

DesertNet
International



Discussions within the *Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)* on how to consider different views on the values of biodiversity and ecosystem services

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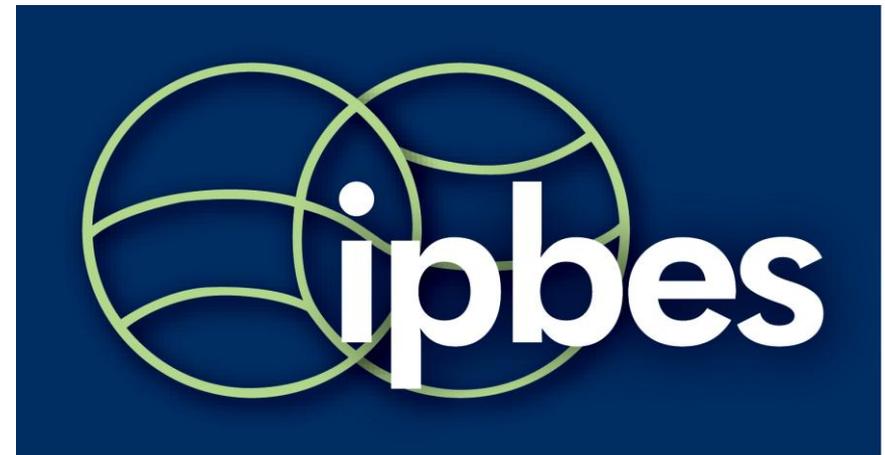


Dr. Mariam Akhtar-Schuster has carried out extensive scientific fieldwork since 1989 within semi-nomadic, nomadic and rural sedentary communities in the drylands of the Republic of Sudan, Namibia and Brazil to analyze the impacts of changes in land tenure on land use and on the status of the land's natural resources. One major aim of her work was to analyze pathways for sustainable land management to enhance the economic resilience of rural households. As co-founder and former co-chair and chair of the international scientific network for research on desertification (DesertNet International) (2006-2011), she has working experience at the science-policy interface to provide policy-relevant scientific knowledge to combat desertification.

Mariam Akhtar-Schuster also chaired the UNCCD ad hoc working group to further discuss the options for the provision of scientific advice focusing on desertification/land degradation and drought issues (AGSA, 2012-2013). Major recommendations developed under her leadership are currently being implemented by the UNCCD or have received encouragement by the 11th session of the UNCCD Conference of the Parties for their implementation. She is currently member of the scientific advisory committee in preparation of UNCCD's 3rd scientific conference.

Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)

In 2012, the *Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* – commonly known as the IPBES – was established as a response to the worldwide decline in biodiversity and the loss of ecosystem services.



IPCC and IPBES

Like the older and therefore better-known *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* – known as IPCC - the *Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (IPBES) is aimed at bringing scientists, policy-makers and other stakeholders around the table for two reasons:

- a. First, to ensure that evidence-based and policy-relevant science is provided to support decision-making on safeguarding biodiversity and ecosystems.
- b. Second, to guarantee that information needs of policy makers are clearly communicated to the scientific community.

The IPBES will work scientifically independently and ensure legitimacy of its work through peer-review.

Very importantly the IPBES will also have to consider **indigenous and local knowledge systems** in its sub-regional, regional and global assessments on biodiversity and ecosystem services.

2nd Plenary of the IPBES, Turkey

Especially at the second Plenary of the IPBES in Turkey, about three months ago, it was all about **listening to, and learning from** different views about the values of biodiversity and ecosystem services existing among different knowledge holders. The discussions included scientists, politicians and traditional or local knowledge holders.

The space provided for these discussions at the intergovernmental was urgently needed in order to start understanding things from different perspectives - or at least accept the fact that different views on defining or terming the values of the land's resources exist.

ONE conceptual framework

These lengthy and partly intense discussions on diverse views about values of biodiversity and ecosystem services were actually very important to help the *Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (IPBES) to create **ONE** integrating and globally accepted *conceptual framework*.

This one unifying conceptual framework for the Platform builds the frame to produce standardized assessments and unite the core activities of the IPBES to come up with scientifically sound proposals to safeguard and sustainably use biodiversity and ecosystem services.

Time well-invested

I believe that the time invested to agree on such an **expanded** perception, has been well-invested at the intergovernmental – thus political - plenary meetings of the *Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (IPBES): Following the sub-optimal outcomes of the 15th Session of the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2009, Elinor Ostrom, a political economist and *nobel laureate*, already pointed out, that in future the involvement of multifarious opinions and stakeholders is unavoidable in order to adequately address environmental concerns.



A more ‘polycentric’ approach

The IPCC expert Professor Michael Hulme – from King’s College London - clearly echoes from his own longstanding work within the IPCC, Elinor Ostrom’s demand for a more “*polycentric*” approach. This would allow considering different views at the science-policy interfaces!

Michael Hulme also clearly emphasises the need for more inclusive and self-governing processes, in which different stakeholders, such as scientists, non-governmental groups and decision-makers **interact**, and where **regional implications** play more prominent and **autonomous roles**. Such an active involvement of multi-stakeholders would in future enable the influx of “*more geographically and culturally nuanced knowledge*” in assessments to support decision-making.

Personal experience

From my own research work on desertification, I definitively underline the views of Elinor Ostrom and Michael Hulme. I therefore argue and encourage the inclusion of local perceptions and realities and involving affected communities and knowledge holders into measures to preserve the land's resources. Surely, this can be the only solid way forward that promises medium- and long-term success to safeguard the natural capital.

So I am certain that the IPBES is on the right track by discussing, defining and finally adapting a '*stakeholder engagement strategy*', hopefully at its 3rd Plenary in early 2015.

The question of 'How'?

The question therefore is not whether we allow other perceptions of 'evaluating' ecosystem services or land degradation to enter the international academic and science-policy arena. It is rather the question how other forms of knowledge and perceptions can be included in science-based assessments to provide policy-relevant advice to safeguard biodiversity and ecosystem services?

Challenges for future academic researchers

It seems to be clear that present and **future academic researchers** and maybe even university curricula will be increasingly challenged with the difficulties arising not only from developing appropriate methods for interdisciplinary research on the economics of land degradation. Future researchers will also be increasingly faced with the challenge of finding ways to include different stakeholder views in research and in practice. And this would include non-academic views as well. In fact, you might already be encountering these challenges in your formal academic training.

Way forward?

The *Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (IPBES) **has yet to develop** a way forward on how to systematically integrate indigenous and local knowledge systems into its various science-based assessments. So after the opinions had been exchanged at the meetings of the IPBES, the next challenge for the biodiversity community was to balance the different perspectives in order come up with **common definitions** and **common terminology**, which integrate the existing wide spectrum of scientific, indigenous and local views.

Examples

Let me give you **three examples** of how the multi-stakeholder discussions within the *Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (IPBES) approx. three months ago struggled and then successfully managed to come up with common definitions and common terminology which are inclusive of all discussed world views:

a. What the scientific community in the discussions during the 2nd IPBES Plenary defined as “**human wellbeing**” was defined by other knowledge systems as “**living in harmony with nature and living well in balance and harmony with Mother Earth**“. Both groups agreed that the expression “**Good quality of Life**” is inclusive of the different world views: In this agreed expression, the diverse views of nature are included:

- i. *“nature being considered as a separate entity to be exploited for the benefit of human societies”*, and
- ii. *the more intimate perception of “nature being seen as a sacred living entity of which humans are only one part”*.

Examples

- b. Another example: The scientific community used the term “**Biodiversity and ecosystems**”. Other knowledge systems used the term “**Mother Earth, and Systems of life**”. The term “**Nature**” that was viewed as inclusive of all world views: In the conceptual framework of IPBES, the term ‘Nature’ includes scientific categories such as ‘biodiversity’; ‘ecosystems’; ‘ecosystem functioning’ as well as the concept of ‘Mother Earth’ that reflects the attitude or feeling in other world views that ‘the earth does not belong to me, but I belong to the earth – she is my mother’ (Latin America: “Pachamama”).
- c. And finally, what the scientific community defined as “**ecosystem goods and services**” was defined by other knowledge systems as “**nature’s gifts**”. Agreement was found that term “**Nature’s benefit to people**” was inclusive of the different world views.

Inclusive conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of the IPBES now is inclusive of different world views and clearly states that, and here I quote: “*Nature contributes to societies through the provision of benefits to people (...) and has its own intrinsic values, that is, the value inherent to nature, independent of human experience and evaluation and thus beyond the scope of anthropocentric valuation approaches.*”

Next steps

After clarifying the terminology, the next step that the Platform will take is to establish a task force in the next few months to work on *“procedures for and approaches to working with indigenous and local knowledge systems”*.

This task force will start piloting procedures and approaches for working with indigenous and local knowledge systems also into the IPBES methodological assessment on how to develop *“policy support tools and methodologies regarding the diverse conceptualization of values of biodiversity and nature’s benefits to people including ecosystem services”*.

Historical context

I believe however that these ongoing discussions in IPBES on the importance of considering different views about ‘pricing’ and ‘valuing’ are not new. Even natural scientists have been pointing towards this since quite a while. Albert Einstein (1879-1955) - a theoretical physicist – said, I quote: *“Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted”*. And in the 18th century, Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) - a scientist, inventor and politician – said, I quote: *“I conceive that the great part of the miseries of mankind are brought upon them by false estimates they have made of the value of things.”*

MOOC on the Economics of Land Degradation

I am certain that the international *"Massive Open Online Course on The Economics of Land Degradation"* (MOOC) has definitively the right academic set-up:

- a. to approach different world views on the "pricing" and "valuing" of the land's resources.
- b. to explore ways on how to include different knowledge systems and views on how to deal sustainably with the natural capital.
- c. And finally, to identify the indicators required at different times and spatial scales to assess achievements emerging from the consideration of diverse views on *"material and non-material values"* or - as termed in the conceptual framework of the IPBES - from *"spiritual inspiration to market value"*.

