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IPBES: politically relevant? Let's try it!

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The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) is entering a new phase of its existence and is settling into the institutional landscape. In parallel to considerations about this institution as an intergovernmental body (its approach, its comprising social groups, and ideological and epistemological fault lines...), it is now time to examine IPBES as a political actor: what changes is it likely to foster, what discussions on political and economic choices can it launch? what impacts can be expected?

“Policy relevant but not policy prescriptive”: let’s take IPBES at its word

When addressing the issue of the political scope of IPBES expertise, one of the most often read or heard expressions is that the platform must be “policy relevant but not policy prescriptive”. Admittedly, the observations, options for action and other statements that are contained within the scientific literature cannot explicitly *demand* action on the part of states. This operating principle is understandable^[1]: it is a demarcation that is being constantly renegotiated (informally) between a synthesis of available knowledge and what is a matter for decision-making, and thus of political responsibility^[2]. It also avoids interfering with the mandates of the various multilateral agreements^[3]. Some see it as a legitimate distribution of power, which notably avoids giving the impression that the scientific community dictates to sovereign governments on what actions should be taken, especially as this community is still dominated by the North through the power of numbers and research resources. Others instead see it as a way to control “the representation of the problem” as produced by experts, thus enabling the avoidance of subjects that overtly challenge political responsibility (or that of certain states, or of the interests of their economic leaders). Nevertheless, the mission of IPBES is 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*” and produce “politically relevant” information for this purpose^[4]. We can then, somehow, “take IPBES at its word”, acknowledging that its opinions should not prescribe policies, but that they should be “relevant” for policy making.

Policies and their contradictions should be integrated as a study topic

It must be acknowledged that the IPBES pollination report is a comprehensive synthesis on the subject, particularly from the perspective of the knowledge of natural sciences, and the fact that the summary for policymakers has been unanimously approved by delegations gives it an undeniable legitimacy. In particular, it describes the main phenomena threatening pollinators and sets out in black and white the impact of land-use change and the intensification of agricultural practices, including the use of pesticides. It even goes so far as to indicate that the solutions to fight against threats involve the use of alternative agricultural production models. What then does it lack that could make it more “politically relevant”? It could, in the opinion of the authors, better reflect the knowledge about the functioning of human societies – their institutions, economies and public policies. In particular, it is striking that the report only touches on actions, technical choices and sectoral policies, even though they underlie the trends described and there is no shortage of literature about these subjects. However, like all environmental issues, biodiversity issues are primarily the product of human collective action, and in particular of certain development choices. Similarly, effectively addressing these problems is primarily a question of collective action. Thus, this early work of the IPBES lacks information about the social, economic and political choices that explain these problems and trends. Finally, it lacks the integration of the data available on public policies and on the conflicts between them. For example, at no time does the analysis provide a synthesis of knowledge on economic and regulatory incentives, and in particular on subsidies, which nevertheless form an essential backdrop to

its political relevance. It should be emphasized that the mission of IPBES is to synthesize the available knowledge on the issues it is tasked with. There exists much scientific literature on sectoral policies, legal and economic instruments, and their evaluation. Synthesizing this knowledge would not imply the need to issue policy prescriptions, and would ensure that actions carried out by IPBES remained confined within the defined limits, the so-called “political relevance”. At the same time it would enable the identification of avenues for more tangible public action, and provide a “legitimized” state of knowledge on the effectiveness of the environmental commitments of the world’s governments. This last point clearly crystallizes the potential difficulties implied by the further study of the policies within an intergovernmental framework such as IPBES. Without even needing to address “prescription”, such syntheses would speak for themselves. Their critical potential would of course make these subjects more sensitive. However, if we want to perform the correct diagnosis and give a chance to biodiversity, addressing these topics seems an obligatory gateway. As for the climate^[5], especially after the Paris Agreement, the challenge for biodiversity is found primarily in the implementation of the decisions taken in its favour in sustainable development policies. This requires interdisciplinary knowledge of a new kind to accompany, critically if necessary, this implementation. IPBES, through its call for diverse perspectives and the proactive mobilization of human and social sciences by its leaders^[6], is a historic tool to meet this challenge. If, however, as some may fear for the IPCC^[7], these important issues remained “stifled” by the intergovernmental nature of IPBES, it would then be necessary to deal with them elsewhere.

[1] [Fondation pour la recherche sur la biodiversité : 4eme session plénière de l'IPBES : récit et bilan](#)
 [2] See [Le groupe d'experts intergouvernemental sur l'évolution du climat, ou les défis d'un mariage arrangé entre science et politique](#). [3] See [Functions, operating principles and institutional arrangements of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services \[PDF - 184 Mo\]](#) [4] See footnote 2. [5] See article in *Science* : [The IPCC at a crossroads: Opportunities for reform](#) [6] See article in *Nature* [Biodiversity assessments: IPBES reaches out to social scientists](#) [7] See article in *Nature* [Climate change: Embed the social sciences in climate policy](#)
