

# The Policy Support Function of IPBES: how could this be more effectively developed and implemented?

**Suggestions derived from an international expert workshop organized by the German Network-Forum for Biodiversity Research (NeFo) in the light of the upcoming external review of the platform and the development of its next work programme.**

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## 1. Introduction

“Better policy through science”: this clause is part of the mission of IPBES, the Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (see <https://www.ipbes.net/about>). More specifically, IPBES intends to “provide policy-relevant knowledge and to catalyze the implementation of knowledge-based policies at all levels in government, the private sector and civil society” (ibid.). Thus, supporting policy making is the central goal of this institution. Five years after IPBES started to implement its first work programme, it is relevant to take a close look at how IPBES is meeting this objective.

This report outlines insights gained during an international expert workshop<sup>2</sup> centred on the following questions:

1. Where is “policy support” anchored in the first work programme of IPBES?
2. Which challenges does IPBES face with regard to delivering effective policy support and how could they potentially be overcome?
3. Which particular suggestions could be worth considering with regard to the IPBES Catalogue of Policy Support Tools and Methodologies (deliverable 4c)?

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<sup>1</sup> the main input to the document was made before appointment as external reviewer and thus does not cause a conflict of interests

<sup>2</sup> International workshop organized by the German Network-Forum for Biodiversity Research (NeFo), 16th-17th January 2018, Leipzig, <http://www.biodiversity.de/produkte/workshops/ipbes-function-policy-support-tools-and-methodologies-options-future-activities>).

## 2. Anchoring of “policy support” in the 1st work programme

The Busan Outcome (UNEP 2010) (of the preliminaries that led to IPBES’ establishment) had specified that supporting “policy formulation and implementation by identifying and promoting development of tools and methods” would be one of the four functions of IPBES. This function was subsequently anchored in the 1<sup>st</sup> work programme of IPBES in two different ways:

- 1) Policy support is – directly or indirectly – part of most of the IPBES activities. For instance, all the assessments are expected to identify priority knowledge needs and options for policy making (see Table 1 for a more systematic overview over the integration of policy support in the 1<sup>st</sup> IPBES work programme). This integrated approach is crucial because the application of policy support is context and scale dependent, and thus, the products of IPBES can only serve its ultimate purpose if they are put into policy context (Hulme et al. 2011, Vohland et al. 2011, Vohland & Nadim 2015). The six assessment SPMs<sup>3</sup> so far approved by the Plenary all include key policy messages. Yet those messages could also be more intimately linked to the policy process.
- 2) The 1<sup>st</sup> IPBES work programme contains one particular deliverable that is exclusively dedicated to policy support: the catalogue of policy support tools and methodologies (deliverable 4c). In 2014, an expert group for this deliverable was established and requested to support the development of the catalogue and to provide further guidance regarding policy support tools and methodologies (IPBES/3/INF/8). The expert group met face-to-face twice: in 2014 and 2015. The expert group performed an elaborate analysis of the meaning of policy instruments and policy support tools and methodologies in the IPBES context, and suggested a categorization of policy support tools and methodologies. Furthermore, it presented a rationale for the IPBES catalogue on policy support tools and methodologies and considerations on its design, use and population (IPBES/4/INF/14). A prototype for the catalogue was established in cooperation with the existing OPPLA<sup>4</sup> web platform (different platforms were explored at an earlier stage). In 2017, the Multidisciplinary Expert Panel (MEP) “considered the reconstitution of the expert group [...] and agreed that it should comprise two task groups: one task group to develop methodological guidance for assessing policy instruments and support tools within an IPBES assessment, and one task group to further develop the catalogue for policy support tools and promote and facilitate its use” (IPBES/6/INF/16). In the meantime, the IPBES Secretariat, supported by the expert group and by the Technical Support Unit for deliverable 4c at the UN Environment World Conservation

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<sup>3</sup> Summary for policymakers

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.oppla.eu/>

Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC), began to technically implement the online catalogue. The catalogue underwent an expert-review from October 2017 to 2018 (IPBES/6/INF/16).

**Table 1: Contributions to the policy support function by objective of the 1<sup>st</sup> IPBES work programme**

<b>Objectives of the IPBES work programme</b>	<b>Contributions to the policy support function</b>
Capacity building and knowledge foundations	Priority needs and data for policy making
2. Regional and global assessments	Contribute to the identification of needs for policy support tools, Assess policy instruments for various objectives and in different policy contexts
3. Thematic and methodological issues	Thematic assessments on pollination, pollinators and food security as well as land degradation and restoration include evaluation of various policy support tools and policy instruments Deliverable 3c: policy support tools and methodologies for scenario analysis, Deliverable 3d: policy support tools and methodologies regarding the diverse conceptualization of values
4. Communication and evaluation	Deliverable 4c: catalogue of policy support tools and methodologies

### **3. Challenges for effective IPBES policy support and possible solutions**

In retrospect, IPBES can be recognized to have been confronted with several challenges with regard to delivering effective policy support. These challenges are linked either to general issues such as a) overall framework conditions and the complexity of global biodiversity policy; or to IPBES-specific issues that can be categorized as being related to b) the delivery of policy support as an integrated element within the deliverables other than 4c; and c) the delivery of policy support by means of deliverable 4c. The underlying challenge was that several deliverables that build on one another were developed in parallel (certain elements of the assessments and the methodology were being discussed while the framework of deliverable 4c was conceptualized simultaneously).

## **a) Challenges linked to overall framework conditions and the complexity of global biodiversity policy**

IPBES has broad and multi-layered objectives but it is not the only organization operating in the field of conservation and management of biodiversity and ecosystem services. A first challenge is therefore to clarify the specific roles of IPBES within the global arena, particularly with regard to biodiversity-related MEAs and institutions, including the UN-IPBES partners (UNEP, FAO, UNDP and UNESCO). Instruments that facilitate the cooperation between science and policy are present in many sectors that are related to biodiversity - especially sectors that are closely linked to the management of natural resources, like agriculture, fisheries or development aid. In fact, other assessment processes are currently conducted in parallel with the IPBES assessments and address similar questions.

The CBD, amongst others, has been one of the processes that had interactions with cross-referencing the CBD Aichi Targets (CBD to IPBES) or outcomes of IPBES pollination assessment (IPBES to CBD) to name two examples. In addition there are parallel processes at the regional level. Given that financial and human resources as well as the capacities of the addressees to take up messages are limited, there is the risk that parallel assessments in rapid sequence compete with each other, e.g. in terms of financing, experts' willingness to contribute, and the attention they generate in the media and target audiences. In the worst case, they can even undermine each other's credibility when different framings, data usage or methodologies lead to differing results and inconsistent recommendations. On the other hand, only in the IPBES framework are assessment chapters accepted and SPMs approved by IPBES member states so there is a stark difference to how other processes receive assessment results<sup>5</sup>. GEO, GBO and FAO assessments all preceded IPBES and so the UN system (which has an agreed role in supporting IPBES) should review the relevance of this range of corresponding products with regard to links and overlaps with IPBES assessments.

### Suggested way forward:

To overcome these challenges we suggest that more attention should be paid to these questions:

“Which role does IPBES intend to play? What are its aim(s) and representation, and which gaps does it strive to fill?”

Possible actions in this regard include:

- (i) A review of the available relevant gap-analyses would be useful to reflect once more on the niche IPBES intends to fill (taking into account also possible comments on this question arising from the external review of IPBES soon to be initiated/currently underway), and this would then result in a clear description of the IPBES-niche.

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<sup>5</sup> GBO, for instance, is only welcomed by Parties, and noted general conclusions.  
<https://www.cbd.int/doc/decisions/cop-12/cop-12-dec-01-en.pdf>

- a. This description should be made available to and be used by governments, MEAs and other stakeholders that are invited to submit requests for IPBES activities under the second work programme.
  - b. IPBES experts should be aware of this description and reflect on it during the preparation of the deliverables and the Plenary, and remain mindful of these reflections during assessment acceptance/approval processes.
- (ii) If parallels or overlaps between IPBES and other processes are identified by the review in (i) above, IPBES and the UN IPBES partners should seek to streamline these processes, e.g. the launches of assessments and efforts to support their uptake by policy. This could potentially increase the impact of assessments, reduce costs and help to avoid decrepitness of assessments, which are released within a short time frame and can potentially “out-date” each other too soon.

#### **b) Challenges linked to the delivery of policy support as an integrated element within the deliverables other than 4c**

To deliver policy support more effectively, it seems important to reaffirm the indissoluble link between the functions of IPBES (assessments, capacity building, knowledge generation and policy support). However, the coordination and interplay between the different functions and working units within IPBES poses specific challenges. During the past five years, the high level of ambition and low level of resources, that characterised the first work programme, compromised the ability of the Plenary to promote all aspects of its work equally to its set intentions. In addition, in 2013, the entire IPBES infrastructure was yet to be established, which took a few years. Also, the Secretariat (including the TSUs<sup>6</sup>) were understaffed, not yet established or in a process of still defining modes of operation and routines. These are normal processes during the establishment phase of an institution but they did cause some difficulties, e.g. with regard to timing, coordination and inspiration among the different deliverables. For example, the guidance on how to conduct assessments was only completed when the regional assessments had already started (and IPBES’ two first assessments had already been completed). The work of IPBES continues to suffer due to lack of resources, especially adequate staffing.

These circumstances further increased the dominance of the assessment function within the first IPBES work programme (see also e.g. Brooks et al. 2014). IPBES assessments are expected to provide policy support and thus serve as policy support tools and, at the same time, they are expected to generate material for deliverable 4c (see section c). However, from the deliverables that have been completed so far and from personal communications with experts involved in ongoing assessment processes, it seems debatable whether the current level of interaction among policy-makers and the members of the IPBES expert groups suffice for ensuring such optimal policy relevance. The initial requests for the assessments are issued by governments or MEAs and the Plenary adopts the chapter outlines prior to initiating an assessment, but there is little interaction during the intersessional periods (i.e. during the times between two plenary sessions) between policy-makers and the

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<sup>6</sup> Technical Support Units

members of the IPBES expert groups. This may partly reduce IPBES experts' awareness of the particular questions and framings that relate closely to policy questions. Furthermore, supportive mechanisms external to IPBES need to be in place to foster the uptake of IPBES results by the requesters, who may act at the global, regional, national or subnational levels. An appropriate contextualization of IPBES results is an important step, including the clarification of links to other relevant agreements and assessments as well as organizations and policies (see a) above).

### Suggested way forward:

Building on the overarching importance of policy support across all functions, the following actions could be envisaged:

- (i) A new deliverable could be built into the next IPBES work programme focusing on procedures, approaches and participatory processes for ensuring effectiveness of policy support as a cross-cutting issue in IPBES. This could involve setting up special arrangements or a mechanism that focuses on policy support<sup>7</sup> (a task force may be appropriate but may also not suit the particular needs of this theme). The mission of this potential mechanism will be to ensure policy support is considered in the development of all IPBES products and also to ensure policy relevance of the products and facilitate their uptake. Moreover, this potential mechanism could encourage the broad inclusion of practitioners from different sectors.
- (ii) In general, assessments should be more coordinated with the actual needs of policy makers: In order to achieve this, a much stronger degree of co-production is necessary, in particular when the draft scoping document is developed. Other possible actions contributing to such enhanced co-production could include the initiation of more interaction among IPBES experts and policy makers, possibly at events similar to the IPBES Capacity Building fora (or by engaging more practitioners at these fora).
- (iii) A final chapter with case examples of good practices of implementation under different contexts (taking into account e.g. different scales and national contexts) could be added to the assessments. This could help to increase the understanding and facilitate uptake of the assessments at national and sub-national level. Furthermore, this final chapter could also make a link to the IPBES catalogue on policy support tools and methodologies where further guidance on suitable policy support tools and methodologies as well as the conditions for their use could be explained.
- (iv) Furthermore, it may be worth considering whether some assessments, or spin-off products from major assessments, should tackle more specific issues (e.g. narrower questions, geographic focus, targeted to a particular user group). These could potentially be delivered by IPBES in a shorter time frame than assessments that cover a broader

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<sup>7</sup> Regionally based but meeting largely virtually, coming together immediately before each Plenary to provide policy context and commentary on the deliverable to be considered for Platform members

range of issues, which could make such assessments or products potentially even more suitable for a timely uptake.

### **c) Challenges linked to the delivery of policy support by means of deliverable 4c**

The catalogue on policy support tools and methodologies has been set up as an online platform by the end of the first work programme. It collates a broad array of i) policy instruments and ii) policy support tools and methodologies, iii) case studies and iv) learning opportunities.

However, there are several challenges related to data entry and maintenance of the catalogue: Responsibilities seem to be unclear, i.e. whether the expert group for deliverable 4c or the experts working on the different (regional and thematic) assessments are in charge of filling the catalogue with adequate examples. The task of expert group 4c was the provision of the conceptual foundation and guidance to the catalogue (IPBES/4/INF/14) and experts of the other assessments are already overburdened by the many different conceptual requirements, procedures and tight timelines. Currently the arrangement is that the Technical Support Unit for deliverable 4c, established in 2017, which set up the technical infrastructure of the catalogue, is starting to fill it with initial examples.

One option discussed for successively populating the catalogue is to invite all interested stakeholders to provide further examples. However, this demands regular control of uploaded content. So far, there are no quality control processes in place or planned to ensure that uploaded content is appropriate, relevant or even correct. And quality control of case examples requires the expertise by independent reviewers on respective topics, methods and contexts.

While some of these challenges will be significantly lower in subsequent work programmes, the issue of an already very high workload on members of expert groups and the issues pertaining to quality control persist. These issues remain critical with many open questions – the IPBES7 Plenary should allocate time to specifically discuss this matter.

### **Suggested way forward:**

It is suggested that the following points may be taken into account during further reflections on the future of the expert group for deliverable 4c and the IPBES catalogue of policy support tools and methodologies.

- (i) Structural and procedural considerations: With regard to the policy support function in the narrow sense, it is suggested to continue the methodological work that has been started during the first work programme (see e.g. IPBES/4/INF/14), e.g. via an extension of the mandate of the respective expert group. Nonetheless, if the mandate for the current expert group will be renewed, it is strongly suggested that its composition is critically reflected, given longer inactive time periods and few physical meetings in the past and potential withdrawals. This is particularly relevant to ensure its functionality and its balance among genders, regions and disciplines. It is further suggested to clarify the mandate of the expert group, to provide them with the necessary resources (also for physical meetings), and with sufficient support from the Technical Support Unit.

- (ii) Resource limitation and sustainability of finance has been an underlying challenge for the IPBES process in general, and particularly for 4c where face-to-face expert meetings had not been held since 2015. These are the matters to be considered in the next work programme, and will also be discussed within the review process. Therefore, there is a need to critically reflect on the level of resources (financial and human) that should be further spent on the catalogue, also taking into account the following considerations:
  - a. The scope and uptake of the catalogue and its comprehensiveness regarding its initial aim needs to be clarified (level of ambition: is the catalogue intended to replace existing tools, or rather to provide one possible entry point to identifying a broad array of policy support tools and methodologies).
  - b. The responsibility for populating validating the IPBES catalogue in its initial phase and its maintenance in the longer run also needs clarification; ensuring content quality seems to be crucial.
  - c. A better understanding of the range of intended users, their needs, capacities and motivations is needed: the application of policy support is context and scale dependent. This makes it challenging to specify how a catalogue of policy support tools and methodologies that is developed at global level could be used at other levels and how assessments could be translated from one level to another.
  - d. Furthermore, many similar portals are available with slightly different but overlapping objectives. It is required to more explicitly emphasize the added value of the IPBES catalogue.
- (iii) A potential option to ensure a high quality of the content of the catalogue with a reasonable amount of resources could be to limit its core to examples extracted from IPBES products such as the assessments. For example, case studies as presented in the assessments could be included, because they have been reviewed by experts and governments and accepted by the Plenary. As a second component of the catalogue, cross-references to external sources/case studies can be included, for instance this could be linked to the NSBAP Forum<sup>8</sup>. This feature would complement the IPBES-derived content and would avoid duplication of databases and platforms. Regarding legal protection and reputation, it is critical to separate these two components transparently to demonstrate that IPBES is not responsible for external sources.

## 4. Summary & Conclusions

In our view, IPBES made a wise decision to integrate policy support by 1) envisioning it as a cross-cutting function of all IPBES functions and most products and actions and 2) by producing specific deliverables for methodological guidance on policy support tools and methodologies.

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<sup>8</sup> The NBSAP Forum is a global partnership aiming to support the revision and implementation of National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs). <http://nbsapforum.net/>



However, the policy support function of IPBES has been somewhat neglected and not yet been developed to its full potential. There are several challenges that partly root in the institutional set-up, the framing conditions, the complexity of global biodiversity policy and the fact that there is no blueprint at hand to develop, organize and coordinate an international science-policy panel. Thus, considering its challenges described above, related shortcomings are fully understandable. However, we perceive the current period of time as a critical moment to reflect on the experiences gained with and within IPBES and on the question what could still be improved. Both the upcoming external review and the development of the new IPBES work programme offer a window of opportunity for adaptations.

Therefore, based on the identified challenges, the workshop participants have developed specific recommendations for better integration of the policy support function with the three remaining functions of IPBES, as well as the development of the function itself, without which IPBES remains incomplete.

To us, it seems particularly relevant to strengthen the role of policy support as a core and cross-cutting function. We suggest that this ambition should be one of the aspects that guide the development of the next work programme of IPBES. This could involve to set-up a special mechanism on policy support (e.g. via a task force) focusing on procedures, approaches and participatory processes for ensuring effective policy support. The mission of this task force could be to ensure that policy support is more strongly considered during the development of all IPBES products and to facilitate uptake and use of these products. For example, assessments could generally be more tuned to the actual needs of policy makers. This could be achieved by involving policymakers in the development of the first draft of the scoping document, or by including a final chapter in the assessment reports with good practices of examples of implementation under different contexts. With full recognition of the difference in status of the SPM versus the assessment chapters, this final chapter could also be issued separately alongside the SPM, as an easily available product for the policy community to use. Furthermore, it may be worth considering whether some assessments, or spin-off products from major assessments, should tackle more specific issues (e.g. more specific themes, geographic focus, targeted to a particular user group).

With regard to the policy support function in the narrow sense, it is suggested to continue the methodological work started under the first work programme, e.g. via extension of the mandate of the respective (re-composed) expert group. The financial and human resources spent on the catalogue of policy support tools and methodologies should be critically reflected. The catalogue will only be perceived as relevant and useful if the process of data entry is transparent, if the quality of information is high, and if its content is reliable and up-to-date. Thus, maintenance and appropriate quality control will be among the major tasks.

## Final remarks

IPBES has now been operating for five years and the end of the first work programme is approaching. An entirely new institution has been established during the last years, in which more than thousand experts, distributed all around the globe, have invested considerable time and effort. Many complex tasks have been accomplished, such as the completion of seven assessment reports, the realization and support of several capacity building activities. We raise this point because large parts of this document reflect critically on the policy support function of IPBES. This is, first, because IPBES is still relatively young and with its first work programme has also undergone a piloting and learning process and thus can benefit greatly from a reflection of lessons learned. And second, it lies in the nature of things that such a reflection, intended to deliver constructive suggestions for some readjustments, centres on issues that are regarded in need of improvement. This is not to downplay IPBES' achievements but to make a contribution to the upcoming discussions with regard to its next work programme and the review of the platform.

This document summarizes the results of an international workshop organized by the German Network-Forum for Biodiversity Research (NeFo, 16th-17th January 2018, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental research – UFZ, Leipzig, Germany). The text has been compiled by Marianne Darbi and Elisabeth Marquard building on the input of the experts gathered during the workshop (in alphabetical order): Beard, T. Douglas; Berghöfer, Augustin; Biber-Freudenberger, Lisa; Bridgewater, Peter; Díaz Reviriego, Isabel; Eggermont, Hilde; Kleemann, Janina; Kloos, Julia; Kohsaka, Ryo; Martin del Real, Inés; Mohammadi Fazel, Asghar; Neuhaus, Michael; Payyappallimana, Unnikrishnan; Raab, Kristina; Reuter, Katrin; Ring, Irene; Solhaug, Tone; Uchiyama, Yuta; Wittmer, Heidi; Ziemacki, Jasmin.

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