

**Understanding Sea-level Rise and Variability**  
**A WCRP Workshop**  
**UNESCO**  
**6-9 June 2006**

**Opening Remarks**  
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**Executive Director, ICSU**

It is a privilege and a pleasure to address you briefly in the opening session of this important workshop.

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, ICSU argued, on behalf of the international science community, that science must become more policy relevant and that policy decisions should be based on best available scientific knowledge. The World Climate Research Programme is the oldest of the four global change research programmes that ICSU sponsors and it can be argued that it is also the most successful. During its slightly more than 25 years of existence, it has attracted the best scientists world-wide to increase our understanding of the global climate system.

WCRP, together with the Global Climate Observing System, provides the essential underpinning of IPCC. Research, monitoring and assessment are all needed and provide the scientific understanding necessary for the political discussions within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Thus, the essential components are in place to ensure the link between science and policy.

The current reporting in the press unfortunately often emphasizes distant possibilities rather than probable outcomes of climate change. A Pentagon scenario-building exercise published last year suggested a sudden breakdown in the North Atlantic circulation, producing a dramatic regional cooling. The disaster film *The Day After Tomorrow* suggested an apocalyptic future not foreseen by most serious climatologists. In fact, we do not know whether global warming will continue to increase on a steady ramp or possibly cross the threshold of some nonlinear process. We are in the middle of a large uncontrolled experiment on the only planet we have.

ICSU and WCRP organized a side-event at the United Nations last month in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Commission on Sustainable Development on the science of climate change. John Church and others described current status of the climate science and John also had the opportunity to address the plenary of CSD on the importance of climate science. Despite all our efforts, we have still not been able to properly communicate the status of climate science: What we know, what we believe to be true and what we do not know.

Much of the initial political pressure to take climate change seriously came from several small island states worrying about sea-level rise. Recent research papers are pointing to a major acceleration in the loss of mass from the world's great ice sheets. That means that the sensitivity of these giant storehouses of water to climate warming may be far greater than expected -- with potentially dire sea level implications during the next several centuries. This is not only a question for the survival of Tuvalu and Vanuatu, but a question for all nations, with or without a coastline.

The scientific uncertainties are large and this workshop is very timely in addressing one of the crucial effects of changes in the climate system. It also provides an excellent opportunity for WCRP to demonstrate its importance.

ICSU celebrates its 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this year and last year we published the first ever Strategic Plan for 2006-2011. In my introductory presentation to the ICSU General Assembly on the process to develop the Strategic Plan, I cited ‘Alice in the Wonderland’ by Lewis Carroll:

*Alice: Can you tell me which way I should take?*

*The Cat: It depends on where you want to go.*

*Alice: I don't know where I want to go.*

*The Cat: Then it does not matter which way you take.*

Like Alice, ICSU itself was not clear exactly where it wanted to go, and our General Assembly in 2002 wisely decided to carry out a broad consultation with the international science community as to which road it should take. This resulted in the Strategic Plan, which describes the landscape and lays out the road for ICSU to follow over the next six years. The focus of ICSU is on strengthening international science for the benefit of science. Two words in this phrase are of particular importance.

First, ‘international’. Traditionally, international research agendas have been almost exclusively dictated by the affluent countries. Through the establishment of Regional Offices, ICSU is now actively involving the scientific communities of developing countries. ICSU has a long tradition of planning and coordinating major international and interdisciplinary research programmes, such as WCRP. We will continue this tradition, while ensuring that the priorities of developing countries are properly reflected in the international agendas.

Second, ‘society’. The scientific community has started to descend from its ivory tower, but there is still some way to go. At WSSD, ICSU promised, on behalf of the international science community, to develop a more participatory approach to setting research agendas. Initial attempts are being made through the UN Commission on Sustainable Development process to involve not only governments but also civil society and the private sector. The climate change focus of the CSD this year provided an excellent opportunity for ICSU to start this process by highlighting the importance of science in general and of the WCRP in particular.

The results of this workshop will be of great importance in guiding and stimulating the science community, but it will also provide an essential input to the policy dialogue. ICSU is proud to be one of the WCRP sponsors and I wish you stimulating and challenging discussions following the many excellent presentations on the state-of-the-art of the science of sea-level rise and variability.