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UCT scientists bring developing world's voice to climate change discussion

Five UCT researchers, among 12 from South Africa, have been selected to contribute to the Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

They are Dr Babatunde Abiodun, Professor Bruce Hewitson and Dr Daithi Stone of the Climate Systems Analysis Group (CSAG), Professor Chris Reason of the Department of Oceanography and Associate Professor Harald Winkler of the Energy Research Centre.

"Better representation by authors from developing countries means that the particular issues of addressing climate change in the context of development and poverty should be more fully reflected," said Professor Winkler.

Professor Hewitson said that as developing countries increase their body of climate-change research and literature, researchers from Africa will have a greater part to play in the assessment reports. He considered this a great achievement, especially since these countries are prone to the effects of climate change.

The IPCC assesses the full range of literature available on climate change. The reports are used as standards works of reference for policymakers, scientists, other experts and students. From the nearly 3 000 nominations received from around the globe, the IPCC has selected 831 contributors for the fifth report, which follows on the organisation's assessments for 1990, 1995, 2001 and 2007.

The team of climate change experts – including meteorologists, physicists, oceanographers, statisticians and social scientists– will dedicate almost four years to the three Working Group Reports of the AR5, to be published between 2013 and 2014. These experts will also contribute to the Synthesis Report to be published in 2014.

About 30% of the authors hail from developing countries or economies in transition.

The UCT contingent examining the physical science basis will be made up of Dr Abiodun and Professor Reason as lead authors. They will work with international colleagues on a chapter on the "Evaluation of Climate Models", to go into their section of the report. Professor Reason said he "will contribute expertise relating to the ability of models to represent Southern Hemisphere climate variability and change".

Professor Hewitson and Dr Stone have been named as, respectively, convening lead author and lead author in Working Group II, which will report on impacts, adaptation and vulnerability to climate change.

Professor Winkler will serve as lead author in Working Group III, which will focus on the mitigation of climate change – the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. This section will take an approach that engages climate policy and provide analytical support to decision-makers. "The focus of the chapter to which I will be contributing is on 'International Cooperation: Agreements and Instruments', an important topic after Copenhagen failed to agree a new treaty," said Winkler.

Hewitson and Winkler were also lead authors on the fourth assessment report.

AR5 will be "a bit more" than just a simple update of facts and figures, said Winkler, as it is a full assessment of the literature on climate change. Therefore the report will pay greater attention to the socio-economic aspects of mitigation and the "pathways of transformation". It will look at the big picture rather than the sector-by-sector picture, and will include a chapter on human settlements.

"The centre of gravity in the climate change debate is shifting to include an increasing element on impacts and adaptation," adds Hewitson, "and Africa is a particularly vulnerable continent in this regard."

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