

# Brief communication: A roadmap towards credible projections of ice sheet contribution to sea-level

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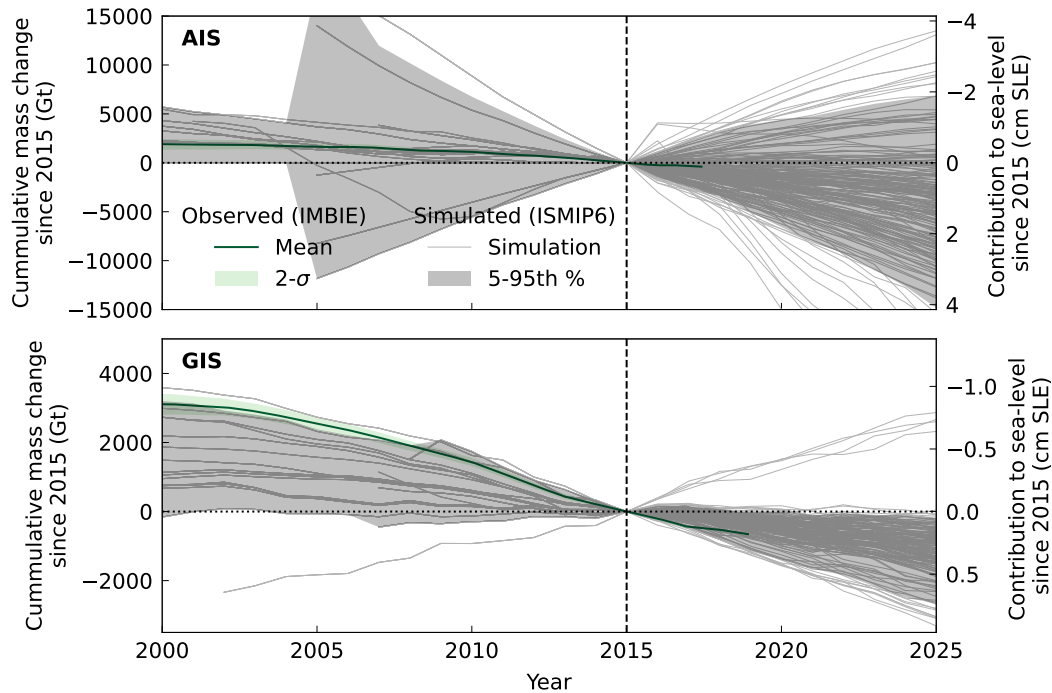
## Abstract.

Accurately projecting mass loss from ice sheets is of critical societal importance. However, despite recent improvements in ice sheet models, our analysis of a recent effort to project [Greenland's ice sheet](#) contribution to future sea-level suggests that few models reproduce historical mass loss accurately, and that they appear much too confident in the spread of predicted outcomes. The inability of models to reproduce historical observations raises concerns about the models' skill at projecting mass loss. Here we suggest that [uncertainties in](#) the future sea level contribution from Greenland [and Antarctica](#) may well be significantly higher than reported in that study. We propose a roadmap to enable a more realistic accounting of uncertainties associated with such forecasts, and a formal process by which observations of mass change [should](#) be used to refine projections of mass change. Finally, we note that tremendous government investment and planning affecting [10s to 100s tens to hundreds](#) of millions of people is founded on the work of [several just a few](#) tens of scientists [involved in a significantly volunteer effort](#). To achieve the goal of credible projections of ice sheet contribution to sea-level, we strongly believe that investment in research must be commensurate with the scale of the challenge.

## 1 Sea level rise predictions from ice sheet loss

Global sea level rose during the 20th century more than 3 times faster than at any time during the last 2,000 years (Kopp et al., 2016). Over the last several decades, mass loss from the Greenland Ice Sheet has been the fastest growing contributor to this rise (Chen et al., 2017; Rietbroek et al., 2016), [currently tracking the upper-end estimates of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's \(IPCC\) fifth assessment report \(AR5; IPCC, 2013\)](#). Sea level rise driven by global warming is expected to continue over the coming century, potentially flooding 14–322 million people per year in 2100, and reducing annual global gross domestic production by as much as 9% (Hinkel et al., 2014).

To guide planning for and mitigation of anticipated damages, ~~the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is poised to make a new IPCC~~ [just published a](#) suite of sea level rise projections for the remainder of the 21st century: its sixth assessment report (~~AR6~~)[\(AR6; Masson-Delmotte et al., 2021\)](#). Effective planning for coming sea level rise necessitates that



**Figure 1.** Observed and simulated historical mass changes from the [Antarctic \(AIS\)](#) and [Greenland \(GIS\)](#) Ice Sheet 2000–2020 in gigatons (Gt) and centimeters of sea level equivalent (cm SLE). ~~GRACE and GRACE-FO JPL RL06Mv2 Mascon Solution (Wiese et al., 2020) (blue), reconstruction from Mouginot et al. (2019) (red) and a~~ consensus estimate [of observed mass changes](#) (The IMBIE Team, 2019) ~~(is plotted in green ), and along with~~ their respective uncertainties (shaded). [The ensembles of ISMIP6](#) ~~Goelzer et al. (2020) Goelzer et al. (2020); Seroussi et al. (2020)~~ historical simulations and ~~projection (projections are plotted with dark gray lines), and the 5th to 95th percentile mass loss rates are shown as a~~ 90% credibility interval ~~(with light gray shading). The 90% credibility interval of~~ [Due to the large variance in ISMIP6 barely overlaps with observations](#) ~~historical simulations for Antarctica, the uncertainties of IMBIE are not visible in the plot.~~

these estimates be [accurate](#) [credible](#), but also that they be accompanied by a defensible assessment of uncertainty (Moon et al., 2020).

- 25 [Recently, the global ice sheet modeling community has come together through a largely volunteer effort to support the Ice sheet models have emerged as the de facto standard for generating estimates of ice sheet contribution to sea level rise and are the basis for AR6 and meet the need for projections of ice sheet change and attendant sea level contribution. This effort, the's estimates for the next century, particularly when coupled to models that simulate relevant forcing from the atmosphere and ocean. However, defensible estimates of the uncertainty in estimates produced by these models remain one of the most](#)
- 30 [challenging goals of scientific inquiry. Here we take ice sheet models to comprise computer code used to predict change in ice sheet mass, including ice dynamics, models of surface mass balance, and models of the ice-ocean boundary.](#)

AR6's estimate of mass change for both Greenland and Antarctica over the next century are based primarily on the Ice Sheet Model Intercomparison for CMIP Phase 6 Project for CMIP6 (ISMIP6) (Nowicki et al., 2016; Seroussi et al., 2020; Goelzer et al., 2020) represents the most impressive assembly of state-of-the-art models, initial conditions and boundary conditions to date (Nowicki et al., 2016,

35 . Through generous collaboration and leadership, 21 groups from around the world contributed 37 different models of Greenland and Antarctic Ice Sheet change through a set of core and optional experiments, and corresponding historical simulations. These simulations had been performed before the latest socio-economic scenarios and climate models were available. Edwards et al. (2021) statistically reproduced the response of these models to climate change and then estimated glacier and ice sheet response to the most recent scenarios and climate model outputs. These Edwards et al. (2021) projections comprise  
40 the AR6 estimate for Greenland. For Antarctica, the AR6 estimate is created by averaging an alternative model intercomparison (Levermann et al., 2020) with these emulated ISMIP6 produced probabilistic distributions of projected sea level contribution under the frequentist assumption that, with enough independent estimates of sea level contribution (i. e., different models and experiments), the sampled distribution of sea level contribution approximates the true distribution. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that the ensemble of ice sheet models perfectly spans, without bias, the range of potential sea level contribution.  
45 This predictions.

We believe that the results of ISMIP6 distribution has since been adopted as the foundation for the represent the state of the art in terms of understanding ice sheet model variability and the breadth of behavior that ice sheet models encompass, and the lessons that it provides will be far reaching both on their own and also with respect to planning additional collaborative efforts to assess uncertainty in sea level prediction. Nonetheless, it is our perspective that the IPCC AR6 consensus estimate  
50 estimates of sea level contribution from ice sheets -However, we believe that these results that are based on ISMIP6 may not be accurate/credible, and that the accompanying uncertainties do not reflect the true breadth of uncertainties associated with ice sheet change. We therefore argue that great care should be used in their practical application and in decision-making.-

Our skepticism regarding the ISMIP6 projections Our skepticism is based on the premise that accurate predictions of the cryosphere's contribution to sea level require that models:

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1. Fully characterize uncertainties in model structure, parameters, initial conditions, and boundary conditions.
  2. Yield simulations that fit observations within observational uncertainty.

If the first point is not satisfied, then predictive uncertainties are likely to be underestimated. If the second condition is not satisfied, then the distribution of model predictions are likely to be biased relative to reality. Our concern that the ISMIP6 ensemble satisfies neither condition For the purpose of credibly projecting mass change, we assert that the models must credibly  
60 reproduce observed mass change. Although such validation is insufficient on its own to instill confidence in projections, it is a necessary condition for projection. These points are not just of academic importance, they can lead to a false sense of security when planning coastal infrastructure and preparing for future sea-level rise, with potentially dire consequences.

Our concern is illustrated by comparing the ISMIP6 simulations of mass loss from the Greenland Ice Sheet and Antarctic Ice Sheets between 2000 and 2025 (Goelzer et al., 2020) with three independent observations of mass loss (Wiese et al., 2020; Mouginot et al., 2019) (The IMBIE Team, 2019) (see Methods for details). A This 25 year period begins with 15 years of ISMIP6 historical simulations,  
65

during which modeling groups were free to select climate forcings necessary to bring their modeled ice sheets to the start of the projection period in 2015. To visualize how the historical simulations impact the projections, we also show the first ten years of the projection period, during which surface mass balance and temperature anomalies were imposed uniformly on all ice sheet models (Nowicki et al., 2020).

70 For Greenland, a clear picture emerges (Figure 1): ~~First, most simulations underestimate recent (2008–2020) mass loss, where ISMIP6 simulations systematically underestimate recent relative cumulative mass loss when compared to observations. Indeed, the observed record of mass loss lies outside the 90% credibility interval of the 95th percentile of the ISMIP6 experiments, violating our second requirement. Underestimating recent mass loss likely translates into underestimating mass loss at 2100 as well. Second, observations and the ensemble are disjoint, implying that~~ follows the observed record of mass  
75 ~~loss, which implies either or both that the~~ model uncertainty is underestimated ~~both now and in the future, in violation of our first requirement. Lastly, the 90% credibility interval of the historical simulations is broader than that of the projections and the ensemble is a biased predictor of cumulative mass change. For Antarctica, the picture is substantially different, with the spread in simulations much larger than observational uncertainty. In this case, many simulations that are not consistent with observations yield a predictive variance that is also not reliable, albeit in the direction of too little specificity.~~  
80 In an effort to ~~assess why these patterns appear and to~~ guide future efforts, we recast the problem of ice sheet simulation ~~through a probabilistic lens in terms of the characterization of joint probability distributions~~, and assess how our two conditions above relate to this viewpoint. We then sketch a path forward for robustly characterizing the potential ice sheet contribution to sea level over the coming century. ~~We note that our commentary is not intended to be a comprehensive review of uncertainty quantification in ice sheet modelling, but rather to serve as a first attempt to define a consistent language around~~  
85 ~~which community efforts can be discussed. We also note that the commentary should not be seen as a criticism of the ISMIP6 effort, which we regard as important and successful, and in which some of us have actively participated, but rather as pointing towards important work still to be done.~~

## 2 Quantifying uncertainties

For the practical problem of predicting the ice sheets' contribution to sea level, we find it useful to adopt a probabilistic  
90 framework. In that framework, we seek to establish a credibility bound (say 90%) ~~for predictions, and to determine the range,~~ between which sea level contribution will fall with that pre-supposed probability. Such an interval can readily be constructed from a probability density function (PDF) for the cryosphere's contribution to global sea level ~~by computing quantiles~~, and thus this is the function that experiments aiming to quantify sea level contribution must correctly characterize. We write this predictive distribution as

$$95 P(\Delta z | \mathcal{F}), \tag{1}$$

where  $\Delta z$  is sea level contribution, and  $\mathcal{F}$  represents climate ~~forcings forcing scenarios~~ (i.e. greenhouse gas emissions) expressed as, e.g., Representative Concentration Pathways (RCP) or Shared-Socioeconomic Pathways, which should also be

characterized by their own PDF. In this short communication we will not address the issue of uncertainty in the ~~forcing~~ specification of a forcing scenario  $\mathcal{F}$  (Team et al., 2010) but concentrate instead on the uncertainties arising solely from ice sheet models.

While interpretation of  $P(\Delta z|\mathcal{F})$  is straightforward, its accurate construction is a grand scientific challenge. The standard approach involves running computer programs that approximately solve mathematical equations describing our best understanding of ice sheet physics. In the best case, ~~when~~ all facets of a physical system are known (including initial and boundary conditions), the equations describing those systems are complete and deterministic, and the mechanism of solution is perfect; ~~then uncertainty in the distribution collapses and~~. In this idealized situation there is no predictive uncertainty in sea level contribution, and  $P(\Delta z|\mathcal{F})$  can be characterized with a single model run. In practice, several types of uncertainties complicate the issue and introduce bias and variance in the predictions. In the following, we discuss these different categories of uncertainty as they pertain to the problem of sea level contribution.

### Model uncertainty

The equations used to describe the physical processes in models are invariably an idealization of reality. Indeed, *all* models are subject to some degree of model error; some physical processes are represented incompletely, while others are omitted altogether. For example, the impact of subglacial hydrology on basal motion (e.g., Bueler and van Pelt, 2015) or the effect of ice mélange (~~Amundson and Truffer, 2010; Joughin et al., 2020~~) (Amundson et al., 2010; Joughin et al., 2020) and iceberg calving (Amaral et al., 2020) on terminus position remain poorly or not represented in numerical ice sheet models, leading to potentially large model uncertainty (sometimes called structural uncertainty). Some hypothesized processes that are often not included in ice sheet models may lead to critical dynamic instabilities that could deeply affect model evolution (DeConto et al., 2021; Sadai et al., 2020). On the other hand, the omission of frictional stresses from wind over an ice sheet surface yields a model that is incorrect yet the resulting error is negligible. Unfortunately, assessing the non-negligible drivers of model inadequacy is a long and arduous process. The different choices that modellers make in this regard leads to an implicitly defined probability distribution  $P(\mathcal{M})$ , where a particular model  $\mathcal{M}$  is a random (although very likely biased) sample from that distribution. Such model error affects the distribution over sea level contribution as

$$P(\Delta z|\mathcal{F}) = \int P(\Delta z|\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{M})P(\mathcal{M})d\mathcal{M}. \quad (2)$$

Monte Carlo approximation of this integral is exceptionally challenging because drawing a single sample from  $P(\mathcal{M})$  requires the development of a new and (ostensibly) independent ice sheet model, an effort which can take years. However, because many ice sheet models have been developed in parallel, it is now possible ~~through model intercomparison such as ISMIP6 and CMIP6, to try to approximate the distribution above~~ to approximate it through model inter-comparison (e.g., Bindshadler et al., 2013; Nowi or through structured expert judgement (Bamber et al., 2019). We note that an implicit assumption of using models for prediction is that the true data generating process should be contained in  $P(\mathcal{M})$ , which is a questionable assumption indeed.

## Initial state uncertainty

130 Decade to century scale forecasts of ice sheet behavior are sensitive to the initial state, similar to numerical weather forecasts (Vaughan and Arthern, 2007; Aschwanden et al., 2013; Aðalgeirsdóttir et al., 2014). Unfortunately, observations alone are insufficient to define an initial state (~~set of all initial conditions~~)since not all aspects of an ice sheet state are observable to begin with, necessitating the use of data assimilation to combine sparse observational data with models of varying complexity.

Similar to model uncertainty, initial state uncertainty  $\mathcal{I}$  affects the distribution over sea level contribution as

$$135 \quad P(\Delta z|\mathcal{F}) = \int P(\Delta z|\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{I})P(\mathcal{I})d\mathcal{I}, \quad (3)$$

where  $\mathcal{I}$  is an initial state.

Details vary from model to model, but generally include initial conditions for the conservation of mass (ice thickness and extent), momentum (basal stress distribution), and energy (temperature or enthalpy).

## Parametric uncertainty

140 Due to computational and conceptual constraints, there are limits to the level of detail at which processes can be simulated in ice sheet models predicting sea level contribution. For example, the fast and small-scale fracture processes that occur at a marine ice sheet's calving front are more complex than can be reasonably captured in a large scale model with practical time steps. This gives rise to parameters  $\mathbf{k} = \{k_1, \dots, k_N\}$ , where  $N$  is the number of parameters, specific to a given model which may include different parameterizations than others. These parameters are explicit numerical values that act as the bridge  
145 between un-simulated small scale processes and their integrated effects at a practical computational scale. Unfortunately, accurate numerical values for such parameters do generally not exist. This lack of knowledge induces *parametric* uncertainty, for example, different values of thermal conductivity within firn might lead to different predictions of sea level contribution. The predictive distribution under parametric uncertainty is

$$P(\Delta z|\mathcal{F}) = \int P(\Delta z|\mathcal{F}, \mathbf{k})P(\mathbf{k})d\mathbf{k}, \quad (4)$$

150 where  $P(\mathbf{k})$  is the probability distribution over a given model's parameter values, which we assume to be independent of scenario. ~~Aschwanden et al. (2019) approximately evaluate~~Multiple works have approximately evaluated the equation above for either Greenland or Antarctica using Monte Carlo simulation, which is computationally challenging but conceptually simple (NIAS et al., 2016; Schlegel et al., 2018; Aschwanden et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2021): sample a large number of parameter values from  $P(\mathbf{k})$ , and compute sea level contribution for each sample.

## 155 Aleatoric uncertainty

Ice sheet models additionally have *aleatoric* uncertainty, i.e. they are subject to irreducibly random processes, most notably the chaotic dynamics present in both atmospheric and oceanic forcings. The predictive distribution under this kind of uncertainty

can be decomposed as

$$P(\Delta z|\mathcal{F}) = \int P(\Delta z|f)P(f|\mathcal{F})df, \quad (5)$$

160 where  $f$  represents a specific realization of a random forcing, and  $P(f|\mathcal{F})$  is its probability distribution under scenario  $\mathcal{F}$ . Due to the relatively slow response time of the cryosphere to such forcings, aleatoric uncertainty often contributes little variance to predictions in sea level contribution over practical time scales of decades to centuries. However, in circumstances where these forcings may interact with a critical glaciological instability like the Marine Ice Sheet Instability (Mercer, 1978), aleatoric uncertainty has the tendency of producing ‘fat tails’, effectively biasing ice sheet evolution towards more extreme  
165 mass loss scenarios (Robel et al., 2019). While only a few studies have characterized the distribution over ice sheet responses to aleatoric uncertainty (e.g. Hoffman et al., 2019), and its influence is not precisely known, Monte Carlo simulation can be used to understand the effects of this kind of uncertainty when multiple realizations of forcings are available.

### 3 Assessing the ISMIP6 ensemble through the probabilistic lens

The response of an ice sheet to a given forcing  $\mathcal{F}$  may be estimated with Earth System Models directly. At present, however,  
170 Earth System Models with built-in interactive ice sheets remain in their infancy (Vizcaino, 2014) and are not yet able to adequately resolve ice sheet processes such as grounding line migration at the necessary resolution, requiring intermediate steps. A common approach, pursued by Goelzer et al. (2020), involves general circulations models to calculate how the global climate responds to a given forcing  $\mathcal{F}$ , regional climate models to downscale the global climate response to the ice sheet scale, and process models and parameterizations (e.g., surface energy balance models, calving models or frontal ablation models) to  
175 interface with ice sheet models.

To make the daunting task of estimating ice sheet response to different forcings a tractable community effort, a certain degree of standardization, streamlining, and simplification was necessary. The ISMIP6 steering committee and its working groups prepared data sets that could be used by individual modeling groups, including but not limited to, preparing oceanic ~~(Slater et al., 2020) and atmospheric (Barthel et al., 2020)~~ (Slater et al., 2019, 2020) and atmospheric (Nowicki et al., 2020)  
180 boundary conditions. ~~To allow a wide range of modeling groups to participate, concessions had to be made, resulting in an experimental setup that does not always reflect advances in modeling practices since the Sea-level Response to Ice Sheet Evolution (SeaRISE Bindschadler et al., 2013; Nowicki et al., 2013) project, including calving and frontal ablation. These practical limitations contribute to an incomplete characterization of uncertainties.~~

Here we consider uncertainty within the ~~Goelzer et al. (2020) experimental protocol~~ ISMIP6 experimental protocols (Goelzer et al., 2020)  
185 through the probabilistic frame work outlined above.

#### Incomplete consideration of uncertainty

ISMIP6 integrates over the model uncertainties, including models of ice sheet dynamics, surface mass balance, and ice front position. ~~However, the ISMIP6 predictive distribution~~ It does not integrate over uncertainty in parameters. ~~Each group decided~~

on the best parameter set for their simulations. This means that each model contributes a point estimate consisting of a single  
190 "best" model run to the larger ensemble. Despite that the parameters leading to this "best" run are often highly uncertain, this  
uncertainty is thus ignored in We note that the multi-model ensemble leading to an underestimated variance ISMIP6 protocol  
allowed modelers to submit as many model setups as they deemed appropriate, in practice, however, each group contributed 1–3  
setups. While it is difficult to gauge the magnitude of this underestimation the resulting underestimation in predictive variance,  
Aschwanden et al. (2019) suggest that the parametric uncertainty for the Greenland Ice Sheet (inter-quartile range) at 2100 is  
195 could be up to 0.3 and 12.9 cm SLE for RCP 2.6 and 8.5, respectively, which is larger than the model uncertainty suggested by  
the ISMIP6 experiments (0.8 and 3.4 cm SLE, respectively). If one takes the Aschwanden et al. (2019) estimate of parametric  
uncertainty as reasonable Aschwanden et al. (2019)'s distributions over model parameters as representing reasonable a priori  
estimates of uncertainty, then the variance in ISMIP6's predictive distribution is greatly underestimated with respect to the real  
variance. When comparing model predictions to observations, as in Figure 1, this has the effect of ascribing misfit between  
200 modeled predictions to model uncertainty, when parametric or aleatoric uncertainty may just as likely be the culprit.

Additional uncertainty may be substantially underestimated. Similarly, aleatoric uncertainty is not considered, which has  
the potential to underestimate mass loss, particularly when dynamic instabilities are likely to play a large role in ice sheet  
evolution (Robel et al., 2019). Uncertainty also emerges from model initial conditions. A strength of the ISMIP6 protocol  
was the independence of different modeling groups to select their model initialization protocol. However, one unintentional  
205 outcome of this protocol is that each modeling group's simulations start with a markedly different ice sheet; for example, initial  
ice sheet extent varied among models by up to 17% (Goelzer et al., 2020). Given the strong control of subglacial topography  
on glacier retreat (Catania et al., 2018), those simulated ice sheets are unlikely to behave as the modern Greenland ice sheet  
does, or will

Taken together, neglecting these additional uncertainties leads to an underestimation of variability in ensemble predictions.  
210 As a secondary consideration, when comparing model predictions to observations as in Figure 1, this has the effect of ascribing  
misfit between modeled predictions to model uncertainty, when one of these alternative sources of uncertainty may just as  
likely be the culprit.

### A biased sample over models

The implicit hypothesis made when accounting for model error using an ensemble approach is that each model is an inde-  
215 pendent sample from  $P(\mathcal{M})$ , where the mode of  $P(\mathcal{M})$  is the true data generating process (i.e. reality). However, the models  
included in the ensemble are not likely to be independent: they share many critical features like numerical methods, parame-  
terizations, and a joint disregard-omission of for *potentially important physical processes that have not yet been discovered*.  
We emphatically note that this is not a methodological criticism: it is a challenge that exists generally in science, with analo-  
gous situations arising in climate modelling (Qian et al., 2016). We note also that such biases may also arise from incorrectly  
220 specified prior distributions over parameters and forcings. Nonetheless, the challenge remains real, as does its potential effect  
on the accuracy-credibility and uncertainty of sea level rise projections. As shown in Figure 1, ensemble predictions relative to  
contemporary observations of mass loss are strongly biased relative to present observations. While the accurate reproduction



of observed mass change was not a goal of Goelzer et al. (2020), the credible projection of future mass change was ~~There a stated goal~~. However, there is no reason to believe that ~~the ensemble a prediction that is biased now~~ does not remain biased in  
225 its future predictions.

#### 4 A Path Forward

While we do not consider ~~the results AR6's use of ISMIP6 and downstream analysis~~ (Goelzer et al., 2020; Seroussi et al., 2020) and its downstream analysis (Edwards et al., 2021) appropriate for use as the consensus estimate of the ice sheets' contribution to sea level over the next century, it remains a powerful blueprint for the collaborative efforts that the ice sheet modelling  
230 community is able to achieve. Building upon the multi-model ensembling approach of ISMIP6, below we offer suggestions on how to more completely account for uncertainties in intercomparison projects.

##### Accounting for all sources of uncertainty

While modelling efforts have captured aleatoric (Robel et al., 2019), ~~parametric~~ (Aschwanden et al., 2019), parametric, initial state (Aðalgeirsdóttir et al., 2014), and model (Goelzer et al., 2020) uncertainties independently, an effective projection of the  
235 ice sheets' contribution to sea level must ~~do so~~ incorporate all of these sources simultaneously by approximately computing

$$\begin{aligned} P(\Delta z|\mathcal{F}) &= \int P(\Delta z|f, \mathbf{k}, \mathcal{M}) \\ &\times P(f|\mathcal{F})P(\mathbf{k}|\mathcal{M})P(\mathcal{I}|\mathcal{M})P(\mathcal{M}) \\ &\times d\mathbf{k} df d\mathcal{I} d\mathcal{M}. \end{aligned} \tag{6}$$

To do this, we envision a multi-model ensemble similar to the effort of ISMIP6, but with each model contributing an en-  
240 semble of simulations using random parameter values drawn from consensus estimates of the uncertainties associated with parametrically defined physics (~~cf. Aschwanden et al., 2019~~) (cf. Aschwanden et al., 2019; Bulthuis et al., 2019), and with random realizations of climate and ocean forcings (for example, an explicit ensemble of fields characterizing the probability distribution of surface and ocean temperatures) developed in collaboration with their respective modelling communities (cf. Robel et al., 2019). We anticipate that such an effort will yield a distribution of sea level projections that is much broader,  
245 and thus less certain, than that presented in recent sea level rise projections (IPCC, 2019). However, we feel that only through modeling what may be considered "unlikely" projections will our community accurately quantify the *a priori* variance in the projections of numerical ice sheet models.

##### Conditioning simulations on observations

While accounting for all sources of uncertainty ~~encourages~~ produces a prior distribution over model projections that appropri-  
250 ately acknowledges the current limits of our scientific understanding, it does not ameliorate the problem of inherent biases in the sampled forcings, parameters, and models. Scientists can add specificity and value to the projected distribution by taking

advantage of additional information, such as the observations illustrated in Figure 1. To address both of these problems simultaneously, we advocate for *conditioning* ensemble predictions on relevant observations (Aschwanden et al., 2013). One way of doing this is through Bayes’ theorem (often called Bayesian calibration), which states that

$$255 \quad P(\Delta z|\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{O}) = \frac{P(\mathcal{O}|\Delta z, \mathcal{F})P(\Delta z|\mathcal{F})}{\int P(\mathcal{O}|\Delta z, \mathcal{F})P(\Delta z|\mathcal{F}) d\Delta z}, \quad (7)$$

where  $\mathcal{O}$  is a set of observations,  $P(\mathcal{O}|\Delta z, \mathcal{F})$  is the likelihood that some simulation associated with sea level contribution prediction  $\Delta z$  agrees with observations, and  $P(\Delta z|\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{O})$  is the *posterior predictive distribution* of sea level, which can be thought of as the prior ensemble (Eq. 6) filtered by relevant data.

All ice sheet models already perform this calibration for certain subsets of available observations, e.g. by calibration of basal  
260 traction or other parameters to yield observed surface velocity or ice geometry within observational uncertainty. ~~In essence, we argue that the existing calibration for parametric uncertainty be moved out from under the purview of individual models, and become an explicit step in the assessment of ice model ensembles.~~

~~For~~ This is a necessary step for models and in many cases part of model specification. However, for the purposes of projecting ice mass change, we argue that the most salient observations on which to condition the prior distribution are measurements of mass change itself (Aschwanden et al., 2013; Aðalgeirsdóttir et al., 2014). It is worth noting that a few works have already performed this Bayesian calibration on observations similar to the mass change observations of Fig. 1, particularly over ensembles meant to capture parametric uncertainty (Nias et al., 2019; Gilford et al., 2020). These studies should be used as a model for future efforts.

Conditioning on observations also requires carefully accounting for the complicated relationship between the time scales of  
270 variability in model physics, forcings, and observational uncertainty; the appropriate time scale over which simulations need to show agreement with observations is not (yet) known. The further back in time, the more spatially and temporally sparse observations become, and the larger their associated uncertainties are. Nonetheless, reliable observations of mass change are now available on the decadal time scale (see Figure 1), reducing the likelihood of mistakenly fitting models to short-term fluctuations in weather and ocean conditions. Fortunately, the record of detailed accurate observations is growing continually,  
275 soon spanning a climatology (30 years).

By accounting for the broad range of potential *a priori* uncertainties in model projections, and then ascribing predictive weight only to those models that demonstrate skill at reproducing observations, the path towards realistic distributions of sea level contribution over the next century is within reach. Without a large, but realistic, spread of model outcomes it might well be possible that an insufficient number of models remain after fitting to observations.

## 280 **Complementary efforts**

Projections made with numerical “high-fidelity” models are computationally expensive and creating ensemble simulations of sufficient size ~~are is~~ limited by the availability of computational resources. Training surrogate models (“emulators”) with the output of the high-fidelity models can help better ~~characterizing~~ characterize sea-level contribution probability distribution functions.

285 It is worth noting that recent efforts have used ISMIP6 as a basis for further analysis, in particular by training a surrogate model on the ISMIP6 and GlacierMIP output that effectively acts as an interpolant (Edwards et al., 2021). While this interpolant is an effective tool for ~~quarrying~~ querying the predictive distribution of sea-level contribution as a function of time and climate scenario *as quantified by ISMIP6*, it inherits the same challenges as its antecedent, namely a lack of accounting for all uncertainty types and a mechanism for bias correction.

290 Modern machine learning methods show promise to complement established numerical research tools in Earth system science in general, and ice sheet modeling in particular (~~Reichstein et al., 2019; Edwards et al., 2019; Brinkerhoff et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2019; Edwards et al., 2019; Brinkerhoff et al., 2021; Gilford et al., 2020; Edwards et al., 2021; Jouvet et al., 2021, e.g.,~~ Reichstein et al., 2019; Edwards et al., 2019; Brinkerhoff et al., 2021; Gilford et al., 2020; Edwards et al., 2021; Jouvet et al., 2021, e.g., . If numerical and statistical models are paired carefully and skillfully with structured expert judgment (Bamber et al., 2019), credible projections of ice sheet contribution to sea-level are within reach.

## 295 5 Meeting the challenge

The potential economic impact of rising sea level has been estimated at over a trillion US\$ (Diaz and Moore, 2017) ~~Similarly, the US government is considering and major world economies including the US consider~~ investing trillions of US\$ to prepare for and avert further climate change (Blumer, 2020)while other major world economies consider similar commitments. Contrasting these staggering numbers, the current funding for research related to sea level rise remains miserly. ~~In 2019, the U.S. National Science Foundation allocated \$123M to research funded by its Office of Polar Programs (National Science Foundation, 2021)~~ only a small portion of which supports the projection of sea level rise, although exact numbers are not readily available and vary from country to country. During an ISMIP6 planning effort in September 2018, participating modeling groups were polled as to how many simulations they could execute in support of projecting ice sheet contributions to sea level rise. Several groups, none of whom were receiving funding to support these simulations, estimated that they could run 5–10 simulations scheduled  
300 amongst their existing commitments. ~~This effort is~~ Most likely as a consequence of inadequate funding, no group submitted more than three distinct model setups despite ISMIP6 encouraged participants to explore parametric uncertainties. Projecting future sea level is an effort too severely under-resourced to meet its mission and yet millions of lives and trillions of dollars depend on an accurate, reliable answer.

~~It is unconscionable that the only scientific basis for sea level contribution from the ice sheets stems from an essentially~~ volunteer effort. Given the lack of investment, it is small wonder that ice sheet mass change validation deviates so severely from  
310 observations (Fig. 1). We urgently need more reliable assessments of the In order to assess potential impacts of sea level rise, which includes a deliberate effort at quantifying we urgently need to be able to deliberately quantify and then systematically ~~reducing~~ reduce uncertainties. Ice sheet modeling, like climate modeling before it, developed from efforts to address basic science questions. However, despite major advances in the capabilities of ice sheet models and expanding appreciation for  
315 the importance of their projections, the funding model of modest grants to address basic science and accomplish incremental model development along the way is unchanged. ~~International~~ Internationally, governments directly support development, maintenance, and operation of the Earth System Models that serve as the foundation for CMIP6 (Eyring et al., 2016), and

this financial support has contributed to a suite of models that now convincingly reproduce observed climate variability (Jones et al., 2013). It is time to similarly bring ice sheet modeling [both standalone and embedded in Earth System Models](#), to an operational level and support it with the funding the problem deserves.

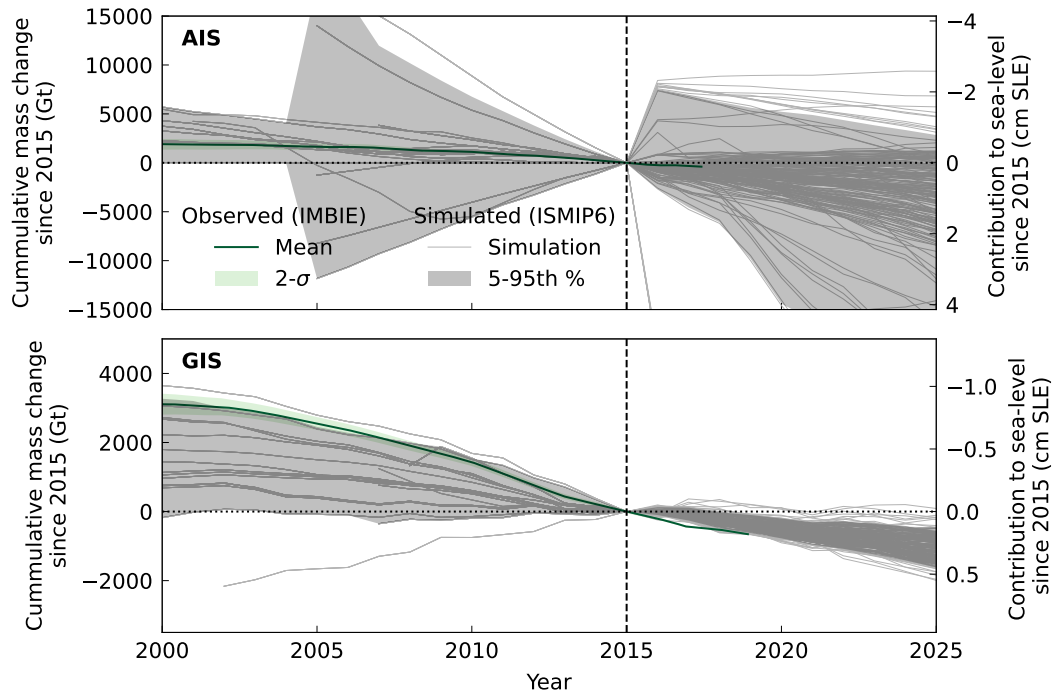
The ambitious characterization of uncertainties and ensemble conditioning we propose requires a massive international and inter-agency effort in both model development and improved observational capabilities. ~~Similar to the manner by which American researchers conducting field work in Antarctica benefited in 2019 from \$292M of investment in professional facilities, and operational and logistical support (National Science Foundation, 2021), we~~ We call for professional support for the largely computational sea level projection effort. These resources, in the form of dedicated developers and high performance computing time, will free up scientists to continue basic science, while the global community receives the applied science (i.e., reliable sea level projections) it needs.

The past two decades have shown that ice sheets react to climate far more rapidly than previously thought (~~Zwally et al., 2002; Rignot and~~ [Rignot and Kanagaratnam, 2006; Joughin et al., 2014](#)). The study of glaciers and ice sheets has moved from a fringe scientific exercise to a central question of major global economic significance. In response to COVID-19, 18 billion US\$ flowed from the U.S. government to fund vaccine development (Tozzi et al., 2020). Appropriate resourcing is possible. While the emergent threat of sea level rise is less abrupt than that from COVID-19, a similarly serious effort is required to reduce uncertainties in sea-level projections.

### Data availability

We downloaded the scalar time-series produced by ISMIP6 for the Greenland Ice Sheet from Zenodo with digital object identifier from <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3939037> (last access: November 2020) ([text guidance available from http://www.climate-cryosphere.org/wiki/index.php?title=ISMIP6\\_Publication\\_List](#)). The data is split into a historical period (pre-2015) and the projection period (2015–2100). ~~The choice of the starting date of the historical simulation was left to the individual modeling groups and ranges from 1961 to 2008. Thus we only used historical simulations from 2008–2014 and projections from 2015–2020 for our analysis, for a total of 20 unique historical simulations and 165 projections.~~ For the projections we used the version where the control simulation was ~~removed (H. Goelzer, pers. comm., November 2020)~~ [not removed, following the suggestion by reviewer A. Robel, however a version where the control simulation was removed is shown below \(Fig. 2\)](#). Removal of the control simulation is intended to account for unforced model drift and mass loss committed as a result of non-equilibrium ice sheet conditions at the start of the simulations. Committed sea level rise is estimated to add an additional 6 mm to simulated sea level rise by 2100 (Price et al., 2011; Goelzer et al., 2020) and thus has little impact on the low bias of recent, simulated mass loss.

For observations, we used ~~the following data sets: mass loss from GRACE and GRACE-FO JPL RL06Mv2 Mascon Solution from 2002 to 2020 (Wiese et al., 2020), a reconstruction based on a comprehensive survey of thickness, surface elevation, velocity, and surface mass balance from 1972 to 2018 Mouginit et al. (2019), and a~~ [a](#) multi-method consensus estimate (The IMBIE Team, 2019).



**Figure 2.** Observed and simulated historical mass changes from the Antarctic (AIS) and Greenland (GIS) Ice Sheet 2000–2020 in gigatons (Gt) and centimeters of sea level equivalent (cm SLE). A consensus estimate (The IMBIE Team, 2019) (green), and their respective uncertainties (shaded). ISMIP6 Goelzer et al. (2020); Seroussi et al. (2020) historical simulations and projection (gray lines) and the 90% credibility interval (light gray shading). Here the control simulation was removed, in alignment with Seroussi et al. (2020); Goelzer et al. (2020)

The analysis was performed using a Jupyter notebook which is available at <https://github.com/aaschwanden/ismip6-ipcc>.

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