



Psychology at the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change

Since October 2022, Professor Tobias Brosch, chair in sustainability psychology at the University of Geneva, acts as representative of the American Psychological Association (APA), the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA), and the Swiss Federation of Psychologists (SFP) to the United Nations in Geneva.

In this position, his task is to create connections between psychological science and the work of the UN by fostering dialogue and information exchange among psychologists, UN staff, member state representatives, and NGOs, with the aim of encouraging the development of psychologically-informed policies and programs to help achieve the UN Sustainable Development goals.

Since the beginning of the mandate, Prof. Brosch has been in contact with many of the key players in the UN ecosystem in Geneva, has given a workshop to introduce Behavioral Sciences to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, participated in the development of a document on psychological insights into risk communication for the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, and has presented his research on the potential of emotions to promote sustainable action at the UN Behavioral Science Week.

The most important activity within this mandate so far was the opportunity to attend the 58th session of the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change, in which the summary for policymakers of the latest assessment report of the IPCC was discussed by the member states. As a participant with official observer status, Prof. Brosch was able to attend the plenary sessions, in which the report was discussed and approved line-by-line, as well as the more informal huddles and contact groups, in which fundamental disagreements were discussed and resolved among the national delegates. Of special interest for the psychological community were the elements of the report that discuss the importance to consider climate change as a threat to mental health and provide the necessary help, and the elements that highlighted importance of using behavior change interventions to promote climate mitigation.

The discussions were a long process (it was not unusual for the discussion of a single sentence to take more than an hour) that consisted of a back-and-forth between the delegates of the different nations who proposed modifications to the text to change the emphasis of different aspects, and a back-and-forth between the delegates and the scientists who were the authors of the report who had to ensure that the proposed corrections adopted by the plenary were still scientifically correct.

There was much agreement about the fact that climate change exists, and that it has very negative consequences for humanity and the planet. Intense discussions mainly were related to the issue of which steps should be taken to promote mitigation and adaptation, given that these decisions will have an enormous impact on the actions required by the different countries. All mentions of mental health in the context of climate change were almost immediately approved by the plenary session. The paragraph describing the importance of behavior change was relegated to a contact group because the same paragraph also involved mention of political measures and financial incentives that can be taken, which resulted in 24 hours of intense negotiation and discussion. In the end, the relevant paragraphs were adopted and approved, including mention of the importance of lifestyle and behavior change in the context of climate change mitigation.

Due to the intense nature of the debates, the approval process took 48 hours longer than initially planned, in the end the delegates negotiated around the clock, with almost no breaks. Most importantly, however, the delegates finally were able to approve and adopt the report, which now can start playing its role in international policy-making.