

## IPBES – the Birth Pangs of a New Assessment Process

Jerry Harrison



Defra's Chief Scientist Bob Watson chairing the first session of the plenary meeting in Nairobi, supported by staff of the United Nations Environment Programme.

For years the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has played a significant role in moving concerns about climate change higher up the political agenda. Over time this has amply demonstrated the potential value of conducting scientific assessments, the outcomes of which are endorsed and subsequently used by governments. It was in recognition of the valuable role that the IPCC has played that led Jacques Chirac, the then President of France, to call for a similar mechanism for biodiversity and ecosystem services.<sup>3</sup>

However intergovernmental processes move slowly, and although President Chirac made his original call in 2005, it was not until governments met in Busan in the Republic of Korea in June 2010 that they finally agreed that an Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) should indeed be established 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”.<sup>4</sup>

However this is not the end of the road, as governments still need to agree exactly how to ‘operationalize’ IPBES. What form will the platform take, and what exactly will its functions be? What principles and procedures will guide its operations? Which United Nations bodies will host the platform, and where will its secretariat be located? What form will its programme of work take, and what will the budget be? It is to answer these questions that a meeting was convened in Nairobi during the first week of October, with a concluding session planned for April 2012.

<sup>3</sup> This call was made during an address to the international conference “Biodiversity: Science and Governance” which took place at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, in January 2005

<sup>4</sup> The report of this meeting, the “Busan Outcome” can be found at [www.ipbes.net/images/stories/documents/K1061514\\_IPBES-3-3-REPORT.pdf](http://www.ipbes.net/images/stories/documents/K1061514_IPBES-3-3-REPORT.pdf), with pages 5-7 of this document being the critical ones

Much has been written in academic journals on what IPBES could, should and might do,<sup>5, 6, 7, 8, 9</sup> but in fact remarkably little has yet been finally decided upon. The key basis for discussion is direction provided by the Busan Outcome, which outlines in general terms what the Platform might do, and establishes a number of characteristics or principles concerning how it should operate (for example, building on existing initiatives, being scientifically independent and ensuring credibility, relevance and legitimacy, using transparent and scientifically credible processes, and so on). The purpose of the meeting in Nairobi in early October was to discuss these issues further, and to begin to take the necessary decisions.

In fact the only set of decisions that the Nairobi meeting had to take were those concerning the process and criteria for selecting which UN body (or bodies) would host the platform and the physical location of the secretariat, and processes are now established for this. It was also agreed to establish intersessional processes for review of both the rules of procedure and the work programme, so that governments can make further input to development of these areas before the meeting in April next year, paving the way for decision at that meeting.

At present four main programme elements are anticipated, covering knowledge generation, assessment, delivery of policy support and capacity building. Initial discussion both in Nairobi and in some of the earlier meetings has demonstrated a widely held view on the importance of capacity building, and how promoting and supporting assessment work at sub-global levels can draw on and contribute to global assessments at the same time as supporting policy development and decision taking at local and national levels. One of the key areas of discussion at the next meeting will be on the balance between the different elements of the work programme, and on the mechanisms for delivery of the work programme.

<sup>5</sup> Larigauderie, A., H.A. Mooney. 2010. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services: Moving a step closer to an IPCC-like mechanism for biodiversity. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 2: 9–14

<sup>6</sup> Görg, C., C. Neßhöver, A. Paulsch. 2010. A new link between biodiversity science and policy. *GIA* 19: 183–186

<sup>7</sup> Vohland, K., M.C. Mlambo, L.D. Horta, B. Jonsson, A. Paulsch, S.i. Martinez. 2011. How to ensure a credible and efficient IPBES? *Environmental Science and Policy* In Press, doi: 10.1016/j.envsci.2011.08.005

<sup>8</sup> Perrings, C., A. Duraipapp, A. Larigauderie, H. Mooney. 2011. The biodiversity and ecosystem services science-policy interface. *Science* 331(6021): 1139-1140 doi: 10.1126/science.1202400

<sup>9</sup> Koetz, T., K.N. Farrell, P. Bridgewater. 2011. Building better science-policy interfaces for international environmental governance: assessing potential within the Intergovernmental Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics*. In press. Doi: 10.1007/s10784-011-9152-z

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Meanwhile on the other areas of discussion in Nairobi there were exchanges of views, and a certain amount of text encapsulating these views was agreed, but essentially the discussion will continue at the next meeting. These areas of discussion include the best way to legally establish IPBES, and the functions and structures of bodies that might be established under the platform. It was felt by a number of participants that this second area could not really be concluded until there was greater clarity on the IPBES work programme, which is one of the reasons why there was reluctance to take a decision.

While the discussions in Nairobi were primarily intergovernmental in nature, this does not mean that scientists and other stakeholders did not make input. Participants included the International Council for Science (ICSU), the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and many other organizations. In addition the scientific advisory bodies of a number of the global biodiversity-related agreements were represented, and a significant number of national government delegations included scientists. In addition ICSU and IUCN facilitated a stakeholder discussion on the day before the meeting started, and conveyed to governments the strong message that a future IPBES would need to embrace mechanisms that ensured full stakeholder participation.

While the next meeting is not until next April, the work continues. This includes not only the intersessional reviews on the rules of procedure and the work programme referred to above, but also further international expert meetings are anticipated. It is also likely that governments in a number of countries will organize stakeholder meetings such as the one organized by the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) last July.<sup>10</sup> In addition both ICSU and IUCN are expected to convene further discussion on the role of key stakeholders in advance of the next meeting.

While this may seem to many to be an interminable process, it is important to recognise the advances that have been made. It was clear from the mood of the Nairobi meeting that governments want IPBES to happen, and that the issues are now more to do with means of implementation. There is also clear recognition of the important contribution that can be made by a wide range of stakeholders, including those already working on initiatives that IPBES would be expected to build on. Again the issue is working out exactly how such relationships would work. Now is the time for those of us expecting to contribute to a future IPBES to be discussing such issues, in preparation for the meeting next April.

<sup>10</sup> For the report of the meeting see [jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-5871](http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-5871)

So with that in mind you might well ask why IPBES might be important for you. I would hope that you were already well aware of the importance and value of using science to effectively inform policymaking, and the need to improve the interface between the two. Hopefully IPBES will be able to draw on BES members as contributing authors, reviewers and communicators in global, regional and thematic assessments. Hopefully it will help to identify the research that is needed by policy makers and to catalyse funding. Hopefully it will promote coordination and better networking of existing initiatives, including improving access to knowledge that already exists.

It is also intended that IPBES will promote and support capacity building. Many of you will have recently been involved in the UK National Ecosystem Assessment,<sup>11</sup> and will have seen some of the impact that this is beginning to have on policy discussions. Experience of national monitoring and assessment is something that the UK is well placed to communicate to others, and many countries are crying out for such support. It is important therefore not only to consider your potential contributions through research, but also through demonstration, training, and sharing lessons learnt.

I therefore encourage you to consider how a future IPBES might be relevant to your work, and where appropriate engage with discussion on its future potential.

For those interested in tracking this process the IPBES website ([www.ipbes.net](http://www.ipbes.net)) is the most definitive source of information. JNCC has a role in coordinating stakeholder engagement on behalf of UK government and summary information about IPBES and notifications of future stakeholder consultations can be found on the JNCC website ([jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-5869](http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-5869)). There are also pages on IPBES on the DIVERSITAS and IUCN websites.<sup>12</sup>



Jerry Harrison is Head of Development at the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre, which is based in Cambridge. He has been directly involved in IPBES discussions to date, including leading preparation of several of the documents which have informed the discussion.

<sup>11</sup> See [uknea.unep-wcmc.org](http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org)

<sup>12</sup> See [www.diversitas-international.org/activities/assessment/ipbes](http://www.diversitas-international.org/activities/assessment/ipbes) and [www.iucn.org/about/work/programmes/ecosystem\\_management/ipbes/](http://www.iucn.org/about/work/programmes/ecosystem_management/ipbes/)