Accommodating consensus and diversity in environmental knowledge production: Achieving closure through typologies in IPBES

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ABSTRACT

How can a diversity of perspectives be accommodated in scientific and political consensus on environmental issues? This paper adopts a science and technology studies (STS) approach to examine how the pursuit of consensus-based knowledge and diverse participation, as seemingly contradictory commitments, have been converted into practice in the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). Through a series of negotiations, these commitments have been translated into a set of situated practices that now dominate this expert panel. Consensus has been achieved through the pursuit of closure, in which meetings of expert and administrator groups produce texts, tables and images that stabilise ostensibly collective decisions. Within this framework, diverse perspectives have been accommodated through the production of typologies, such as lists of comparable options, which allow for the coexistence and commensurability of a range of knowledges and experts. However there is a politics to typologies, which requires specific attention to how decisions are made (deliberation), who participates in them (participation), and the extent to which these participants are representative of broader knowledge and policy communities (representation). While the potential of typologies to accommodate consensus and diversity offers the hope of realising 'unity in diversity' for both environmental knowledge and policy, recognising the politics of their production is important for more equitable processes of environmental governance.

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1. Introduction

In environmental governance, there is a growing tension between the pursuit of scientific and political consensus, and the recognised need to open up governance processes to diverse participants and worldviews. In the production of environmental knowledge, the inclusion of a wider range of experts and knowledges is not only considered important for traditional forms of capacity building, but also for attaining more equitable environmental outcomes (Castree et al., 2014; Mooney et al., 2013; Turnhout et al., 2016). While many initiatives now recognise the need for wider participation, approaches for achieving diversity in practice are still in experimental stages (e.g. Clark et al., 2016; Palsson et al., 2013; van der Hel, 2016). In light of this challenge, this paper asks: How can consensus-based knowledge and policy processes take account of divergent perspectives?

This paper examines the case of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (hereafter IPBES, or 'the Platform'), which is an international expert panel for biodiversity established through the United Nations system. Influenced by the perceived success of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the foundation of IPBES was catalysed by an ambition to bring greater unity to biodiversity knowledge. Billed as an 'IPCC for biodiversity' it was argued that an intergovernmental structure would allow biodiversity science "to evolve [. . .] towards greater unity and integration." (Loreau et al., 2006: 246) In the following years, the IPCC became an important model for emulation. In fact, the formal rules of IPBES agreed in 2012 reflected many features of the climate panel, including: an intergovernmental structure; highly formalised procedures that governed its functions, structures and processes; and a system of documentation based on the circulation of meeting reports, decision documents and drafted texts between groups of administrators, experts and peer reviewers.

During this period, expectations of what constituted good environmental knowledge were also changing. Although premised on the success of the long-standing climate panel, the negotiations around IPBES opened up opportunities to scrutinise the perceived failings of the IPCC. Notably, the climate panel had been criticised for having limited participation from developing countries (Hajer, 2012; Hulme and Mahony, 2010), was lacking in the meaningful

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integration of diverse disciplinary perspectives (Ford et al., 2012; Godal, 2003; IAC 2010), and prioritised a framing of the climate as a 'global kind' that privileged top-down forms of governance (Hulme, 2010; Jasanoff, 2010). In designing IPBES, it was also recognised that biodiversity was materially different to climate, encompassing highly dynamic and diversely distributed socio-ecological relationships that needed attention at multiple scales. Similarly, the need to account for the rights and agency of indigenous peoples and local communities, which had been raised in the Convention on Biological Diversity (see for example, Reimerson, 2013), also prefigured new approaches to knowledge production (Turnhout et al., 2012). These emergent perspectives were by no means universally held amongst the architects of IPBES, but were none the less integral to a call for greater inclusivity, in which a wider group of voices were to be welcomed into the process.

To examine how the pursuit of consensus and diversity were converted into practice in the case of IPBES, this paper draws on theoretical and methodological approaches from science and technology studies (STS). This field of scholarship has drawn attention to how science shapes, and is shaped by, the settings in which it is produced (Jasanoff, 2004). In particular, it has shown that the precise mechanisms through which knowledge production takes place reflect the commitments of the institutional and political cultures in which they are situated (Jasanoff, 2005; Miller, 2008). The structure of IPBES as an ostensibly global organisation in the United Nations system, for example, predisposes the Platform to produce what have been considered 'global kinds of knowledge' (Turnhout et al., 2016). However, previous scholarship has also shown that such commitments translate into practice in different ways in different settings. Even broadly prevalent commitments, such as that of objectivity, become enacted through practices that are highly context dependent (Jasanoff, 2011). In the case of IPBES, the commitments to consensus-based knowledge and diverse participation were therefore translated into their own situated practices. In this paper, I empirically examine this process and identify the emergence of one particular solution – the typology – as a means of achieving closure in heterogeneous settings. While typologies facilitate coexistence and commensurability in environmental knowledge production, they also bring the politics of participation to the fore. When inclusion in a typology is dependent on being involved in their negotiation, the questions of who participates and how in environmental knowledge production becomes increasingly important.

2. Case study and methods

This research is based on the case study of IPBES, an international expert institution for biodiversity (www.ipbes.net). IPBES was formally established in 2012 with the mandate to "strengthen the science-policy interface for biodiversity and ecosystem services" (IPBES, 2012). The Platform has an intergovernmental framework, which brings together an international cast of over 1000 experts and 120 governments to produce its first work program between 2014 and 2018 (see overview in Montana, 2016). It has four broad functions: to conduct assessments on the state of knowledge on biodiversity; build international capacity across knowledge and policy communities; catalyse the development of policy support tools; and support new knowledge generation. The Platform is intended to produce a range of outputs, including assessment reports, methodological guides, participatory processes, and online catalogues. IPBES was the result of around a decade of discussions, workshops, and formal intergovernmental negotiations that took place both inside and outside of the United Nations system (see account in Vadrot, 2014b).

This research applied qualitative methods to collect and analyse data from interviews, participant observation, and official documents between December 2013 and February 2016. Interviews for this research were conducted with both IPBES experts (n = 12) and administrators (n = 5). Experts were defined as those selected for the IPBES work program (anonymised as E1 - E12). Administrators were defined as those working in the secretariat, technical support units, Bureau and Multidisciplinary Expert Panel (anonymised as A1 - A5). Administrators worked in collaboration to oversee and coordinate the IPBES process and are grouped accordingly here. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted in person or via Skype. Interview data was complemented by participant observation at IPBES meetings, including three Plenary meetings (Antalya, Turkey in 2013; Bonn, Germany in 2015; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2016), one expert group meeting (Ushuaia, Argentina in 2015), and a joint meeting of the Multidisciplinary Expert Panel, Bureau, and three task forces (Bonn, Germany in 2015). This was complemented by background research during a four-month institutional placement with the IPBES secretariat from January until April 2015. Some data was also extracted from official documents. Collected data was analysed using computer-assisted thematic analysis (Atlas.ti) using an iterative three-pass coding process. Quotations provided in this paper are representative of the coded themes.

3. Institutionalising consensus

Although an ambition for forging consensus and increasing diverse participation were articulated in the lead up to the establishment of IPBES, the precise mechanisms through which these commitments would be translated into practice were subject to a series of negotiations. In the intergovernmental Plenary of IPBES, the institutional conditions of knowledge production were negotiated in the form of operating principles, rules and procedures. These documents set the scope of the IPBES work program and established expert groups to carry it through to completion. They defined rules that would guide the selection of experts and specified the procedures for peer review. These 'rules on paper' sketched out the rough framework within which IPBES would carry out its work, allowing the subsidiary bodies, secretariat and expert groups to interpret and operationalize them into what would later become the Platform's 'rules in use' (to draw on the language of 'new institutionalism', Young, 2002). From this perspective, the institutionalisation of consensus was the result of a series of negotiations that took place across the Platform's formal structures.

IPBES emerged as an outcome of the United Nations system, in which consensus-based decision making and state sovereignty are central principles of operation. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that the rules prescribed consensus as the chief decision-making framework of its intergovernmental Plenary. Defined by tradition, consensus is achieved through the absence of formal objections, rather than the outcome of a majority vote or unanimous agreement (UNEP, 2007). This provides, according to an administrator in IPBES, "an environment where people are basically owning and being part of whatever is being produced" (Interviewee A5, June 2015). Driven by this motive, consensus was institutionalised as "a principle that runs across the whole operations of IPBES" (Interviewee A3, May 2015). However, unlike the Plenary, the administrative and expert groups of IPBES did not have strict rules that governed how decision making should take place. Frameworks of deliberation instead emerged as local cultures dependent on the particular styles and preferences of those involved. While meetings of the formal administrative bodies (i.e. the Multidisciplinary Expert Panel and Bureau) worked towards consensus in accordance with United Nations tradition, decision making in other expert groups was much more variable.