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# If at first you don't succeed: Evaluating stakeholder engagement in global environmental assessments

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### ABSTRACT

Engagement with numerous stakeholder groups is increasingly popular in global environmental assessment (GEA) processes. This paper explores to what extent stakeholder engagement has been successful in a few selected GEAs, focusing on major limitations and downsides of particular methods for stakeholder engagement. This addresses a gap in the literature regarding the empirical analysis of different direct and indirect practical implications of stakeholder engagement methods. Exploring these implications is necessary to appropriately evaluate both the methods and the objectives for stakeholder engagement. Our cases are (1) the regional consultations for UNEP's Fifth Global Environment Outlook, (2) its Summary for Policy Makers negotiations, and (3) the Summary for Policy Makers negotiations of the Working Group III contribution to the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report. The qualitative evaluation of these cases draws on 99 interviews with GEA authors, government representatives and other stakeholders to identify challenges to successful stakeholder engagement in GEAs. As an outlook, we highlight three promising options to improve engagement: (a) organization via a Multi-Stakeholder Advisory Body, (b) finding place for deliberation and negotiation in producing the Summary for Policy Makers, and (c) co-producing multiple summaries targeting specific target audiences jointly with these stakeholders. This article is part of a special issue on solution-oriented global environmental assessments.

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## 1. Introduction

Global environmental assessments (GEAs) are one of the most elaborate mechanisms to formally organize and integrate knowledge on the drivers, impacts and potential solutions of global environmental problems, striving to inform environmental governance at multiple scales (Berkes et al., 2006; Clark et al., 2006; Mitchell et al., 2006; Díaz et al., 2015). GEA processes present an unparalleled opportunity to bring together a necessarily diverse group of actors at the science-policy interface which can contribute to a broad array of benefits. Four prominent objectives for stakeholder engagement in GEAs were distilled from the literature (and are discussed in more depth in Supp. Mat. 1). The first objective is to enable different individuals or groups to provide information to the assessment from diverse viewpoints, including from multiple scientific domains, different knowledge systems and

also from the perspectives of decision-makers and others who use GEA outputs (Ludwig, 2001; Watson, 2005; Berkes et al., 2006; Fabricius et al., 2006; Mitchell et al., 2006; Norgaard, 2008; Reed, 2008; O'Faircheallaigh, 2010; Vohland et al., 2011; Ford et al., 2012; Dietz, 2013; Díaz et al., 2015). Engaging with different actors can improve communication, for example by translating the main messages and findings of an assessment into terms those same actors find comprehensible, salient and legitimate (Andonova, 2006; Clark et al., 2006; Fabricius et al., 2006; Reed, 2008; Leemans, 2008; Koetz et al., 2012; Field and Barros, 2015). Fostering a dialogue between different groups can help to address contested issues in a more explicit and transparent manner while building up trust and can enable learning among all actors involved (Wiklund, 2005; Berkes et al., 2006; Clark et al., 2006; Siebenhüner, 2006; Norgaard, 2008; Reed, 2008; Stirling, 2008; Renn and Schweizer, 2009; Vohland et al., 2011; Dietz, 2013; Díaz et al., 2015). Finally, engaging with diverse actors encourages them to build a sense of ownership over the assessment process and products, which is seen as closely related to improving its influence

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(Agrawala, 1998; Clark et al., 2006; Mitchell et al., 2006; Reid et al., 2006; Leemans, 2008; Field and Barros, 2015).

However, despite demands for more inclusive stakeholder engagement in assessment-making (e.g. Andonova, 2006; Berkes et al., 2006; Reed, 2008; Dietz, 2013), many risks, challenges and fears remain unresolved and can be exacerbated at the global scale. Some research has pointed out concerns that engaging with non-scientific actors may, for instance, diminish scientific credibility (e.g. Berkes et al., 2006; Clark et al., 2006). Engaging with stakeholders might hinder progress if conflicting interests are not appropriately dealt with, and the process risks becoming mired in disagreements (O'Faircheallaigh, 2010; Edwards, 2012). Moreover, stakeholder engagement in GEAs is very costly and is often designed without adequate reflection, increasing the chance that these risks and fears will be realized and that participants will feel let down by the process and its promises (Rayner, 2003; Reed, 2008).

The success or failure of stakeholder engagement in GEAs can have impacts beyond the assessment process itself. One significant example is the relevance of participation in GEA processes to broader debates on the politics involved in encouraging and evaluating knowledge exchange and integration in environmental management and other fields (Scoones, 2009; Koetz et al., 2012; Fazey et al., 2014). Knowledge exchange is a pervasive and fundamental characteristic of GEAs, taking place between different scientific domains but also including non-scientific knowledge in some cases, for example indigenous knowledge systems or experiential knowledge (Berkes et al., 2006). The unavoidable entanglement of facts and values, which occurs in particular in solution-oriented GEAs, mean that interactions between and amongst expert and 'lay' participants are inevitably highly politicized (Scoones, 2009; Koetz et al., 2012). GEAs present a unique set of circumstances that can potentially foster more democratic relationships between diverse stakeholder groups at multiple scales, acknowledging the value-laden nature of scientific expertise (Norgaard, 2008; Kowarsch et al., 2014; Ch.3), bringing in additional viewpoints (Bäckstrand, 2003) and adding value to information (Fabricius et al., 2006). While this runs the risk of increasing the complexity of the process significantly as opposed to work done in smaller, homogenous groups, it also has the potential to enable deliberative policy learning processes, inter alia increasing transparency and accountability in governance (Kowarsch et al., 2016) and facilitating a shift in beliefs about the rationales for policy choices based on knowledge exchange and experience as well as scientific analysis (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013).

In light of the tension between the various benefits and risks of stakeholder engagement in GEAs, a rigorous approach to evaluating whether it lives up to its potential, and under which conditions, is crucial. This will not only serve to improve engagement in GEAs but also addresses broader concerns over the legitimacy and inclusiveness of participation in environmental policy processes and the very political nature of related knowledge production. Thus, the overarching question this paper addresses is: to what extent can stakeholder engagement in selected GEAs be deemed successful? More precisely: what major problems (in terms of effectiveness and unwanted side effects) do different actors perceive with regards to specific stakeholder engagement activities in GEA process?

This paper employs the term 'stakeholder' to refer to those who are functionally involved in a GEA process as well as GEA target audiences. We define the term stakeholder engagement as encompassing the myriad ways in which different individuals interact in some way in the social process of producing a GEA, ranging from scoping meetings to author meetings to consultations on specific topics or questions to name but a few. Wherever

possible, we specify which groups of stakeholders and which precise method of stakeholder engagement we refer to throughout the paper.

Given the high demand for, but also the difficulties of, stakeholder engagement in GEAs, there is still surprisingly little critical reflection on its relative success. The well-known Harvard GEA Project provided important insights into GEAs occurring before 2005 (e.g., Clark et al., 2006). However, a significant number of solution-oriented and other GEAs have been released in the intervening years (Kowarsch et al., 2014; Ch.2). Academic reflection on these more recent processes is lacking, in particular on questions regarding their engagement of stakeholders. When it comes to ex post evaluation of methods for engaging with stakeholders, considerably less research has focused on assessments at the global scale as compared to national or sub-national assessments. What research has been conducted (e.g., Andonova, 2006; Berkes et al., 2006; Scoones, 2009; Edwards, 2012) has not sufficiently explored the various practical implications of methods for stakeholder engagement in a systematic manner, in particular from the perspectives of those involved. Examining these implications from the point of view of the participants themselves is crucial for such discussions since the legitimacy of the process, and by extension its evaluation, is above all a matter of perspective, or in the words of Clark et al., of "attributions" (2006, pp.16).

Sect. 2 describes the cases being examined, namely the regional consultations in UNEP's Fifth Global Environment Outlook (GEO-5) and the Summary for Policy Makers (SPM) negotiations in GEO-5 and in the Working Group III contribution to IPCC AR5 (WGIII IPCC AR5), as well as the methods employed for evaluation. In Sect. 3, the three cases are critically evaluated in light of the objectives for stakeholder engagement drawn from the literature and confirmed in interviews, highlighting prominent challenges perceived by diverse stakeholders. Sect. 4 briefly presents three hypotheses in the form of promising options for overcoming the prominent challenges and the paper concludes in Sect. 5.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Selection of GEAs and stakeholder engagement cases

Cases of stakeholder engagement were selected from two different GEAs. We chose GEO-5 because it is UNEP's flagship assessment series, it is the most comprehensive assessment of global environmental change with regards to scope currently available, and it stresses the engagement of stakeholders. Moreover, the emphasis GEO-5 placed on the exploration of potential solutions makes it even more interesting with regards to stakeholder engagement. IPCC AR5 was chosen because it is arguably the most well-known example of a GEA today, and has acted as a model for many other GEAs. The focus is on WGIII since it deals with potential solution spaces, which increases both the potential and the challenges for stakeholder engagement, inter alia due to the higher number and diversity of concrete stakes involved.

The cases selected for evaluation are the GEO-5 regional consultations and the SPM negotiations in GEO-5 and IPCC WGIII AR5. We look at the regional consultations because they provide a window into how a broader diversity of stakeholders (beyond scientists acting as individuals and government representatives) can be engaged in GEA content development. We investigate the SPM negotiations in both GEO-5 and IPCC WGIII AR5 because these negotiations are central to most intergovernmental GEA processes, where a highly visible and authoritative summary is jointly produced by policy-makers and scientists. Furthermore, oftentimes tensions which have built up over the course of the GEA process come to a head during SPM negotiations which is highly interesting when evaluating the engagement of stakeholders. The

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