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IPBES: a biodiversity platform in need of support

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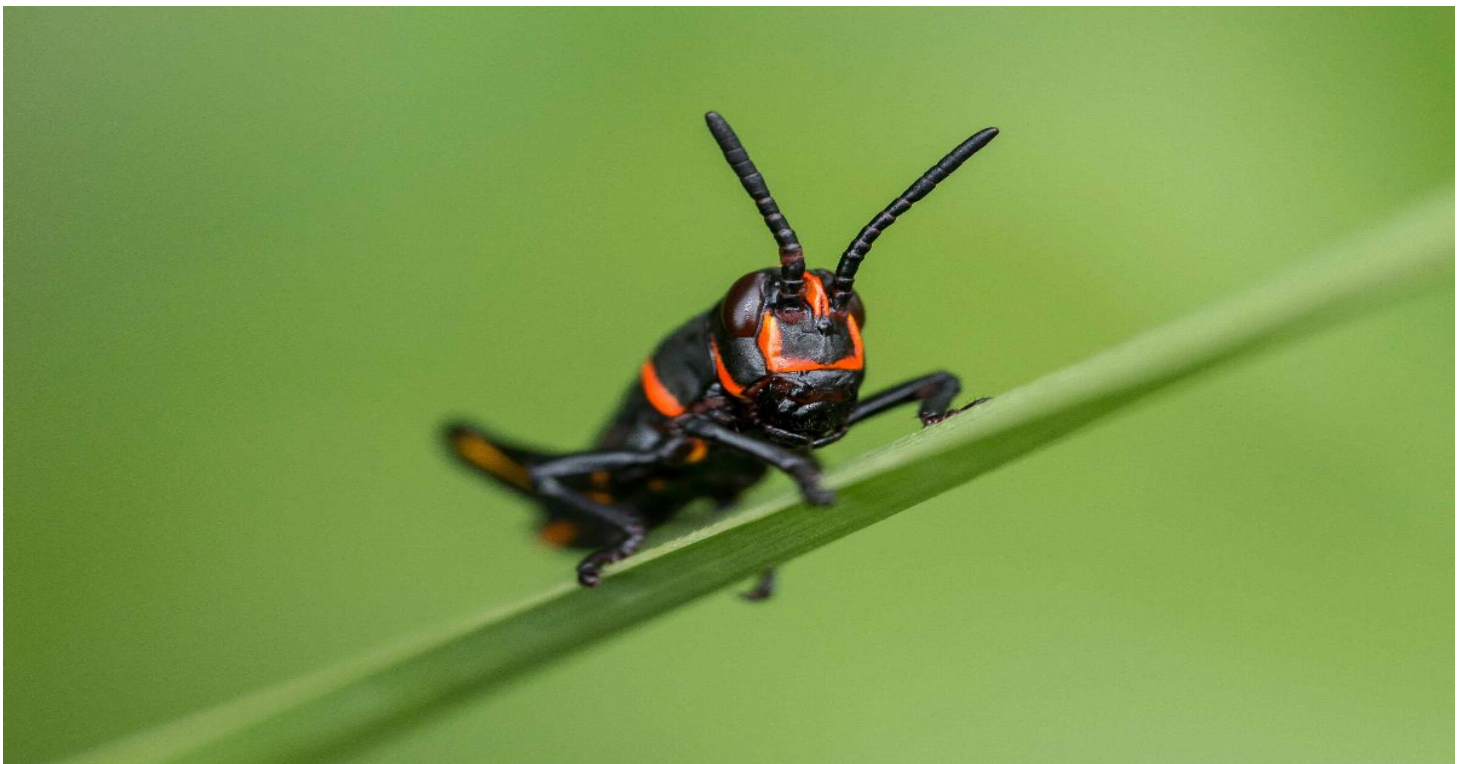
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The Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) published its first assessments in 2016, and is currently finalizing no less than five assessments to be presented for the approval of member states in 2018. However, despite the significance of its work, IPBES has not received support commensurate to the task that it was assigned to by governments. Mobilising resources to support the platform's varied activities is vital for the completion of its work, but is also an important way to dissipate some counter-productive political tensions between its member states.

The Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), a young diplomatic and scientific institution, is an indispensable tool to synthesize ongoing work [on the causes and consequences of biodiversity loss](#). But it also synthesizes scientific work on possible ways to halt biodiversity erosion, notably through public policy, and integrate biodiversity concerns into socio-economic strategies. In the same vein as the IPCC, IPBES brings together thousands of experts from around the world to work on producing large-scale assessments, at the continental or global levels, intended to be adopted by governments and inform national and international political processes. Held in March 2017, the last annual plenary meeting of IPBES attended by the 126 member States in Bonn was high on emotion. While significant progress was noted on certain aspects of the work programme, discussions around the platform's budget were so fraught that the week could have ended in catastrophe. This is a recurrent problem since IPBES' establishment, which suffers from a systemic funding problem: only twenty member states —essentially developed countries — contribute to its budget. This has led to three major obstacles in the platform's functioning.

Budgetary problems: a systemic issue and source of numerous tensions

Firstly, weak financial support for IPBES has naturally led to significant difficulty in completing its [2014-2018](#) work programme. No less than three assessments are now pending due to potential budgetary shortfall. They pertain to crucial global biodiversity aspects such as the impact of invasive species, as well as combatting practices that hinder the sustainable use of biodiversity (such as illegal poaching which is causing the destruction of elephant, rhinoceros, pangolin and so many other species). It is important to note that the work programme was collectively discussed, planned out and adopted unanimously by the member states in December 2013. Despite this awareness of the task at hand, voluntary contributions to the (well-known) budget requirements have fallen short. Secondly, this situation has contributed to rising tensions and created an environment of mistrust between donor and non-donor countries. Donor countries, which are increasingly showing their discontent at having to bear the financial burden in isolation, are being suspected of wanting to cut down on the platform's ambitious scope. On the other hand, non-donor member States, which include some major developing countries, are being accused of unreasonable expectations leading to an inflation of IPBES' work programme. As a result, budgetary considerations continually interfered with other items of discussion, creating an environment which was not conducive to constructive debate. Lastly, this imbalanced budgetary arrangement makes the platform vulnerable to skewed balances of power to the point of upsetting negotiations. This year, the American delegation, [which explicitly cited the Trump administration](#) in their arguments, put forth extremely tough positions. They tabled propositions that could have paralysed IPBES next year or even, in our view, put its medium-term existence into question. Given the experience of previous years, the other delegations seem to have come with relatively clear instructions. On the one hand, donor countries hinted at domestic budgetary austerity in order to indicate their inability to unilaterally increase their contributions. On the other hand, some non-donor countries defended the position that only developed countries should contribute to the budget. In all logic, relatively few protests could emerge from this tense environment against the American delegation's proposals; the other countries were kind of trapped in their positions. Thanks to the work of IPBES officials (bureau and secretariat), a "survival" budget was nevertheless adopted for the upcoming year, but the March 2018 discussions already promise to be difficult. We can no longer abide by such a situation. First of all, it must be underscored that the IPBES work programme, laid out and adopted by scientists and diplomats, was ambitious precisely because biodiversity is in grave danger. The populations of several species are declining and the current rate of species extinction is estimated to be [up to 1000 times higher than the average natural background rate](#). In this context, we still lack a comprehensive assessment of the symptoms and impacts of what is increasingly being referred to as the sixth mass extinction.

Reinforcing mobilisation for the IPBES and biodiversity protection

The lack of support for IPBES reflects a general lack of budgetary allocations to biodiversity-oriented policies. Depending on the sources and methodologies used, some financial estimates of the gap in biodiversity funding arrive at a 1:20 ratio (20 billion USD of actual expenditure towards the implementation of global objectives, against a requirement of 450 billion USD); while others arrive at a ratio of [1:3](#) (50 billion USD actual expenditure against a 150 billion USD requirement). The budget of IPBES is orders of magnitude smaller. The entire budget required to cover its 2012-2020 activities is around 50 million Euros, with only 3 million Euros required to fund most of its needs for the year 2018. By way of comparison, one could consider [the costs of a single G8/G7 or G20 summit](#) (estimated to run into several tens or even hundreds of millions of Euros) or the search for life in outer space (Europe is contributing 1.3 billion Euros to the [ExoMars](#) programme). All this while scientists have still not comprehensively described all life forms on Earth! More countries must contribute to supporting IPBES, within their respective means. Stakeholders involved at various levels with the issue of biodiversity must mobilise and take action. They could, for instance, contact their respective [National Focal Points](#) to IPBES to identify what they can do, and how they can contribute to a renewed dynamism for IPBES.

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