SPIRAL Briefs
SCIENCE POLICY INTERFACES: RESEARCH, ACTION & LEARNING

SPIRALing IPBES

The Brief in brief

The Intergovernmental Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) was established in 2012. This brief presents the IPBES and outlines some recommendations based on SPIRAL expertise and SPI tools.

Setting the scene

IPBES was established after years of consultations and negotiations (including the IMoSEB-process[1], and three multi-stakeholder meetings from 2008 to 2011[2]) in a plenary meeting held in Panama in April 2012. ***The overarching objective of IPBES is "to strengthen the science-policy interface for biodiversity and ecosystem services for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, long-term human well-being and sustainable development"***. The structure of IPBES includes: a small Secretariat based in Bonn, Germany; a decision-making Plenary composed of members (governments) and observers, a Bureau and a Multidisciplinary Expert Panel (MEP)

The IPBES has four functions:

1- Knowledge generation

The first objective of the knowledge generation function is to develop common frameworks, methodologies and basic understanding to support decisions-making processes. The second objective is to make sure knowledge gaps are addressed and relevant research strategies are implemented. Finally this function should address issues relating to including various types of knowledge (e.g. indigenous), supporting observation and monitoring programmes and ensuring open access to existing data.

2 - Assessments

The objective here is to address user needs by carrying out assessments of existing knowledge including different types of knowledge (scientific, traditional, grey literature, citizen science…)

Discussions are on-going as to the scale at which assessments will be performed and how assessment topics will be identified, prioritized and their scoping[3] defined.

3- Policy support

The objective is to promote a better use of existing knowledge by identifying and promoting tools to transfer knowledge to policy makers in an efficient way, e.g.scenarios, indicators or models. The overarching challenge is to achieve one of the founding objectives of IPBES: to provide knowledge which is "policy relevant but not prescriptive"[4]

4- Capacity building

The objective is to catalyse and build the capacity at various levels to implement effective science-policy interfaces and to enable all actors to contribute efficiently to the different functions of the IPBES.

The intended structure and processes

Regarding the structure, concern has been raised about the composition of the MEP (See below key lessons learned). Potential problems still remain due to significant outstanding issues concerning decision making procedures (based or not on consensus), the role of UN bodies as host institutions for IPBES, and the question of membership of regional economic integration organizations (REIOs such as the EU). In addition, IPBES still needs to address issues related to how the work programme will be defined and implemented (e.g. through a more regional approach).

Additional key issues under discussion include the engagement into IPBES processes of stakeholders, such as other intergovernmental organizations, international and regional scientific organizations, environment trust funds, non-governmental organizations and the private sector. A Stakeholder Engagement Strategy is under development and will be discussed at the next plenary in December 2013.

The expected outputs

[1] The consultation on an International Mechanism of Scientific Expertise on Biodiversity (IMoSEB) was initiated after the conference Biodiversity: Science and Governance, held in Paris in January 2005 and lasted for three years until 2008

[2] all information on meetings are available at: http://www.ipbes.net/ (resources/previous meetings)

[3] Scoping is still under definition and can encompass the review of currently available information, relevant scale, cost estimates of assessments, etc.

[4] See Busan outcome at http://www.ipbes.net/resources/previous-ipbes-meetings/3rd-meeting-on-ipbes.html

We can expect IPBES to produce, or trigger the production of, not only assessment reports on a global scale but also assessments at other scales and on thematic issues. Main challenges are related to how stakeholders and different knowledge types will be involved in designing the outputs and what communication tools and methodologies will be used.

The expected effects

At the current state of negotiations no precise judgement concerning the impact of IPBES on global biodiversity policy is possible.

Approach taken in SPIRAL to study the test case

SPIRAL members were present at most of the steps of the preparatory/consultation process: from the Science and Governance conference in Paris, in 2005 to the IMOSEB consultations and the multi-stakeholder meetings since 2008 (Putrajaya 2008, Nairobi 2009, Busan 2010), SPIRAL members also attended the two sessions of a plenary meeting of IPBES (3-7 October 2011, 16-21 April 2012), organised a workshop on the policy support function as part of the intersessional process in December 2011 as well as various workshops and meetings organised in Europe during intersessions. In addition, SPIRAL workshops provided an informal opportunity for several representatives from EC-DG RTD, EC-DG ENV, national delegates and UNEP-IPBES Secretariat to further discuss SPI concepts and attributes.

As SPIRAL members followed closely all IPBES developments, they could feed some recommendations during intersessional workshops and consultations. Results of SPIRAL research on SPIs were used to develop these recommendations, hence bringing SPIRAL work to the attention of those designing IPBES structure and processes.

Key lessons learned from the Test Case

We address three main key aspects for which SPIRAL approach, tools and expertise can provide interesting insights:

➢ An important aspect of IPBES is the tension between its legitimacy (political mandate, intergovernmental process) and its credibility, which heavily depends on the independence, composition and operation of its Multidisciplinary Expert Panel (MEP) and on the rules and procedures framing the interactions of the MEP with the political bodies of IPBES (the Plenary and Bureau).

At the IPBES plenary in Bonn, nominations of MEP members raised concerns regarding the fair representation of social sciences and other knowledge holders (indigenous and local knowledge). Gender balance is also far from being implemented. A key recommendation would be to ensure that this panel reaches out beyond the "usual suspects", i.e. the biodiversity experts already involved in the CBD/SBSTTA[5] in order to ensure a good representation of disciplines but also new kinds of expertise.

In terms of independence, the challenge comes from the Intergovernmental status of IPBES, which implies that politics is decisive for all rules of procedures and has a strong influence on the questions selected ("scoping"). What this will mean in practice is still unclear as one important element of the rules of procedures is still under negotiations: whether decisions in plenary should or must be made by consensus, which would give each single member state control of the assessments and their use. - The intergovernmental plenary represents both a risk as the questions addressed in assessments might be biased by countries' political agendas, and an opportunity as the "adoption"[6] of assessment reports conclusions will have a powerful impact on policy development and implementation at national and international level. To safeguard independence of IPBES, the structure and processes should allow for the working groups and the MEP to work without pressure and independently from the intergovernmental plenary and that the procedures to select questions/assessment topic be open and transparent, and allow contribution from stakeholders. In addition, ways should be found for stakeholders to contribute and to participate actively in the plenary, helping to ensure that the process is transparent, inclusive, balanced and relevant.

- A key question also concerns the flexibility of the complex process of IPBES and its adaptability to unforeseen changes in the socio-economic landscape. This relates directly to the way requests will be brought to IPBES and how the scoping process will function. As IPBES will address complex interrelated biophysical, socioeconomic and institutional issues, it needs to be established as a learning institution, adapted to dealing with complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity and ignorance. It thus needs a mechanism for external monitoring, evaluation of its internal structures and procedures (e.g. to ensure transparency), quality control of its outputs, and any additional aspects relevant to its self-evaluation and adaptive management.
- Another striking aspect is the issue of scaling and how a global intergovernmental platform will be able to tackle biodiversity issues that are usually quite context-dependent both in terms of knowledge availability (including different type of knowledge) and in terms of policy development and implementation. A key question remains regarding possible regional hubs that would provide a better link to the regional political structures and scientific communities/networks and encourage

[5] Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

[6] Procedure of adoption has not yet been agreed upon

bottom up processes: regional hubs would ensure assessments are pertinent to the levels at which results are most needed.

We can also identify some additional recommendations based on SPIRAL work:

- Adequate and sustained financing is a requirement to enable any SPI to achieve objectives and it will be key for IPBES.
- Strong leadership is needed to move IPBES forward (e.g. by drawing more resources to IPBES, facilitating compromises, reaching out to the policy side, providing expertise and credibility, motivating others).
- The use of 'champions' or charismatic 'ambassadors' who are well-respected and highly-placed could contribute to improving visibility and credibility of IPBES and facilitate access to other resources.
- Inclusiveness is important, especially in processes such as scoping, strengthens relevance and legitimacy. To ensure inclusiveness, IPBES will need to build and maintain collaboration with existing networks to increase possibilities for continuity but also ensure necessary engagement of additional stakeholders and knowledge holders.
- Conflict management (including policy on conflict of interests) is also a key process that will require clearly stated and appropriate methods. The use of open scientific debate should be promoted as a constructive 'conflict' can also be seen as a healthy sign of open dialogue

Looking for more information on science-policy interfaces?

For more SPIRAL results, including separate briefs focussing on results from other test cases, see companion SPIRAL briefs at http://www.spiral-project.eu/content/documents

This brief is a result of research and interactions within and around the SPIRAL project. This brief was written by Estelle Balian and Sybille van den Hove (Median), Juliette Young and Allan Watt (CEH), Christoph Görg (UFZ)

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Interfacing Biodiversity and Policy