

Notes on Time is Running Out

...for the social transformations necessary to avert irreversible climate catastrophe

The Editors of Monthly Review

Time is running out for the world to carry out the social transformations necessary to avert irreversible climate catastrophe, keeping the increase in global average temperatures below 1.5°C (or below 2°C). The most optimistic scenario

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currently provided by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) describes a pathway in which the increase in temperature will not rise to 1.5°C until 2040, peaking at 1.6°C, and then falling back to 1.4°C by the end of this century. But to achieve this will require revolutionary scale transformational change in global social relations affecting the human relation to the climate and the planetary environment as a whole.

This was the clear message of the original draft by scientists of the most important climate change report to date: [the Working Group III report on Mitigation of Climate Change of the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report \(AR6\)](#), authored by 278 scientists from sixty-five countries, and drawing on some 18,000 scientific studies. The scientific report was completed in



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August 2021. The final report was then published, following alterations by governments of The Summary for Policymakers (SPM), in April 2022. Yet, the final governmental-drafted SPM—the only part of the climate change report that is widely read and that affects policy—negated almost all of what scientists themselves had previously agreed on with respect to mitigation in their original draft of the SPM, creating a sharp divergence between this and the rest of the 2,900-page report.

It is crucial to understand that, in the IPCC process, the lead authors of the report arrive at a scientific consensus with

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respect to the entire climate report, including the all-important SPM. But, before the IPCC report is published, the SPM requires a second, supposedly higher consensus, known as the governmental consensus, in which governments (with corporate lobbyists looking over their shoulders) decide on

the final SPM line by line, rewriting what the scientists provided. This means that the published SPM is no longer entirely the result of scientific deliberations but is negotiated by political-economic interests. Governmental actors, however, are not able to alter the climate report as a whole, only the SPM (Juan Bordera et al, [On How 'Lobbies' Water Down the World's Most Important Climate Report](#) — Jus Semper, April 2022). The justification for the twofold consensus process is that the governmental consensus is simply meant to modify the scientific consensus to account for political realities and in order to forge an international agreement. In the case of the Mitigation report for AR6, however, the governmental consensus took an extreme form that in effect entirely erased the scientific consensus that had preceded it.

Alerted early on to what was likely to transpire, Scientist Rebellion (linked to Extinction Rebellion) leaked the Working

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Group III document to the press in August 2021 (though most of the mainstream press refused to make mention of the leaked report), which was then published on MR Online in September. Reading the leaked scientific summary and the governmental summary that displaced it, side by side, demonstrates that they are two entirely different SPMs, with the governmental consensus SPM

annulling the scientific consensus SPM, in effect censoring and removing the most important conclusions of the scientists who had authored the overall Working Group III Mitigation report (“Advance Release! [Leaked IPCC Reports,](#)” — Jus Semper, 1st January 2021).

As early as October 2021, the BBC, relying on documents it had obtained from the 2021 UN Climate Change

Various governments were going to war on the scientific consensus of the Working Group III Mitigation report... most of these countries were seeking to reverse the science in the SPM pointing to the non-viability of carbon capture and sequestration... All of these countries were successful in cutting out entirely or watering down what they regarded as objectionable in the published SPM.

Conference then taking place, described how various governments were going to war on the scientific consensus in the SPM of the Working Group III Mitigation report. Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Australia, India, Japan, and Norway, together with the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, were demanding the removal of parts of the SPM that had insisted on rapid reductions in fossil fuel energy. Australia lobbied against statements in the SPM that indicated that coal-fired plants

need to be eliminated while protesting references to fossil fuel lobbyists in the reports. At the same time, most of these countries were seeking to reverse the science in the SPM pointing to the non-viability of carbon capture and sequestration. Saudi Arabia objected to phrases in the report pointing to the need for “accelerated mitigation” of climate change. Brazil and Argentina insisted on censoring the scientific report on the subject of decreasing meat-based diets.

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Switzerland sought to remove sentences in the scientific report pointing to the need of developing countries to receive financing from rich countries in order to meet the targets for emission reductions. India, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia attacked the scientific consensus for its negative assessment of the role of nuclear power in combating climate change and achieving sustainable development goals (“COP26: Document Leak Reveals Nations Lobbying to Change Key Climate Report,” BBC, October 21, 2021). All of these countries were successful in cutting out entirely or watering down what they regarded as the objectionable elements in the published version of the SPM, including references to “accelerated mitigation,” which no longer appears.

The numerous changes to the SPM for the 2022 IPCC Mitigation report, which was altered in almost every line, dramatically highlight the role of vested interests in censoring the science. A number of examples will suffice:

1. A key finding of the scientific consensus report was that no net addition to current coal or gas plants could be built and that existing ones needed to be closed down within a decade if the below 1.5°C target was to be met. Not only was this eliminated in the governmental consensus SPM, but the SPM was rewritten to state that coal-fired plants could be increased, given possibilities for carbon capture and sequestration.
2. The scientific consensus report stated that possibilities for “the scale-up, diffusion and global spread of carbon capture and storage, nuclear energy, and carbon removal technologies have not progressed as rapidly” as other, alternative energy, technologies, and were not likely to play the major role in climate change mitigation, which, at this point, would have to rely on social change and demand-side, low-energy solutions. This was removed from the governmental consensus SPM.
3. The original draft SPM written by scientists compared the carbon emissions of the wealthiest 10 percent of the global population to those of the poorest 10 percent, indicating that the former account for ten times the per capita emissions of the latter. This comparison was deleted from the published report.
4. Likewise, the SPM by scientists had indicated that the top 1 percent accounted for 50 percent of all aviation-based emissions, while this was dropped from the governmental SPM.
5. Significantly, the science-based SPM explained that over 40 percent of developing country emissions were due to export production for developed countries. This is no longer included in the final SPM.
6. The scientific consensus indicated that “incremental” change was not sufficient to address climate change, with its “lock-in” of high-emissions technologies, and that an “ambitious transformation” with a “systemic approach” aimed at a fundamental social transition, overcoming “vested interests,” was required. This was discarded in the governmental consensus.
7. The summary approved by scientists indicated that “rapid GHG [greenhouse gas] emissions reductions and fundamental structural changes at global scale” were required to meet climate goals and that “accelerated policy development” was therefore essential. This is gone from the final SPM.
8. The scientific consensus SPM underscored that “pathways consistent with limiting global warming to below 2°C and 1.5°C entail rapid emissions reductions and a fundamental transformation of all sectors and regions in order to reach net zero CO2 emissions.” This sentence is nowhere to be found in the governmental consensus SPM.

9. A paragraph on the “rebound effects” of technologies (related to the Jevons Paradox), in which increased efficiency in the use of energy inputs in the current economic order can be seen as leading to higher rather than lower levels of carbon emissions given current economic tendencies, was removed from the final SPM.

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With respect to specific social-ecological measures advanced by the scientific consensus report, the deletions were equally dramatic:

1. A sentence in the scientific consensus SPM on how pathways based on “lower demand” are key to carbon dioxide emissions reduction is absent in the final governmental consensus SPM.
2. Six successive paragraphs on the importance of demand-side reductions based on lower-energy solutions, requiring fundamental social change, which were part of the scientific consensus, were entirely deleted from the governmental consensus report. This included paragraphs emphasising altering urban space and built environments, shifting away from a meat-based diet, and providing better human services with less expenditure of energy. Eliminated were sentences stating: “The impacts of improved service provision on the constituents of wellbeing have many more positive than negative impacts. In low-energy demand scenarios, final energy demand is 40% lower in 2050 than in 2018, while wellbeing is maintained or improved.”
3. The scientific consensus discussed the building of new, more sustainable cities, but this was removed in the governmental consensus.
4. A statement on “nature-based solutions to mitigate climate change, such as urban forestry and green infrastructure” also disappeared.
5. A key paragraph on how “transition pathways...that prioritise equity” can promote “transformational changes” was excised in the governmental consensus.
6. Although the term just transition is still included in passing in the governmental consensus report, the substantive discussion of this is expunged.
7. A discussion in the scientific SPM addressing “lack of integration of environmental justice in climate mitigation activities” was removed from the governmental SPM.
8. A paragraph on “accelerated system transitions consistent with sustainable development” necessary to achieve climate goals was deleted.
9. The scientific consensus indicated that “new social norms” could be created if “10–30% of the population” committed itself to “low-carbon technologies, behaviours, and lifestyles.” This was trashed in the published SPM.
10. The scientific consensus insisted on the need for mobilisation of the population, especially vulnerable communities, to combat climate change: “Increasing the participation of women, and racialised and marginalised groups, amplifies the impetus for climate action. Collective action through formal social movements and informal lifestyle movements expands the potential for climate policy and supports system change (high confidence). Climate strikes have given voice to youth in more than 180 countries.” No trace of any of this is to be found in the final report.

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Upon the release of the IPCC Working Group III Mitigation report, UN general secretary António Guterres, in a radical departure from the norm, issued a strong statement that the climate change report itself was “a file of shame” and revealed “a litany of broken

climate promises” by the “vested interests” who were putting humanity “firmly on track towards an unliveable world.” Although Guterres did not make it entirely explicit, nevertheless it was clear from his choice of words and the occasion that his objections were in large part a response to the mangling of the original SPM written by climate scientists. “Some

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government leaders,” he stated, were “lying,” “saying one thing—but doing another,” continuing to promote “investment in new fossil fuel infrastructure,” thereby perpetuating “moral and economic madness.” In a statement that read like a defence of the annihilated scientific consensus SPM, the UN general secretary declared, “climate activists are sometimes depicted as

dangerous radicals,” but in his view “the truly dangerous radicals are the countries that are increasing the production of fossil fuels” (“[Mitigation of Climate Change Report 2022: ‘Litany of Broken Climate Promises’—UN Chief](#),” United Nations April 5, 2022).

The effective eradication of the entire scientific consensus in the published SPM of the April 2022 IPCC Mitigation report means the published SPM is in stark contradiction with various chapters of the Mitigation report, which still convey the

The published, government (and corporation) SPM should be entirely dismissed as the consensus of capital, and the betrayal of science, reason, and humanity. The science is clear. Without radical transformative social change that breaks with the logic of the existing mode of production and that points to a world of sustainable human development, there will be no future for humanity.

underlying scientific consensus on mitigation. Thus, chapter one of the report underscores that some argue that “the character of social and economic development produced by the nature of capitalist society is ultimately unsustainable,” and cites radical, anticapitalist figures such as Jason Hickel and Andreas Malm. The word degrowth appears twenty-eight times in the full report. It is therefore necessary for those seriously concerned about the current climate emergency to rely primarily on the scientific report

—that is, the published chapters of the report plus the leaked SPM, representing the actual scientific consensus. In contrast, the published, government (and corporation) redacted SPM should be entirely dismissed as the consensus of capital, and the betrayal of science, reason, and humanity. The science is clear. Without radical transformative social change that breaks with the logic of the existing mode of production and that points to a world of sustainable human development, there will be no future for humanity.

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- ❖ **About the authors: Editors of Monthly Review Magazine:** John Bellamy Foster is the editor of MR and a professor of sociology at the University of Oregon. He has written extensively on political economy, ecology, and Marxism. Brett Clark is the associate editor of MR and a professor of sociology at the University of Utah. Camila Valle is assistant editor and Jamil Jonna, is associate editor for communications & production.
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