

Brief for GSDR 2015

Powerful International Science – Policy Interfaces for Sustainable Development: organise their proliferation, accept and clarify their political role

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Introduction

This contribution builds upon IDDRI's experience in supporting negotiations about the establishment of international science-policy interfaces like IPBES¹, and on recent publications and workshops intending to take stock of the variety of science-policy interfaces having emerged for the international governance of the environment or other sustainable development objectives like food security.

Organizing the proliferation

International Science-Policy Interfaces (ISPIs) are proliferating in the various regimes of international governance of sustainable development (scientific advisory bodies, IPCC², IPBES, World Water Assessment Programme, High level panel of experts for Food security and nutrition, Assessment of Assessments [AoA] for the marine environment, panels on soils at FAO or for the UNCCD³...).

Their multiplication is often based on the replication of successful mechanisms or experiences, used as references : the IPCC in general, but also the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment for IPBES; other main references are the role played by science in addressing long range trans-boundary air pollution (LRTAP / Acid rain), tropospheric ozone depletion (Montreal protocol), or environmental issues in the Mediterranean (Barcelona Convention). There is a genealogy underpinning the multiplication of ISPIs (Integrated assessment modeling exercises, story and simulation approaches, key research institutions and personalities).

But recent experiences and publications put the stress on the specific political context and specific structure of academic and epistemic communities in each field, showing that the role of science has to be analysed specifically in each case. The following recommendations can be made:

- It is useful to seek synergies and coordination, in order to avoid duplication among ISPIs.
- The role of science in each field has to be identified specifically: an existing ISPI should not be directly substituted to the expected function in another field, neither can the model of an existing ISPI be directly replicated in another field.
- Having identified a specific need for scientific expertise in an international policy process should not necessarily lead to the institutionalisation and the design of a new ISPI. Empowering existing academic arenas and coordinating partial, scattered existing mechanisms should also be considered valid options.
- Drawing lessons from experiences of ISPIs in other fields is useful and should be organised, without leading to direct replication.

Accepting and clarifying the power of ISPIs comes first, before ensuring their efficiency

Current discussions about ISPIs are centred around efficiency improvements and optimal institutional design. But institutional design should only come after the identification of the function that is expected from scientific expertise in the specific area under consideration.

The reference models of successful ISPIs have to be put into perspective, as they often refer to

¹ Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

² Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

³ United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

situations where the key role played by science was to put a new environmental problem on the agenda (for instance, for LRTAP or Montreal protocol).

The IPCC, in particular Working Group I on climate science, has been seen as a reference, for their efficient process of clarification of climate change and its anthropogenic cause. It is therefore considered as the ideal model: scientists should reach consensus and clarify residual uncertainties in order to impact decision makers. Efficiency is then a question of: (i) ensuring good quality standards for the production of “sound science”; and (ii) improving communication channels and mechanisms to reach policy makers. However, this perspective is only relevant: (i) for experimental sciences and biophysical phenomena; and (ii) if the objective is to put an environmental issue on the agenda.

For many other scientific fields and policy contexts, controversies are inevitable (whenever it comes to social changes, development pathways, and to social sciences or economics), and they cannot and should not be reduced to consensus. For many decisions, the role of science is not anymore in agenda setting, but rather on comparing policy options, as in Working Group III of IPCC.

For food security, the critical function of science lies more in the evaluation of the performance of policies than in agenda setting. Such an evaluation role of science will be all the more critical when the focus comes down from international regulations to evaluating domestic policies, which raises the question of the legitimacy of ISPIs for such a function.

The following recommendations can be made:

- The political function of science should be acknowledged, particularly as it should not be reduced to producing biophysical scientific evidences for the only purpose of agenda setting.
- The role of science, and the function of ISPIs has to be considered as strategic, in so far as knowledge production ensured in these arenas has a key role to play in advocating for changes in current policies, by, *inter alia*:
 - assessing the current state of a problem;

- evaluating the performance of existing or possible policy options;
- evaluating the costs (economic, but also social, environmental, political costs) of different options, and the distribution of these costs among the different negotiating parties or non-negotiating stakeholders;
- closing controversies when possible;
- re-opening the range of possible options;
- re-framing the formulation of a problem to include dimensions that are not enough taken into account,

This first list of possible functions illustrates that there are a diversity of possible strategic roles of science. They have to be identified carefully, to clarify how the legitimacy of science to play such strategic roles can be ensured.

- The role of science is therefore of a political nature, but it will never be to impose any decision calculated as optimal, which would substitute to the negotiation process. Science should not be expected to take over the responsibility of political decision-makers and negotiators. Improving the legitimacy of ISPIs is important, and can necessitate pluralism, or even the participation of a variety of stakeholders because they hold a key component of relevant knowledge, as is the case in IPBES. However such a “democratisation” process in the field of knowledge production should never result in its substitution to political decision making.
- Common criteria used to assess the efficiency of ISPIs (credibility, legitimacy, relevance) are very useful tools to improve the capacity of science or of the corresponding ISPI, but only once the strategic role of science has been clarified.

Depending on the context and the expected function, credibility should not directly be reduced only to quality processes to ensure “sound science”. It can be linked to the organisation of a pluralistic academic debate among different worldviews (for instance, in economics, about the impacts of trade liberalisation on socio-economic development), showing both convergences and divergences in the existing scientific production. It

would not be science's role to substitute for the political choice by a false consensus.

Independence from any mandatory body, be it national or international, can be a very important criterion to ensure some of the strategic functions science could play (the capacity to re-open the range of possible options, for instance, necessitates that the mandate of an ISPI is not too narrowly defined by its mandatory body), and it would increase its credibility and also its legitimacy. But in some intergovernmental negotiation processes, legitimacy might need to be ensured through some kind of intergovernmental designation of experts, and relevance might necessitate some definition of the mandate by an intergovernmental process.

In every specific context, it is thus necessary first to analyse and specify the strategic function that is expected from science, or from an ISPI if considered necessary, in order to clarify its political role, and to address specifically how to ensure or improve credibility, legitimacy and

relevance, with respect to the specific expected strategic function.

Issues for further consideration/Key messages

- It is not just *efficient* but really *powerful* science-policy interfaces that are needed for the international governance of sustainable development: ensuring they can have power, in a legitimate and efficient way, is more than a question of institutional design.
- The international community should endorse the necessity to empower each ISPI with a strategic and political role, although this role differs depending on the issue at stake. A process should be launched to enable to specify this strategic role in each case and at the same time draw relevant lessons from other experiences without replicating one-size-fits-all models.

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