevance of a new five- to seven-year cycle for the IPCC, which would produce over 4,000 pages of reports. What are your thoughts on this?

JP van Ypersele: The work of the IPCC provides the basis for political decisions at both international and national levels. The IPCC has been doing this work for over 30 years, as it will be celebrating its 35th anniversary this year. I believe it is essential that it continues its work, based on the mandate given to it by the United Nations General Assembly: to assess the scientific, technical, and socio-economic aspects of climate change, including response options; to carry out this assessment as rigorously as possible, with the aim of assisting political decision-making. This is what makes the IPCC relevant. It is the sense of service, the sense of utility. The information assessed and summarised by the IPCC must be as useful as possible. Today, the time has come to do more than just refine the scientific diagnosis of what is happening in the climate system. We know that greenhouse gases produced by the burning of fossil fuels and by deforestation are the main cause of global warming and climate change. In the

years to come, it is vital that the IPCC's work focuses more on solutions, in terms of mitigation, adaptation, and financing.

Adaptation is obviously the number one priority. We need to adapt to the part of climate change that is already here, so that the impacts are as small as possible: impacts on people, on human life, on health, on existence sometimes, but also on agriculture, ecosystems, infrastructures, the economy, etc.

In addition to adaptation, we absolutely must do more to mitigate warming, in other words to reduce net greenhouse gas emissions - primarily CO₂, which is the main greenhouse gas produced by human activities. Reducing emissions is essential to ensure that the problem to which we are trying to adapt does not become so great that it is simply no longer possible to adapt. Lastly, we need to help identify solutions so that international funding can be used to achieve what needs to be done in the areas of adaptation and mitigation. To these three areas - adaptation, mitigation, and financing - we could add a fourth one that has unfortunately become inescapable: the financing of loss and damage.

All this needs to be done in a much more determined way, and the IPCC must be at the service of making progress toward this objective. It must continue to provide information that refines the scientific diagnosis. But it must also better explain how to implement the many solutions that exist, in the most effective way possible, particularly by developing maximum synergies between the various actions in the climate field and in other areas of sustainable development.

[*] SM : Belgian Climate Center, member of Jean-Pascal van Ypersele's campaign team.

The "Walloon IPCC Platform" is the "Plateforme wallonne pour le GIEC" in French; Wallonia is one of the three regions of Belgium.



Tree planting with Elizabeth Wathuti (Green Generation Initiative) and children from the region of Nyeri, Kenya, June 2023. Photo : PwG (CC-BY).

In that regard, you stress the importance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an essential framework for the IPCC's analysis and action. What does this mean in concrete terms, at both levels - analysis and action? And how do you see SDG 13 (climate) being better integrated with the other SDGs?

JP van Ypersele: I do think it's very important to integrate all the dimensions of climate action into the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The IPCC has repeatedly demonstrated the many synergies existing between the various objectives. In particular, it has shown that we can help eradicate poverty - SDG 1, which is obviously essential - while adapting to climate change, reducing net CO₂ emissions, improving people's health, etc. These synergies have been highlighted by the IPCC in its latest reports, notably in the special report on a 1.5°C warming and in volumes II and III of the Sixth Assessment Report. I think we need to continue in that direction. When we deal with the climate on Monday, poverty on Tuesday, and biodiversity on Wednesday, we cannot take advantage of all the synergies. We need to break down the walls between the silos, and look at the problems together with a more open mind. I am convinced that the IPCC can help by putting these analyses at the service of political action - and by developing them further, because the literature on the subject is obviously evolving.

You would like the IPCC to become even more useful to political decision-makers - without being prescriptive, of course - by better identifying their needs at the start of the process. What do you mean by this and what proposals do you have in this area?

JP van Ypersele: I was struck during the last IPCC plenary sessions by the considerable amount of time spent discussing the concerns of certain governments -- and expressing these concerns is of course their absolute right -- in relation to the way in which the report had been drawn up. When concerns of this kind are expressed at the end of the process, it is far too late to address them. I am convinced that a better dialogue between the scientific community preparing the reports, on the one hand, and the political decision-makers who are their main audience, on the other hand, would make it possible to chart a better course from the outset, through a more relevant table of contents. In this way, the reports produced would better respond to the needs and concerns of policy-makers. Obviously, it is not a question of having decision-

makers write the reports, but of ensuring that they respond better to expectations and to the need for useful information that can be turned into decisions. This will help make the work of scientists more relevant. That's what I'd like to do, and in particular it requires a more inclusive scoping process at the start of the report-writing process.

But wouldn't this proposal increase the weight of politics over science in the IPCC's work?

JP van Ypersele: It is essential that scientists have the final say on the content of IPCC reports. These must be based on scientific literature, of course. But these reports are not just for the academic community. The IPCC's main function is not to highlight the work of scientists. Its function is to provide decision-makers around the world with the most useful information for political decision-making on an urgent problem that increasingly concerns countries around the world. The aim here is not to give undue influence to political decision-makers by allowing them to impose their concerns, but simply to be sure from the outset that the authors will write their reports with a clear understanding of the expectations of decision-makers in terms of the issues to be explored.

You place a great deal of emphasis on inclusiveness in the work of the IPCC, particularly with regard to researchers from the South, young researchers, and female researchers in particular. Why is this so important, and do you have a roadmap for achieving this objective?

JP van Ypersele: This is important because the IPCC is an international organisation whose reports must reflect the diversity of situations. These vary from country to country, depending on the conditions and level of development, the geography, the wealth of the country and the decisions that have or have not already been taken. To take this diversity into account, the hundreds of IPCC authors must ensure a well-balanced representation. It is therefore absolutely essential to have authors from every region of the world, preferably those who work there, to bring their knowledge of the situation on the ground, their perspectives, their ways of seeing things, and their priorities too, in the most appropriate way. Given that half of humanity is made up of women, and that the impacts of climate change affect them first and foremost, it is essential that the proportion of women authors tends towards 50%, so that the IPCC can benefit fully from their skills and perspectives. I will be paying close attention to this aspect, for which

I am already benefiting from the advice of my all-female campaign team!

How can we do this? The first thing is a state of mind, and this is mine: over the next cycle, the IPCC absolutely must be more inclusive than ever, and ensure that everyone feels respected. I will try to instil this spirit throughout the IPCC, in the Working Groups, in the Task Force on inventories, in the Secretariat, in everything the IPCC does. This will obviously be reflected in the selection of authors: we will also need more authors from developing countries, particularly the most vulnerable. There will also need to be more young scientists, who will bring fresh perspectives and energy. However, these authors must have the same means of access to scientific information, for example, and the same level of support as their colleagues in developed countries. As the work of the IPCC and its authors is voluntary, help will sometimes be needed to enable authors to carry out their synthesis work in addition to their day-to-day tasks. I am also very keen to maintain and develop the IPCC Scholarship Programme, which was initiated following the IPCC's Nobel Peace Prize [1]. I am seeking funding for these objectives from various international bodies and I think I am on the right track. If elected, I hope to be able to put this vision into practice and put forward innovative proposals from the start of my term of office.

You say that the countries of the South are doubly affected by climate change, and you refer to a change in their development trajectory. What might this change in trajectory entail, and how could the IPCC facilitate it?

JP van Ypersele: I used the expression "double injustice" 15 years ago in a publication [2]. Why? Because the main contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, historically, are the developed countries, the countries of the North. There's no point in hiding it, it's perfectly clear. This must be acknowledged and accepted, because at the same time, the impacts of climate change are most acute in the most vulnerable countries, which are also those that have emitted the least. Many of the impacts are felt, for example, in Africa, South Asia and Small Island States, regions that have contributed very little to emissions. How can the IPCC help to address this double injustice? Among other things, by providing the information that is most relevant to the solutions that can be implemented, taking into account the historical context and the "common but differentiated" responsibilities [3].

In my opinion, awareness of this context should also be a state of mind for the work of the IPCC and its authors. There is a growing body of scientific literature today that is making it possible to design policies in the

various countries of the world that take better account of the two-fold historical injustice. By providing the relevant information, the IPCC will make its contribution to moving towards a fairer world, to the "just transition" that is being talked about more and more. The IPCC obviously does not decide what needs to be done: it does not make the decisions, nor does it organise the COPs. But it can provide inspiration, highlighting the urgent need for action and the options available to decision-makers around the world. I would like the IPCC to do this with a clear awareness of the historical context: it will be better heard.

The historical context also involves changing the development trajectories of the countries of the North. How can the IPCC contribute to a positive change in this area too?

JP van Ypersele: It's clear that the climate problem is a global one. One kilogramme of CO₂ has the same effect on climate whether it is emitted in New York, Brussels, or Timbuktu. But – and this is a big "but"! – emissions in New York are much higher per person than emissions in Brussels, and even higher than emissions in Timbuktu, for example. The IPCC must obviously take this reality into account, and it has been very clear in its latest reports: the greatest efforts in terms of mitigation must be made by those who pollute the most. But there is also work to be done throughout the world to ensure that the trajectories of today's developing countries are not limited to copying the past trajectories of developed countries, in which case we would find ourselves in a situation that is scarcely better in a few decades.

International cooperation is needed to tackle this global problem, and cooperation must take into account the famous principle of common but differentiated responsibilities.

The development trajectories that need to change the most and the most rapidly today are those of the North. It should be pointed out that it is mainly the consumption patterns of the richest people in the North that are at issue, because not everyone in the North is rich either. Per capita emissions levels can be very different within developed countries. We must take that into account as well. Whether in the North or the South, it is not a question of telling people who emit very little that they must reduce their emissions. We must start by acting on the most important levers, that is, not only people but also the sectors where emissions are highest. The IPCC has been very clear on this, and it will have to be even clearer in the years to come.



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[1] ipcc.ch/2023/03/15/seventh-round-of-scholarship-awards

[2] van Ypersele 2006, *L'injustice fondamentale des changements climatiques* (The fundamental injustice of climate change), Alternatives Sud (in French): cetri.be/L-injustice-fondamentale-des Adapted English version in *Social developments in the European Union 2007*, ETUI: tinyurl.com/etui-org-vanyp

[3] This principle is at the heart of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, 1992): "the global nature of climate change calls for the widest possible cooperation by all countries and their participation in an effective and appropriate international response, in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities and their social and economic conditions". Source: <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conv.pdf>, 6th paragraph.



Photo: IISD/ENB | Anastasia Rodopoulou

In terms of governance, you regularly stress the need to improve communication and transparency within a more dynamic IPCC. How do you plan to make progress in this area?

JP van Ypersele: As far as governance is concerned, it's quite simple. There are procedures and structures at the IPCC that obviously have to be respected. They stem from decisions taken by the IPCC Plenary Assembly, which is made up of government representatives from all over the world. We have to work within this framework, but there is a state of mind that I intend to instil, as Chair, into the work of the IPCC: a spirit of collegiality and collaboration. There is more in two heads than in one, and more in three than in two, and so on. We need to work together in all our diversity. Because not everyone has the same opinion on every subject, compromises will sometimes have to be reached. The Belgians are known for their ability to find compromises, and I intend to exercise this ability in the governance of the IPCC, if I am elected Chair.

In terms of communication, I believe that the IPCC only makes sense if its work is well known by the international community. I am therefore determined to pay particular attention to this issue, and to use all possible tools to ensure that the IPCC is well understood. I want it to be even better understood than it is today, even better heard, even better listened to. The key messages must be very clear. I am proud to have been able to preside over the development of the IPCC's first communication strategy when I was a Vice-chair, between 2008 and 2015. But things change. It's been almost ten years now. The IPCC must have a communication strategy and communication resources that match the urgency of climate change and the urgency of sustainable development. I'm convinced that we can make great progress in this area, by using different tools, such as videos, or by organising more decentralised training sessions in different countries, and also in languages other than English. In this respect, I am proud of the work of the Walloon Platform for the IPCC [4], which I set up in 2016 with the support of the Walloon government to raise awareness of the IPCC's work in the French-speaking world.

[4] plateforme-wallonne-giec.be

You say that the IPCC must be the most solid scientific voice of climate. That seems to sum up your intentions...

JP van Ypersele: Indeed. With her permission, I borrowed the expression "IPCC, voice of climate" from Kari De Pryck, who has published a very interesting book under this title [5]. You know, I've only missed two COPs since the first one in 1995. At these meetings, we hear a lot from individual countries. But there is one voice we don't hear: the voice of climate. It is an essential "Party", but it has no voice as such in negotiations. So I would like the IPCC to be the global voice of climate and climate science. This is obviously just a figure of speech, but it means that the IPCC's messages, its reports reflecting the reality of current and projected climate change, as well as its impacts and options for action, must be communicated as clearly as possible. It is not enough to place 3,000- or 4,000-page reports or even 30- or 40-page summaries on the table of political decision-makers. No one should be unaware of what the IPCC is saying, based on science.

[5] De Pryck, K. (2022), « GIEC, la voix du climat », edited by Presses de Sciences Po.

The IPCC Bureau and the electoral process

The elections for the IPCC Chair and the 33 other positions in its Bureau will take place from 25 to 28 July, at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, which is the headquarters of the United Nations in Africa. The meeting will be attended by the duly mandated representatives of the IPCC member countries, which are all the countries of the United Nations. Each country has one vote, and a simple majority is required to be elected.

The IPCC mandate usually lasts between 5 and 7 years, during which time it produces a series of Special Reports and an Assessment Report. The mandate ends with the publication of the Synthesis Report.

Further information:

- On the elections: ipcc.ch/about/ar7-elections
- On Jean-Pascal van Ypersele's programme: jpvanyyp.be
- Campaign video (3 min): youtu.be/AMdbQu63j1c

If you are elected, how would you like to embody your role as Chair of the IPCC?

JP van Ypersele: I would like the IPCC to be truly representative of the full range of climate situations and solutions needed, and I would like to make its voice as eloquent as possible. I think it is very important to go and see what is happening in various countries, in very concrete terms. Not just at a ministerial level, but also on the ground, to see the reality of the impacts of climate change and the solutions being implemented here and there. During this campaign for IPCC Chair, I was lucky enough to be able to make a number of field visits, notably to Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh, and India. These visits allowed me to see suffering, but also hope. If elected, I will be a 200% IPCC Chair: 100% for the IPCC itself - to make it more effective, more eloquent, better understood, more relevant, etc.; and 100% to develop partnerships with other organisations, to solve the problems that the IPCC will not be able to solve on its own, and to be in contact with the situation on the ground. I will be making as many visits as possible, starting with countries that I have not had the opportunity to visit during the campaign. I think this is very important. For the IPCC to be the voice of climate, the voice of climate-related issues, its Chair must have both feet on the ground, in touch with reality.