

IPBES-6 HIGHLIGHTS: WEDNESDAY, 21 MARCH 2018

On Wednesday, IPBES-6 delegates started to consider the summary for policy makers for the thematic assessment on land degradation and restoration and discussed the review of the Platform.

The contact group on the regional assessment of biodiversity and ecosystem services in the Americas reconvened to resolve outstanding issues. The budget group continued its deliberations throughout the day.

Highlights of the day included the following:

- Three of the regional contact groups concluded their work in the late evening or early morning hours having worked through most of the night.
- The contact group on the Americas regional assessment concluded its work during lunch time, thus keeping the meeting on track to the public launch of four regional assessments on Friday.
- The contact group on the assessment on land degradation and restoration considered the SPM, including clarifications on infographics in the background section.
- Delegates discussed conclusions and lessons learned from the internal review of the Platform, including suggestions to improve the drafting process for SPMs and developing shorter SPMs with more effective messages.
- Five countries signed up to the Coalition of the Willing on Pollinators, an initiative established to develop follow-up actions based on the findings of the Thematic Assessment on Pollinators, Pollination and Food Production adopted at IPBES-4.

CONTACT GROUPS

LAND DEGRADATION AND RESTORATION: The Contact Group was co-chaired by Ivar Baste (Norway) and Fundisile Goodman Mketeni (South Africa). Assessment Co-Chair Bob Scholes (South Africa) reported that the assessment is a compilation of known science and does not contain new or surprising information.

In general statements, delegates asked for *inter alia*: a holistic approach to balance migration and restoration issues; inclusion of tables on research and knowledge gaps; and clarity on proposed confidence levels and baselines used. The contact group then began considering the background section of the SPM. On the definition of land degradation, delegates accepted that it refers to “human-caused” processes as laid out in the assessment’s scoping document.

Delegates discussed the role of agriculture as a driver of land degradation, and how to relate it to ecosystem transformation. Assessment Co-Chair Scholes clarified that the distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘transformed’ ecosystems implies the use of different biodiversity baselines.

Regarding a section on human-oriented production ecosystems resulting in losses of biodiversity and non-prioritized ecosystem services, delegates requested clarification on the meaning of “non-

prioritized” ecosystem services. Assessment Co-Chair Scholes explained that societies transform ecosystems for specific ecosystem services, such as food production, which may lead to a loss of other services, such as water storage.

Participants agreed that there is need to clarify how the terms ‘ecosystem services’ and ‘nature’s benefits to people’ are used in the assessment to avoid reopening discussions from earlier sessions. Co-Chair Scholes confirmed that the assessment uses mostly ecosystem services since this was the definition used in the scoping document. Delegates also noted that the use of the term Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) should be consistent with agreed use in the regional assessments.

In the afternoon, participants tackled the status and trends of drivers of land degradation. They inquired about the differences of baselines for the drivers and reported on underestimated data for some regions. Participants also noted that the regional representation used in the assessment could confuse policy makers, as they are not consistent with the assessment’s subregions.

On projected loss in global biodiversity by 2050 under a range of scenarios, delegates suggested clear definitions of terms, such as ‘managed’ forests and ‘urban’ encroachment; and to better describe ‘shared socioeconomic pathways,’ ‘mean species abundance’ and ‘functional diversity.’

On impacts on ecosystem functions, they discussed also referring to permafrost. On adverse effects on human well-being through the loss of ecosystem services, delegates refined language to refer to production of biomass rather than net primary production.

Participants addressed the definition of water security, ensuring that it is consistent with the regional assessments, as well as ways to attribute specific percentages of crop yield reductions to land degradation and climate change, respectively. They further discussed highlighting that soil fertility loss is mainly caused by soil acidification, salinization, and waterlogging.

The group also discussed human health impacts of land degradation, including that land degradation increases the number of people exposed to pollution in developing countries. Some suggested that the rates of pollution-related loss of life may be overstated in the background information. On the negative effects on cultural identity, they emphasized the need to be specific on how biodiversity loss and land degradation affect IPLCs.

The group also considered the inclusion of novel concepts that acknowledge that humans and ecosystems not only interact but are also mutually interdependent. To integrate ethics in governance, participants discussed whether, and in what form, to include references to ‘ecological solidarity,’ as enshrined in French law, as well as references to the rights of ‘Mother Earth,’ and the notion of ‘Buen Vivir’ as described in the constitutional frameworks of Bolivia and Ecuador, respectively.

REVIEW OF THE PLATFORM: This contact group, mandated to consider the internal and external review of IPBES, the second work programme, and the review of decisions pertaining to the Executive Secretary’s Report, was co-chaired by Robert Watson (UK) and Alfred Oteng-Yeboah (Ghana). The Secretariat introduced the review of the effectiveness of the administrative and scientific

functions of the Platform (IPBES/6/10), the report of the internal review team (IPBES/6/INF/32), and information on the selection of the review panel and an external professional organization (IPBES/6/INF/33).

Many participants welcomed the internal review, stressing that it portrays the need for increased integration and a better balance between the four IPBES functions. They noted the review lacks proper guidance on stakeholder engagement and communication. Some suggested it was hampered by a low response rate, while others noted it should clearly identify key challenges and lessons learned.

Several called for more timely contact between the experts and the focal points during the development of SPMs, with some pointing to the success of regional workshops. Some suggested sending SPM drafts to a few governments to get initial feedback, with many supporting a “co-creation process” in the development of the SPMs.

Delegates also supported a proposal for much shorter SPMs, with one preferring the summaries be less than six pages long, and others calling for short, simple, accessible, clear, relatable, informative, and punchy key messages. Some drew attention to the efficacy of bright, colorful diagrammatic messaging addressed to policy makers. Still others called for caution when translating the reports into other UN languages, noting that sometimes the essence is lost. Some suggested refining the purpose, structure, and focus of the policy catalogue, with others proposing that information from the four regional assessments and the land degradation and restoration assessment be included in the catalogue.

The group further underscored the importance of utilizing the internal review as the basis for the external review process, which, they discussed: is necessary for the development of the second work programme; will support the policy relevance of the Platform; should focus on all four IPBES functions; and must be independent, unbiased, and efficient. One delegation noted that the external review must begin before the commencement of any pending assessments or other activities, to which Co-Chair Watson clarified that the external review will start as soon as the new budget is approved.

On the draft decision, participants discussed a request to the Secretariat, the Bureau, and the Multidisciplinary Panel of Experts (MEP) to consider which issues and lessons learned can be addressed within the ongoing Work Programme. They further deliberated on requesting IPBES members and other stakeholders to promptly respond to invitations to contribute.

Co-Chair Watson appealed to governments and institutions to nominate experts with backgrounds in science and/or policy and urged those nominating experts to alert the Bureau of any barriers they face in the nomination process.

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AMERICAS REGIONAL ASSESSMENT: The contact group on the regional assessment for the Americas concluded its work, addressing pending issues, including editorial changes, substituting prescriptive language, and addressing questions around terminology.

IN THE CORRIDORS

IPBES-6 delegates worked hard all night to present IPBES Chair Bob Watson with a very special gift for his 70th birthday: the completion of negotiations on the four regional assessments, which substantially increased IPBES-6’s chance to “make history” and approve an unprecedented five assessment reports at a single meeting. In the morning, visibly exhausted participants “sleep walked” out of consultations into new contact groups to discuss the land degradation and restoration assessment, and the review of the Platform. Even though the late-night debates on regional assessments had evidently taken a toll on many, the contact group rooms were packed, which was interpreted as a sign of commitment to successfully deliver on IPBES’ ambitious work programme.

That this commitment must be pragmatic to ensure an uptake by policy makers was echoed by many, though different views emerged even over differentiating unsustainable from sustainable practices. “The point is quite simple,” one delegate said, “if unsustainable practices are problematic and contribute to land degradation, we need to provide policy makers with sustainable options.” Others cautioned, “generalizations and attributions of sustainable and unsustainable practices to specific sectors won’t be useful.”

Making effective use of assessments and meetings such as IPBES-6 was expressed during a lunch time signatory ceremony that added several new members to the Coalition for the Willing on Pollinators founded in 2016 as follow-up to the assessment on pollinators launched at IPBES-4. Several government representatives affirmed that “the Coalition has helped create partnerships, motivate national debates, and more importantly, inspire new national action programmes to protect pollinators.”

Motivated by these reports of positive impacts of the pollinators assessment, and conscious to avoid the specter of yet another late-night session, delegates returned to the afternoon contact group on land degradation and restoration with added resolve. “We should focus first on policy-relevant messages,” one delegate said, “for efficiency and adequate use of time.” Many also expressed intolerance for reopening already agreed text on definitions, and unsurprisingly, ‘nature’s contributions to people,’ ‘ecosystem services,’ and ‘biocapacity’ stood out as possible contentious issues. Not wanting to stir things up, delegates demonstrated great restraint and goodwill, agreeing to have footnotes or explanations on the use of these terms in the assessment. One delegate voiced surprise at “how easy that went.”

Meanwhile, the review of the Platform and discussions on the second work programme got off to a somewhat rocky start. Speaking in a room just shy of being standing-room only, non-English speaking participants expressed their disappointment that the important issues under discussions had not been accorded interpretation services. “Language is becoming more and more political in this process, it seems,” confided one delegate standing in a long line to return his translation headset.

Throughout the day and reminiscent of comments heard during the regional assessments discussions, the venue halls echoed words such as “short,” “punchy,” and “clear” in relation to an ideal summary for policy makers.

As work progressed into the evening once more, most messages became simpler, as delegates turned what one delegate referred to as “long-winded and obfuscating” statements into policy-friendly ones.