
African crops yield another catastrophe for the IPCC

One more alarming claim in the IPCC's 2007 report is disintegrating under closer examination, says Christopher Booker

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Published: 7:36PM GMT 13 Feb 2010

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Ever more question marks have been raised in recent weeks over the reputations of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and of its chairman, Dr Rajendra Pachauri. But the latest example to emerge is arguably the most bizarre and scandalous of all. It centres on a very specific scare story which was included in the IPCC's 2007 report, although it was completely at odds with the scientific evidence – including that produced by the British expert in charge of the relevant section of the report. Even more tellingly, however, this particular claim has repeatedly been championed by Dr Pachauri himself.



A farmer in the Maghreb in Morocco, where the IPCC claims that harvests could decline by half in the next decade. Photo: ALAMY

Only last week Dr Pachauri was specifically denying that the appearance of this claim in two IPCC reports, including one of which he was the editor, was an error. Yet it has now come to light that the IPCC, ignoring the evidence of its own experts, deliberately published the claim for propaganda purposes.

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One of the most widely quoted and most alarmist passages in the main 2007 report was a warning that, by 2020, global warming could reduce crop yields in some countries in Africa by 50 per cent. Dr Pachauri not only allowed this claim to be included in the short Synthesis Report, of which he was co-editor, but has publicly repeated it many times since.

The origin of this claim was a report written for a Canadian advocacy group by Ali Agoumi, a Moroccan academic who draws part of his current income from advising on how to make applications for "carbon credits". As his primary sources he cited reports for three North African governments. But none of these remotely supported what he wrote. The nearest any got to providing evidence for his claim was one for the Moroccan government, which said that in serious drought years, cereal yields might be reduced by 50 per cent. The report for the Algerian government, on the other hand, predicted that, on current projections, "agricultural production will more than double by 2020". Yet it was Agoumi's claim that climate change could cut yields by 50 per cent that was headlined in the IPCC's Working Group II report in 2007.

What made this even odder, however, was that the group's co-chairman was a British agricultural expert, Dr Martin Parry, whose consultancy group, Martin Parry Associates, had been paid £75,000 by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) for two reports which had come to totally different conclusions. Specifically designed to inform the IPCC's 2007 report, these predicted that by 2020 any changes were likely to be insignificant. The worst case they could come up with was that by 2080 climate change might decrease crop yields by "up to 30 per cent".

British taxpayers poured out money for the section of the IPCC report for which Dr Parry was responsible. Defra paid £2.5 million through the Met Office, plus £330,000 for Dr Parry's salary as co-chairman, and a further £75,000 to his consultancy for two more reports on the impact of global warming on world food supplies. Yet when it came to the impact on Africa, all this peer-reviewed work – including further expert reports by Britain's Dr Mike Hulme and Dutch and German teams – was ignored in favour of a prediction from one Moroccan activist at odds with his own cited sources.

However, the story then got worse when Dr Pachauri himself came to edit and co-author the IPCC's Synthesis Report (for which the IPCC paid his Delhi-based Teri institute, out of the £400,000 allocated for its production). Not only did Pachauri's version again give prominence to Agoumi's 50 per cent figure, but he himself has repeated the claim on numerous occasions since, in articles, interviews and speeches – such as the one he gave to a climate summit in Potsdam last September, where he boasted he was speaking "in the voice of the world's scientific community".

Only last week, in an interview available on YouTube, Dr Pachauri was asked about errors in the IPCC's 2007 report and his own Synthesis Report, with specific reference to the loss of North African crops. His reply was that

– aside from the prediction that the IPCC has now had to disown, that Himalayan glaciers could vanish by 2035 – the reports contained "no errors". Passages such as those on African crops were "not errors and we are absolutely certain that what we have said over that can be substantiated".

In the wake of all the other recent scandals, "Africa-gate" may be the most damaging of all, because of the involvement of Dr Pachauri himself. Not only is the reputation of the IPCC in tatters, but that of its chairman appears irreparably damaged. Yet the world's politicians cannot afford to see him resign because, if he goes, the whole sham edifice they have sworn by would come tumbling down.

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