

Policy Brief: Raising awareness of the IPBES Regional Assessment for Asia and the Pacific

André Derek Mader (Institute for Global Environmental Strategies), Linda Anne Stevenson (Asia-Pacific Network for Global Change Research) and Christmas Uchiyama (Asia-Pacific Network for Global Change Research).

Outline

This policy brief outlines some of the discussions at a series of science-policy dialogues for countries of the Asia-Pacific region, held between February and October 2019. The purpose of the dialogues was to introduce biodiversity policymakers, and other stakeholders from these countries, to the IPBES Regional Assessment Report for Asia and the Pacific (IPBES 2018a), and in particular its key messages (see Table 1). The report was compiled partly as a support for policymaking. This policy brief is aimed at policymakers such as those who attended the dialogues, as well as their counterparts in sectors that have an impact on biodiversity. It is expected to give them an idea of how to spread the word about the Assessment and its Report. This is one part of a set of two policy brief that cover the most important aspects of the science-policy dialogues. The other discusses biodiversity challenges and solutions in Asia and the Pacific, with reference to the Assessment Report. **Both policy briefs are statements of the views of the workshop participants.**

The dialogues for the South Asia and Western Asia subregions were held in Kathmandu in February 2019; for the Oceania subregion in Canberra in April 2019; and for the North-East Asia and South-East Asia subregions in Bangkok in October 2019. The dialogues formed the main component of the “Capacity Building Project for the Implementation of IPBES Asia-Pacific Regional Assessment”. This project was funded by the Japan Biodiversity Fund through the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and was implemented by the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) and the Asia-Pacific Network for Global Change Research (APN), in collaboration with the technical support unit for the IPBES Regional Assessment for Asia and the Pacific, as well as hosts and other partners.

1. Background

The Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) is an independent intergovernmental body established by States 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 (IPBES 2020). Much of the Platform’s activities are concerned with “assessing knowledge”. To that end, IPBES conducts assessments of existing knowledge of biodiversity and ecosystem services. A set of four regional assessments were conducted – for Africa, the Americas, Europe and Central Asia, and Asia and the Pacific. The reports produced out of these four assessments were approved, along with the IPBES Thematic Assessment on Land Degradation and Restoration, at the 5th meeting of the IPBES Plenary in 2018. These assessments presented the most up-to-date compilation of knowledge on the status and trends of biodiversity; the ecosystem services that they provide; the drivers of change of these trends; future scenarios; and policy options. This information is presented at a relatively course scale, but with the intention of passing the baton to governments to perform their own assessments at the national and even subnational level. The reports’ Summaries for Policymakers (SPMs) (IPBES 2018b) summarize the report chapters in a series of key messages, intended to facilitate accessibility of findings.

2. The IPBES Regional Assessment Report for Asia and the Pacific

2.1. Ways in which the report has been used, or its use has been promoted

Perhaps because the IPBES assessments are relatively new tools to inform biodiversity policy, many biodiversity policymakers in Asia and the Pacific are not yet aware of them. There are, therefore, limited examples of outreach activities by governments to promote their use. The science-policy dialogues served partly to make the IPBES Assessment for Asia and the Pacific known to participants, while some countries reported their activities so far.

In **Japan** the Regional Assessment Report for Asia and the Pacific, as well as most IPBES report SPMs to date, have been translated into Japanese. The Ministry of the Environment of the Government of Japan also holds regular media briefings to share IPBES meeting outcomes; has organized symposia on the Asia Pacific and Global Assessment; and convenes liaison meetings between Japanese authors of these assessments and the relevant government ministries.

In **India** the Society of Zoology has conducted training events for young scientists, while the Asia Pacific Assessment has encouraged action at the local level.

In **Bangladesh** the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change organized an event to engage different ministries, NGOs, the private sectors and others in developing action plans.

The **United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific** hosted experts and support staff from the Asia Pacific Assessment to present its findings at a lunch meeting of their Committee on Social Development in November 2018.

IPBES assessments in general aim to encourage biodiversity assessment at the national level. Some countries provide further models for this level of implementation. China and Japan, for example, have already conducted national biodiversity assessments while others like the Republic of Korea and Cambodia are planning to do so in the near future.

2.2. Challenges and solutions

The assessment report should be considered in the context of the mass of international information available to policymakers and other decision-makers. Particularly in developing countries, they have the additional challenge of competing priorities and often a national focus on economic development, infrastructure and health. Careful consideration of how to strategically disseminate the findings of the IPBES assessment, and about biodiversity in general, is therefore needed.

Accessibility

Even in cases where IPBES reports are freely available, many policymakers and others may not be aware of them. Language is an obvious obstacle to accessibility where policymakers and others are less comfortable with any of the six UN languages into which the IPBES SPMs have been translated. In these cases, translation into local languages can vastly increase accessibility, though it may be time-consuming and require cross-ministry collaboration. In such cases translation of the key messages of the assessment report offers a reasonable compromise. Quite apart from language, the report's findings could be clarified and simplified – including the use of graphics – to make it more accessible.

Communication

Considering the international significance of the IPBES Asia-Pacific assessment, it may merit investment in marketing and communications strategies to create the right narrative for uptake. Social media is perhaps the main way in which word can be spread, but other types of tools should also be utilized for its mass dissemination, such as video and radio, and in local languages. The institutions or individuals responsible for integrating biodiversity into policymaking (e.g. IPBES and CBD national focal points) have a key role to play in introducing the assessment report to colleagues across ministries. A communications package to aid national focal points in delivering messages would be a good starting point. Where possible, ambitious approaches can be attempted, such as engaging celebrities to endorse the product.

Resources

The lack of resources – both human and financial – is a perennial limitation that should always be acknowledged and which applies to the uptake of the assessment report. It may help to align the objectives of using the assessment report with broader, more high-profile frameworks such as the SDGs. Sustainable financial mechanisms and trust funds may offer additional avenues for support in this regard.

Participation

Stakeholder engagement needs to be improved if the assessment report is to be taken up and distributed more broadly than it currently is. This goes for a range of actors including government, NGOs, the private sector, and indigenous peoples and local communities. Collaboration with local people can be enhanced through citizen science or rapid ecosystem assessment, and empowering them can lead to better co-production of knowledge.

National governments will benefit from engaging more with local governments in their countries, in addressing the priorities outlined in the assessment report. National governments stand to benefit from the collective participation of their local governments, while local governments require endorsement, guidance, or support from national government. Sub-regional transboundary cooperation may also be worth exploring.

The assessment report is a mechanism to transfer information at the science-policy interface. Such mechanisms are in short supply, and both the quality and quantity of interaction between scientists and policymakers need to improve. Young scientists may have a special role to play in this regard, as they often have the best grasp of communication technology and innovation.

Another interface that needs to be traversed is between ministries of the environment (or similar), and ministries in sectors that impact biodiversity. Intersectoral differences need to be addressed and can even offer opportunities for conservation (e.g. through tourism, energy, agriculture). Cross-sectoral engagement is vital to ensure IPBES messages are considered from a holistic viewpoint. Biodiversity policymakers should use mechanisms such as workshops to reach out to their counterparts, but being careful to adjust the messages to make them intelligible and relevant to the respective audience. Synergy between ministries has the additional potential benefit of pooling limited resources for producing assessments. Institutions or other bodies can also help to integrate inter-sectoral understanding of biodiversity and strengthening them can promote uptake. Long-term political buy-in, for example, may be achieved by emphasizing the economic links between biodiversity and human wellbeing presented in the assessment report. Outside of government, engaging with business and industry is a useful strategy, and platforms exist to facilitate it (e.g. Global Partnership for Business and Biodiversity).

Buy-in

Although IPBES made significant efforts to broadcast news of the Asia-Pacific Assessment report, media coverage failed to reach some biodiversity policymakers in the region. Researchers who are aware of the report have also not downloaded and cited it as much as may be expected. Public attention is needed to encourage political buy-in – particularly in democratic societies. Awareness-raising can take a variety of forms and would be well advised to consider harnessing popular current technology such as gaming apps.

Relevance

The assessment report covers an enormous geographical area and its findings are thus somewhat too generic for direct application by national or subnational governments. It does, however, provide a model for countries to compile their own assessments at finer scale. Concrete local examples, in particular, help to illustrate key points. The report does, nevertheless, provide up-to-date confirmation of regional biodiversity challenges that governments need to take note of. Customized presentation of the report's key messages, according to national contexts, can help to make them relevant.

2.3. Future assessments

The importance of the work that IPBES is doing merits dissemination to a wider audience, particularly at the national level. Many governments find it difficult to understand the relevance of a regional-level assessment and IPBES could improve its credibility by undertaking more outreach activities with this topic at the forefront.

The IPBES Regional Assessment for Asia and the Pacific is a very lengthy and fairly technical document, while its SPM is shorter but with even more complex text. In order to reach the most people, in future deliverables should be in clear language, concise and easily accessible to stakeholders, including non-scientists. Beyond the assessments themselves, it would be helpful if there were greater conformity in the language and terms used across the different international bodies such as IPBES, the CBD and FAO. Indeed, these entities would benefit from better coordination and alignment, for example between national focal points and even the reports that they compile.

Now that IPBES has produced a set of assessments, the time of national governments might be better spent conducting and compiling national assessments, using the IPBES assessments as a guide. There is a need for more data that is credible and specific to country contexts, and assessments that link to national planning and policy. That is not to say that transboundary efforts are not very important - they will help to promote a holistic, landscape approach towards conservation. In the meantime, awareness-raising for policymakers and other decision-makers across sectors should continue, to lay the ground for the implementation of planning based on national assessments.

Future assessments of all types should build on the start that IPBES has made on incorporating indigenous and local knowledge. Future assessments should be able to further mainstream indigenous and local knowledge into their reports. In doing so, assessment experts should work in a culturally sensitive way to co-design and co-manage assessments. For indigenous peoples and local communities to take part in the IPBES process, the assessment expert team would need to establish trust; build capacity where needed; and share questions on the assessment process through participatory processes.

If IPBES does continue to produce regional and other assessments, a stronger focus on islands is called for. Islands are unique in many ways, and their ecosystems particularly susceptible to human and climate impacts. IPBES membership needs to be increased across the Pacific island countries. Their more formal participation in the Platform can lay the foundation for more active involvement in future IPBES assessments, including through the provision of advice and review.

Regional organizations in Asia and the Pacific can take an influential position in future assessments that are conducted at a finer scale than the IPBES regional assessments but bringing together several countries. A Pacific Island Report, for example, may carry the benefits of being fairly focused, as well as pooling the resources of the countries concerned.

Regarding the thematic focus of future IPBES assessments, it is suggested to place more emphasis on mainstreaming biodiversity in economic development. This will also help to bridge the gap between sectors. High-level bodies, including ministers and politicians, are focusing much attention on climate change, which represents another opportunity for synergy.

3. Conclusion & recommendations for use of the assessment report

The IPBES Regional Assessment for Asia and the Pacific is part of a suite of international IPBES assessments that function at a scale above that which can be of direct use by many national governments. However, if it is widely disseminated it can serve as a tool to raise awareness and a guide to conducting assessments at finer scales.

Recommendations for spreading the word about current IPBES assessments

1. The key messages of the assessment report summarize its main points, but may require clarification when they are shared.
2. To make it as accessible as possible, it would be beneficial for the report to be available in more languages.
3. A variety of tools should be employed to disseminate the assessment report and raise awareness about it, depending on the context. These range from social media to local radio stations.
4. Stakeholder engagement is a prerequisite for dissemination of the key findings of the report – whether it be with indigenous peoples and local communities; vertically across levels of government or horizontally across sectors.

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Appendix: Participation

The dialogues for **South Asia and Western Asia** were attended by representatives of the Governments of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Jordan, India, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, the Maldives, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, and the Syrian Arab Republic. Other participants represented the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Asia-Pacific Network for Global Change Research Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

The dialogues for **Oceania** were attended by representatives of the Governments of Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, and New Zealand. Other participants represented the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Asia-Pacific Network for Global Change Research Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

The dialogues for **South-East Asia and North-East Asia** were attended by representatives of the Governments of Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, The Philippines, Timor-Leste, Republic of Korea, Thailand (hosts), and Viet Nam. Other participants represented the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, National Taiwan University, the Predicting and Assessing Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services initiative, Society for Wildlife and Nature International, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, and United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Center.

"Capacity Building Project for the Implementation of IPBES Asia-Pacific Regional Assessment" is implemented by Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) with support from the Government of Japan through the Japan Biodiversity Fund.

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