

Making a difference with IPBES

Leipzig Consideration derived from an expert workshop on Science-Policy Interfaces and Nested Networks, held in Leipzig, Germany 11th - 13th of May, 2011¹

The establishment of a new “Intergovernmental Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services” (IPBES) opens a window of opportunity to strengthen decision making on biodiversity in a broad range of areas. To support this goal, participants of a high level expert workshop convened to compile and evaluate the experiences with past and existing global science-policy interfaces. The outcome of the meeting builds directly upon the “Busan outcome”² and its follow up.

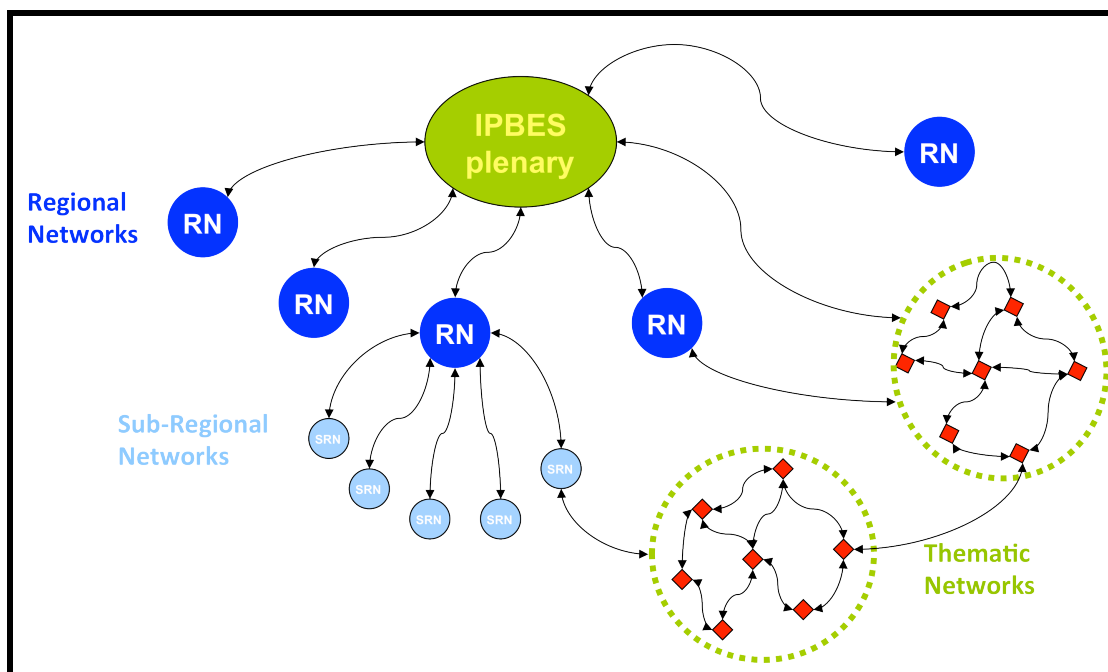
When designing new mechanisms for dialogue between science and policy, it is always tempting to adopt well-known models – in this case, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stands out as the most prominent example. We nevertheless strongly recommend considering a fuller spectrum of options, beyond the IPCC approach, and exploring and opening up the choices that scientists and policy makers have in designing such a novel platform. **The main challenge is to improve decision making on biodiversity and thus to give greater meaning to the well-established but still vague concept “policy relevant without being prescriptive”.** The mechanism must be suited to the particular challenges of biodiversity policy and management, and incorporate lessons learned on global science-policy interfaces over the two decades since the IPCC was designed.

Therefore participants agreed that a science policy mechanism properly adapted to the specific nature of biodiversity and ecosystem services would have to be linked to knowledge “on the ground” as much as to global policy, in order to support policy implementation through local action. To achieve this, expert networks at different levels should be linked with each other. Local expertise, including local and indigenous knowledge, should be linked via sub-regional, mostly national networks, to the work of the IPBES. Additionally, specific thematic networks should integrate a broad range of knowledge and expertise from different spatial scales as part of the IPBES process. What is crucial, thus, is to provide a responsive and flexible ‘nervous system’ to gather, synthesize and distribute knowledge for the plenary of the IPBES.

¹ The workshop was carried out by the NesNet project, which is funded by the Federal Ministry on Education and Research (BMBF), Germany. See <http://www.ufz.de/index.php?en=21365> for more information.

² <http://www.ipbes.net/images/stories/documents/K1061514%20IPBES-3-3%20-%20%20REPORT.pdf>

Platform for Biodiversity knowledge:



Main Aims

- The IPBES is intended to contribute to the implementation of biodiversity policies. Its success or failure depends on how it is related to both the scientific and the political processes.
- The IPBES is intended to be a platform for which “conducting assessments” is but one function. The platform can take on a variety of roles at different scales, involving different knowledge forms and stakeholders. An effective mechanism will enable and empower decision makers at all levels to access a broad and relevant knowledge base.

Structure

- Quick and accurate response to issues of global and local importance requires decentralized and flexible structures and mechanisms. Access to knowledge through existing networks at all levels³ helps to provide fast, precise information at low cost. Most of the networks are already there and organically cross-linked and nested within the specific local/regional circumstances. They have the capacity (and auton-

³ This could include, among others, networks of scientific institutions, projects of global change programmes, learned societies, networks of non-governmental organisations, regional networks of biodiversity knowledge and practice, including indigenous knowledge, and many others. Many of these institutions and network have already been identified in the preparatory work for IPBES, see for example UNEP/IPBES/2/2 and UNEP/IPBES/3/INF/1

omy) to inform the planetary-scale activities of IPBES, while communicating the global understanding to local practitioners.

- Decision makers cannot always foresee what knowledge will be important or critical. In some cases, scientists notice trends long before other stakeholders. A politically relevant IPBES will respond quickly to the needs of decision makers, but will also report on emerging issues recognized by a variety of stakeholders, including scientists.
- An effective platform has a strong and transparent communication mechanism with respect to internal processes and to transmit understanding to society. Independent policy evaluation, including appraisal of the IPBES itself, is a critical element of healthy policy processes.

Processes

- A policy-relevant IPBES reviews and assesses biodiversity knowledge and discusses their implications for decision making and explores existing and potential response options, helping decision makers to clarify, and even expand, the scope of available courses of action.
- An effective IPBES uses a variety of forms of knowledge, while validating and assessing the quality of that knowledge.
- This requires novel forms of validation apart from scientific peer review (e.g. extended peer reviews including experts outside science). An effective, responsive and legitimate platform is itself subject to regular external assessment from an independent body.
- A policy-relevant platform assesses and communicates uncertainty, ignorance and the limits of knowledge and provides room for scientific dissent and minority views.

Specific functions – the four work areas of IPBES

The “Busan outcome” identifies four potential and mutually supportive work areas for an IPBES work program that need to further be specified.

- “Assessment” will work in a context of regional challenges and differences when analyzing topics on the global scale. To be policy relevant, its approach must be coherent across, and relevant to, a wide range of scales and multiple policy sectors⁴.
- “Policy Relevant Tools and Methodologies” are central to the main goal of producing policy-relevant knowledge. It will not only seek out integrative models, scenarios, indicators and other assessment outcomes, but also evaluate best practices, to make them widely accessible as policy options across scales. The form of products from

⁴ To further specify the way assessments are organized, it will help to identify potential topics and specify to procedural steps to carry out the assessment. Such topics could include cross-cutting issues like “biodiversity and water provision” or “health and biodiversity under a changing climate”

this work area may include reviewed global reports, but will also include such things as data bases of good practices or specific reports⁵.

- “Capacity Building” will be an integral part of biodiversity decision-making processes and vital for the empowerment of stakeholders. Effective capacity building is both a programme and a tool for interactive knowledge generation and utilization.
- “Knowledge Generation”, in the “Busan outcome”, identifies and prioritizes the need for scientific information. Elsewhere the “Busan outcome” points out that knowledge is not only scientific. Knowledge generation thus requires work to identify and evaluate knowledge in all its forms and to integrate it in the work of the platform.
- “Capacity Building” and “Knowledge Generation” work together to support the whole knowledge cycle.

Context

- Context is critical for all four work areas. Environmental issues are embedded in social, cultural, and political contexts and effective decision making takes into account these contexts involved.
- Variation in Biodiversity at genetic, species and ecosystem level is often confined to a small area of land or sea. Concerns and priorities for conservation and sustainable use, including different legal and institutional settings, inevitably vary from one place or country to another. An effective global platform of biodiversity knowledge recognizes and fully takes into account local and regional dimensions.
- To be useful and relevant, concepts such as the framework of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment are mapped, linked and adapted to local understandings and frameworks.

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⁵ See for example the report suite of the TEEB initiative and its other products