

# 4

## Venues

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### Overview

By highlighting the importance of venues and meetings for the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), this chapter offers a novel angle from which to study the institution. Thinking of the IPCC as a ‘travelling village’ and a ‘system of meetings’, we discuss the various functions of venues and meetings in organising and maintaining the IPCC’s assessment process. We argue that because of the global and networked nature of its activities and institutional arrangements, participating in the IPCC means making the world one’s workplace. The chapter also shows how established IPCC meeting practices have been tested by the COVID-19 pandemic and sheds light on some of the implications of the shift from in-person to virtual meetings.

### 4.1 Introduction

The IPCC describes itself as a ‘huge and yet very small organization’ (IPCC, n.d. (a)). The dozen staff members of its Secretariat are hosted by the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) in Geneva, but most of the scientists and government representatives who carry out the bulk of its activities are scattered worldwide across many institutions. In order to function as a network organisation (Venturini et al., 2022) and carry out its work, the IPCC relies on a complex ‘system of meetings’ (Brown & Green, 2017: 46) organised in various places around the world. Unlike other practices, actors, institutions and objects that make up the IPCC, the Panel’s venues and meetings have so far received little attention. This is somewhat surprising since these venues and meetings play a key role in the coordination of the assessment work and contribute to building consensus in the IPCC. They also serve as a ‘visible stage’ (Craggs & Mahony, 2014: 415; see also Death, 2011) from which the authority of the organisation is projected.

This chapter is based on ethnographic experience with IPCC meetings since 2014. Studying the IPCC means travelling to many countries, and going into different venues and meeting rooms to observe global climate assessments in the making – although, amid the global pandemic, meetings have been held virtually since spring 2020. The chapter is structured as follows. Sections 4.2 and 4.3 explore the spatial and material nature of IPCC venues. Section 4.4 explores the orchestration of meetings and their various functions in the work of the IPCC. It also discusses some of the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on its meeting practices (see Box 4.1).

## **4.2 All Over the Place? Locating the IPCC Assessment Process**

In science and technology studies (STS), the role of places and venues in knowledge production has been acknowledged since the 1970s (Shapin, 1998; Livingstone, 2003). Against the commonplace assumption that scientific knowledge is universal, scholars have shown that places shape the production of knowledge (Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Knorr Cetina, 1999). All forms of knowledge are situated and reflect the particular conditions of their production (Haraway, 1988). Places are ‘a way of understanding’ (Cresswell, 2004: 11) because they make it possible to ‘see attachments and connections between people and place [. . . and] see worlds of meaning and experience’. STS scholars have also shown that the aesthetic features of the environment in which scientific knowledge is produced and presented are crucial for underpinning the authority of science. Some places can even act as ‘truth-spots’ (Gieryn, 2018: 172) that provide ‘believability and authority to claims or assertions associated with that spot’.

The assessment work of the IPCC is bound to multiple and specific locations. For example, the location of the Secretariat at the WMO in Geneva – ‘a United Nations city’ – provides the IPCC with solid institutional and scientific credibility and contributes to its authoritative status. As the Panel describes it, ‘Geneva is a perfect example of an international and multicultural city’ (IPCC, 2019a), which succeeded in attracting numerous international and non-profit organisations and turned into a UN ecosystem (Dairon & Badache, 2021).

The other ‘parts’ of the organisation are spread across the globe. IPCC authors who write the reports are based in their home institutions, as are the representatives of the member states who review and accept them. Authors meet at least three to four times at so-called Lead Author Meetings (LAMs), to coordinate and write their collective report. IPCC member states meet at least once a year in Panel/

Plenary sessions and take major decisions regarding the mandate of the three Working Groups (WGs), the budget of the organisation and outreach activities. These plenaries are also attended by observer organisations (see **Chapter 10**). LAMs and Panel sessions take place worldwide and the organisation relies on the willingness and resources of its member states to offer venues. The IPCC may thus be characterised as a ‘travelling village’ (to take a metaphor used by one participant) whose thousands of scientific experts and delegates regularly leave their home institutions to meet in various locations.

Since 1988, the IPCC has organised hundreds of gatherings in over 57 countries (see Figure 4.1). Such widespread spatial organisation projects the image of a truly global endeavour. It also reflects the way in which the IPCC derives its authority from its ‘convening power’, much like its parent organisation, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), which seeks to bring ‘the world together to protect the environment, support sustainable development and ensure the health of the planet for future generations’ (UNEP, 2021).

Figure 4.1 shows that, overall, IPCC activities have taken place in some regions more than in others. As the top panel illustrates, Switzerland (Geneva, 11 sessions), Kenya (Nairobi, 6), Canada (Montreal, 5) and France (Paris, 4) have hosted the most IPCC Panel sessions. This is not surprising since these four cities host UN institutions that offer adequate plenary venues. Interestingly, the United States only hosted one session in 1990 in Washington (IPCC-3). No Panel session so far has been held in Oceania. The middle panel shows that countries that hosted the most LAMs for regular assessment as well as special reports are Switzerland (16), the USA (12), Australia (12), the UK (9) and Norway (9). It is worth highlighting that only a few LAMs were held in the Middle East, Africa and Central Asia. These numbers illustrate the centrality of the Global North, in particular Switzerland, in hosting both Panel sessions and WG meetings.

Finally, a less visible component of the IPCC, the Technical Support Units (TSUs), deserve attention, as depicted in the bottom panel of Figure 4.1. TSUs, generally a dozen people, support the work of the WGs and the Task Force on National Greenhouse Gas Inventories (TFI) and play a key role in the coordination of the assessment activities. Each TSU is jointly chaired by two co-chairs, one from a ‘developed country’ and one from a ‘developing country’, but is generally hosted and funded by the developed country. The co-chair whose country funds a TSU thus has a particularly strong voice in running the WG (IAC, 2010). As the map shows, only a handful of countries have supported the establishment of TSUs: the UK and USA have together financed 8 out of 18 of the WG TSUs, while Japan has been in charge of the TFI since 1999.

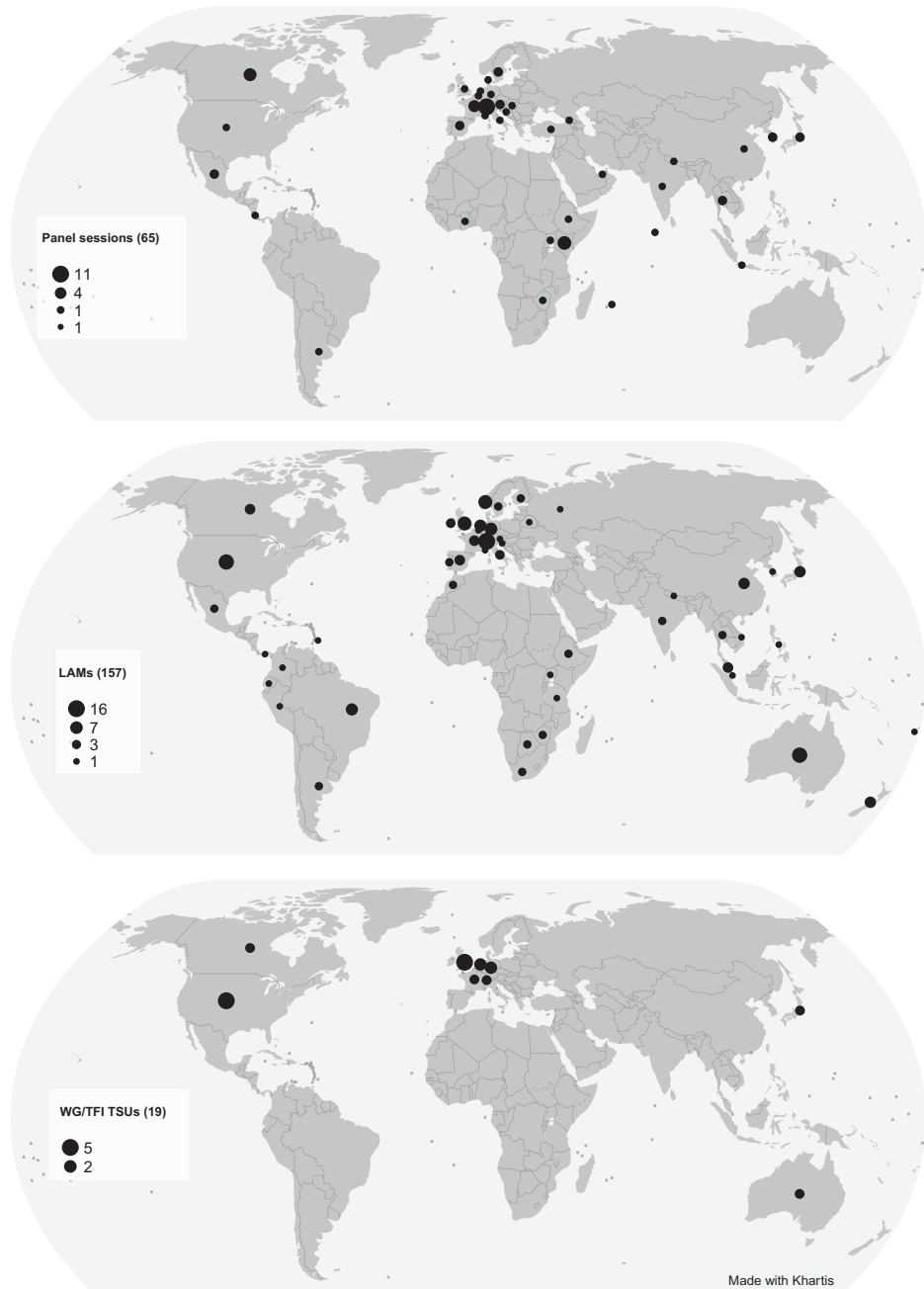


Figure 4.1 The global distribution of IPCC gatherings (1988–2020).

The top panel displays the distribution of the plenary sessions of the Panel. The middle panel shows where LAMs took place. The bottom panel presents the locations of the TSUs of the WGs and of the TFI. The locations were found in meeting documents available on the IPCC website. A few locations, from the early days of the IPCC, could not be found in the available documentation.

### 4.3 IPCC Venues, Enclosing Climate?

Examining the venues, and more specifically the buildings and rooms that have hosted IPCC meetings, draws attention to the materiality of the spaces that underpins the Panel's work. Venues and their distinct spatial features, including their locality and architecture, have an impact on how science and policy are (co-)produced. As McConnell (2019: 47) has argued, places can carry with them distinct 'affective atmospheres', relating, *inter alia*, to the way in which official buildings convey a sense of neutrality and universality through their function and design. The WMO building (Figure 4.2), for example, carries a clear symbolic meaning. According to WMO (2021), its main building is 'at once pragmatic and emblematic – a hi-tech response to geography from the creativity of science and a symbol of the commitment of WMO to the protection of the environment and the rational and economical use of energy'. Originally, the 'Chic Planète project', submitted by the architects Rino Brodbeck and Jacques Roulet in 1993, sought to accommodate budget constraints, the geography of the site (a narrow strip bound by roads, a railway and existing buildings) and care for the environment. Its interior design is a

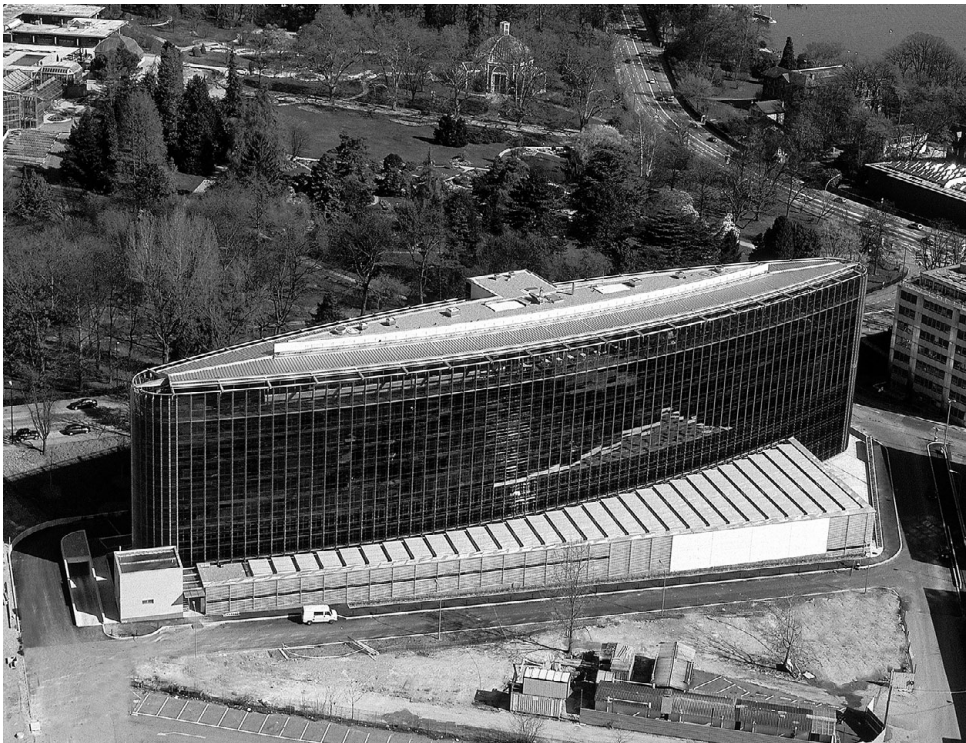


Figure 4.2 The WMO headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.

Source: WMO (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>)

perfect illustration of the desire of humans to control their climate, as the ‘natural process of heat transfer [put in place by the architects] maintains the building at a constant optimal temperature, between 20 and 26°C’ (WMO, 2021).

The buildings that accommodate IPCC Panel sessions and LAMs also have distinctive features from which the organisation can draw credibility and legitimacy. These meetings usually take place in universities, resort hotels, conference centres or UN buildings – places that, for different reasons, strive for neutrality, conventionality and universality (cf. Augé, 1995). These buildings are meant not only to ‘keep the weather out’ (Gieryn, 2002: 35) but also to accommodate the daily flow and gathering of hundreds of people, thereby ensuring the smooth and efficient proceedings of meetings and events. IPCC venues have a particular ordering function in which they ‘arrange in space things and people, building-in strict patterns of movement and interpersonal contacts that are sequenced by entrances, passages, barriers, and exits’ (Gieryn, 2018: 174). Over the years, the layout of the rooms for LAMs and Panel sessions has come to look alike and the steady flow of movement in and between plenary and adjacent rooms, interrupted by regular breaks, has become routinised. As Figure 4.3 shows, IPCC venues generally consist of one main conference room, where the plenary meetings take place, and several smaller breakout rooms to host contact groups and chapter meetings. Corridors also play a key role in facilitating informal gatherings of participants.

As for most UN bodies, such venue configurations are also meant to create a strict separation between participants and the rest of society. Such separation becomes visible through the badges worn by participants and observers – the fruits of a long process of accreditation and registration started several months before the meetings – which allow them to enter rooms that are often guarded and not open to other users of the building and the public.

#### 4.4 Meetings within Meetings

Places and venues can also shape the practices that prevail at a science–policy interface (Mahony, 2013; see also Palmer et al., 2019). When the IPCC meets in a certain place (e.g. a conference centre, university or hotel), it temporarily creates an ‘IPCC space’. Such ‘boundary spaces’ (Mahony, 2013: 31) can be instrumental in bringing science and politics into closer relation (Mahony, 2013: 37). They support and constrain ‘individual performances and in doing so shap[e] the narratives and knowledges produced’ (Craggs & Mahony, 2014: 415).

The activities of the IPCC are organised through a complex system of large-scale and small-scale meetings, in constant dialogue with one another. Each of these gatherings has specific functions aimed at ensuring that the assessment reports will be published according to the approved timeline and based on the latest published literature. Meetings are also a vehicle to order the process and

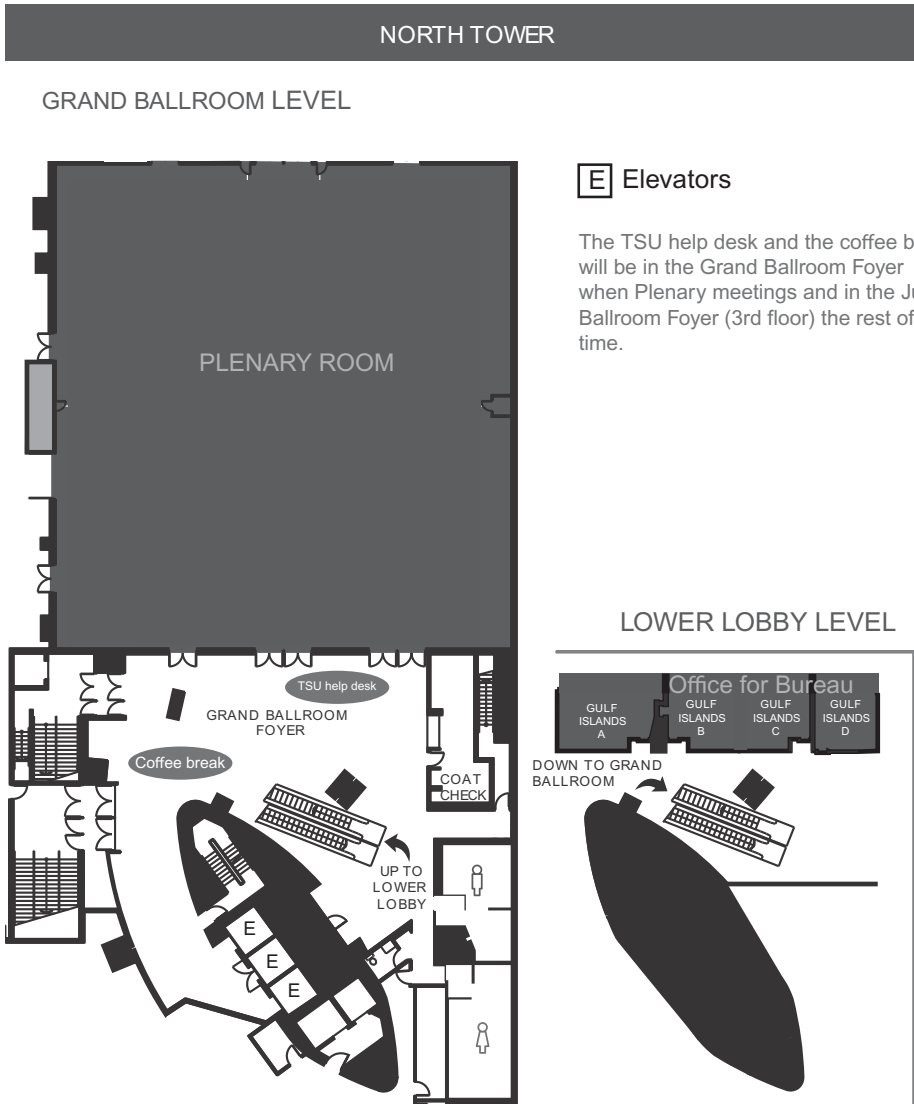
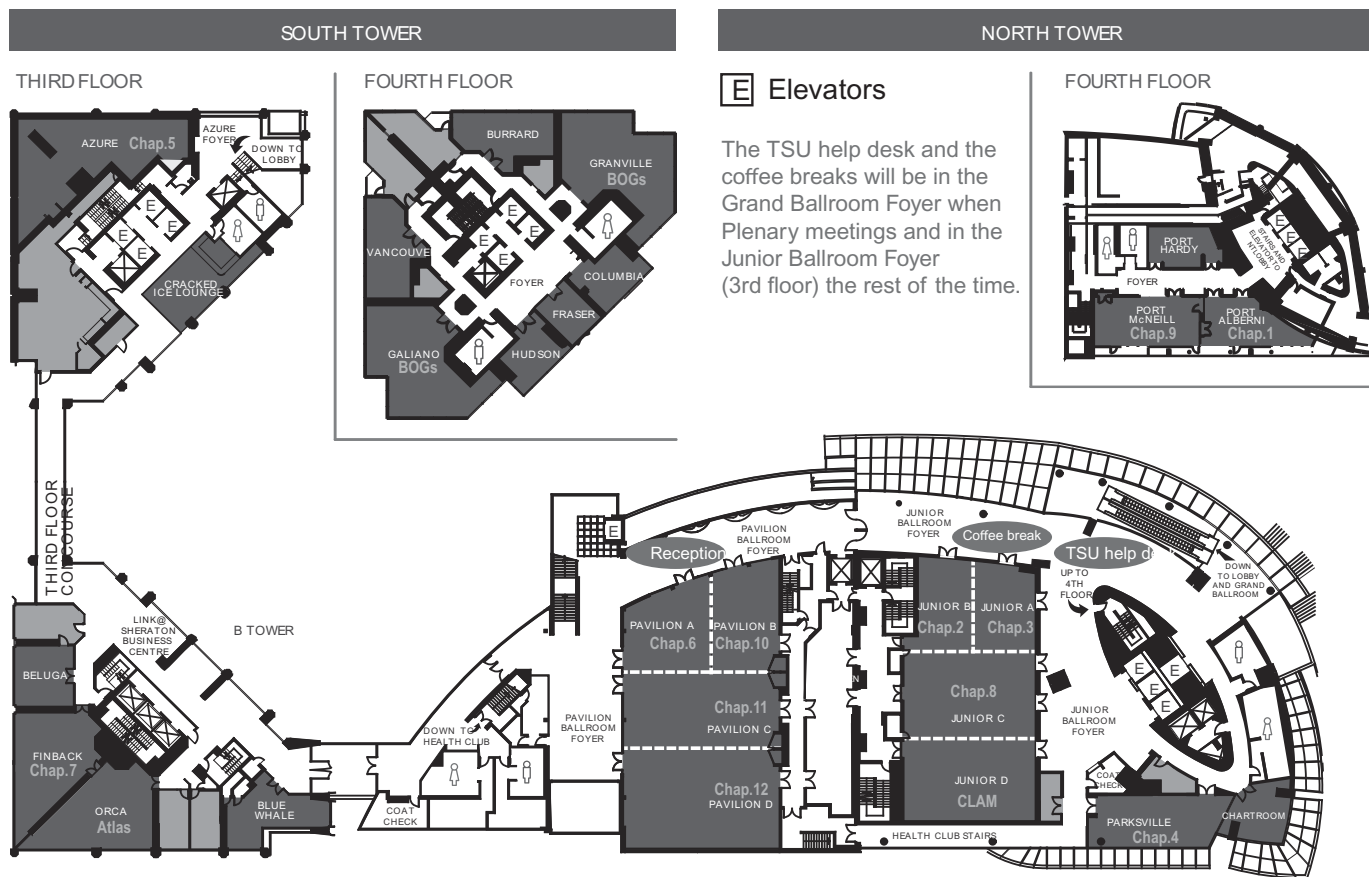


Figure 4.3 Example of the layout of a Lead Author Meeting.

Source: IPCC, 2019a

make sure that the otherwise geographically and institutionally scattered assessment cycles follow the rules of procedures that underpin the credibility and legitimacy of the IPCC (see **Chapter 3**). Each meeting is therefore bound to a strict agenda and to the achievement of predefined tasks and milestones within the assessment process – agreeing on the outline of a report, answering reviewers’ comments, approving the Summaries for Policymakers (SPMs) and so forth.

Each meeting is also bound to specific norms and codes. WG LAMs closely resemble large academic gatherings and abide by largely informal deliberative



### E Elevators

The TSU help desk and the coffee breaks will be in the Grand Ballroom Foyer when Plenary meetings and in the Junior Ballroom Foyer (3rd floor) the rest of the time.

Figure 4.3 (cont.)



practices. Discussions are mainly held in English, making it more challenging for non-native speakers. The domination of certain individuals is also sometimes difficult to avoid. In contrast, IPCC Panel sessions are more akin to UN meetings (with a ceremonial opening session, the presence of interpreters, the names of countries displayed on tables, the use of diplomatic courtesy and formalities, etc.). At the same time, because of the scientific aura of the IPCC, government representatives need to adapt their interventions to the register of science (e.g. political interventions can be dismissed on the grounds of being ‘too political’).

Brown et al. (2017: 14) define meetings as ‘spaces for the alignment and negotiation of distinct perspectives [...] constituted through the contextual interplay of similarity and difference’. As an essential tool of collective deliberation, meetings – and meetings within meetings (chapter meetings, Bureau meetings, Breakout Groups (BOGs), SPM meetings, contract groups, huddles and so on; see Figure 4.4) – lie at the heart of the IPCC consensus-building strategy (see **Chapter 19**). Meetings allow participants to deliberate on specific issues, to identify agreements and disagreements, and to formulate informed assessments and decisions. Meetings are considered the ‘locus and embodiment of ideas of appropriate, transparent decision-making’ (Brown et al., 2017: 11), and the numerous guiding documents that are issued by the IPCC are expected to support and legitimise such processes.

Meetings also have an important socialising function as they offer moments of interaction and opportunities for relationship building. As ‘a series of situated relationships between people, places, tools, and documents’ (Yarrow, 2017: 97), meetings bring together IPCC participants and familiarise them with the norms and practices of the organisation. They help develop connections with other participants by creating a sense of community, shared identity and trust in the ‘IPCC family’.

The Panel’s system of meetings is also in constant dialogue with events happening outside the IPCC context. Smaller-scale in-person or virtual meetings between distinct expert communities aim to organise, orchestrate and align the activities of these communities with IPCC assessment cycles to ensure that their outputs are published in time to be included in IPCC reports (see **Chapter 18**). IPCC meetings are also part of even larger orchestration efforts that take place in other international institutions and fora (UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), UNEP, WMO, Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), etc.) (Campbell et al., 2014: 3). These events are connected by the individuals who circulate between them and who weave together ideas, practices and objects to build the global governance of the environment.

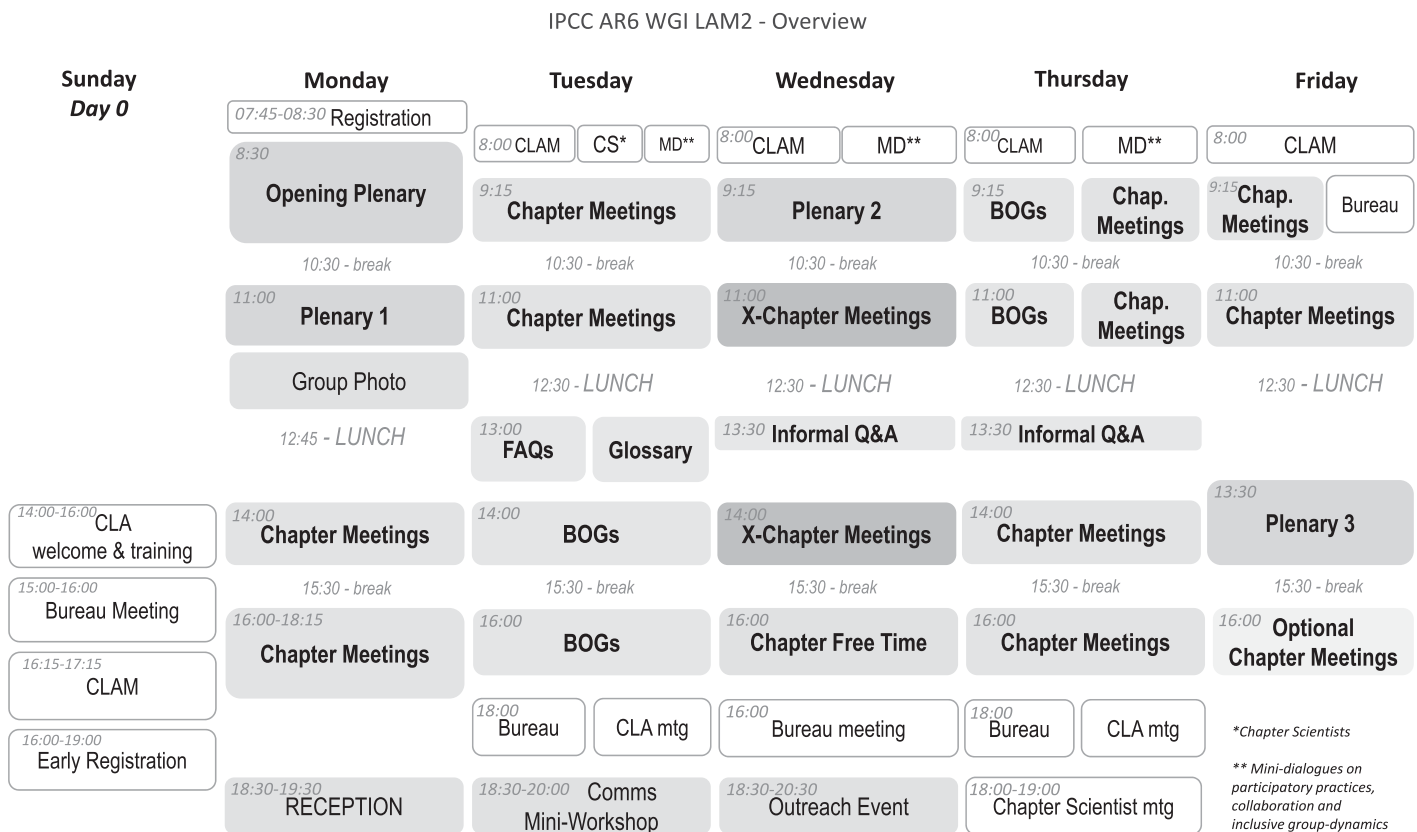


Figure 4.4 Types of meetings scheduled during a Lead Author Meeting.  
Source: IPCC, 2019a

## Box 4.1

**From in-person to virtual meetings**

From April 2020, as a result of the global pandemic, LAMs and Panel sessions were moved online. The move to virtual meetings brought IPCC deliberations into the intimacy of the homes of authors, delegates, staff and observers. This required significant changes to the carefully orchestrated IPCC system of meetings. It meant, for instance, setting up a very complex schedule to ensure hospitable meeting times for participants across different time zones. The length of the meetings was also adapted. Author meetings were more frequent (WGIII for instance organised two 'Light Touch Stocktake' meetings) and virtual approval sessions lasted twice as long as in-person ones (i.e. two weeks).

Adapting the format of the meetings impacted participation both positively and negatively. Some participants welcomed, for example, the possibility to attend meetings which they otherwise could not have attended because of other commitments, limited resources or visa issues. Others appreciated the opportunity to save money and reduce their ecological footprint by avoiding air travel. WGIII for instance saved 368 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and about \$1 million in travel costs (IPCC, 2020b). While both eLAMs and virtual Panel sessions recorded high attendance rates, challenges remained. For example, connectivity issues and limited internet access were a barrier for effective participation in some regions and some participants had to work through the night, as in Oceania and the Pacific Islands.

Deliberations were both facilitated and hindered by the process of moving online. For instance, through a well-balanced sequencing of the SPM sections, WGI succeeded in having most issues resolved on time. Instead of following the order of the SPM text as would be the case for in-person meetings, WGI moved the discussion of some of the trickiest statements to the first days of the approval, thus allowing more time for their resolution. In the eLAMs, the use of the Zoom chat function prompted reactions and comments that could easily be recorded by the authors and the TSUs and taken into account in following discussions. At the same time, the spontaneity, intensity and proximity of face-to-face meetings were often lost, and group dynamics were impacted. Virtual meetings reduced the possibility of moving between tables and rooms to meet other participants, of organising informal meetings, and of socialising in the corridors and during breaks. For instance, during the WGI approval session, some participants found it much harder to reach consensus online. Especially during heated debates, the difficulty to see other participants, their facial and bodily expressions, made deliberations more challenging. The WGIII TSU (IPCC, 2020b) also noted that meetings were sometimes dominated by more vocal and Zoom-savvy participants.

Virtual meetings are certainly no perfect substitute for in-person meetings, but they did open a space for considering new deliberation formats. It also allowed the organisation to publish the WGI report in time for the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), thus providing a timely 'reality check' for the UNFCCC negotiations.

#### 4.5 Achievements and Challenges

This chapter has shown why the IPCC is both large – in relation to the number of contributors who participate in its activities and the assessment function it provides – and small – in relation to its material reality and physical footprint. It functions through a carefully orchestrated and structurally embedded system of meetings spread throughout the world (although more occur in the Global North than in the Global South). Through this system of meetings, the IPCC has succeeded in bringing together scientific experts from all over the world to produce probably the most sophisticated global environmental assessment. It has also managed to socialise policymakers from all countries to the issue of climate change. However, building and maintaining such spaces in which researchers and government representatives can deliberate undisturbed comes at the cost of separating the organisation from the rest of society and organising its meetings behind closed doors.

As a result of the pandemic, and its subsequent restrictions on international travel and gatherings, in 2020 all IPCC meetings were moved online. The IPCC became a laboratory in which to experiment with new forms of participation and deliberation (Box 4.1). Notwithstanding the challenges of the global pandemic, the perceived success of eLAMs and virtual WG approval sessions proved the adaptive capacity of the IPCC's system of meetings. It also provided important lessons to be learned for the future of the organisation, notably suggesting the possibility of organising hybrid events, or alternating virtual and in-person meetings, to retain some of the advantages of eLAMs in terms of inclusivity and a lower carbon footprint.

#### Three Key Readings

Brown, H., Reed, A. and Yarrow, T. (2017). Introduction: towards an ethnography of meeting. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 23(S1): 10–26. <http://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12591>

This article demonstrates the relevance of meetings as objects of study.

Craggs, R. and Mahony, M. (2014). The geographies of the conference: knowledge, performance and protest. *Geography Compass*, 8(6): 414–430. <http://doi.wiley.com/10.1111/gec3.12137>

This article draws attention to the role of conferences as an important part of political and academic life.

Gieryn, T. F. (2018). *Truth-Spots: How Places Make People Believe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <http://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226562001.001.0001>

This book shows how truth and place are inextricably linked and examines those places that lend credibility to beliefs and claims.