

Communicating Uncertainties on Climate Change

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The term of uncertainty in common language is confusing since it is related in one of its most usual sense to what cannot be known in advance or what is subject to doubt. Its definition in mathematics is unambiguous but not widely shared. It is thus difficult to communicate on this notion through media to a wide public.

From its scientific basis to the impact assessment, climate change issue is subject to a large number of sources of uncertainties. In this case, the definition of the term is close to its mathematical sense, but the diversity of disciplines involved in the analysis process implies a great diversity of approaches of the notion. Faced to this diversity of approaches, the issue of communicating uncertainties on climate change is thus a great challenge. It is also complicated by the diversity of the targets of the communication on climate change, from stakeholders and policy makers to a wide public.

We will present the process chosen by the IPCC in order to communicate uncertainties in its assessment reports taking the example of the guidance note to lead authors of the fourth assessment report. Concerning the communication of uncertainties to a wide public, we will give some examples aiming at illustrating how to avoid the above-mentioned ambiguity when dealing with this kind of communication.