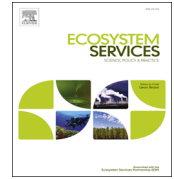




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Opportunities and challenges for mainstreaming the ecosystem services concept in the multi-level policy-making within the EU



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ABSTRACT

Mainstreaming the ecosystem services (ES) concept in EU policy-making, i.e., introducing it in a variety of policy fields, comes along with great expectations from practitioners, policy-makers, and scientists to improve environmental policy and halt the loss of biodiversity. While most environmental policies incorporate ES-related governance tools, only very few policies refer to ES explicitly, and for most non-environmental policies mainstreaming has, if at all, just begun. This article addresses three major challenges for mainstreaming the ES concept into EU policies: the need for (1) vertical and (2) horizontal policy integration, and (3) the question of stakeholder involvement in policy-making. It further examines the different meanings of 'mainstreaming' and discusses how the ES concept can be used as boundary concept in participatory processes to overcome the challenges by mediating between the different understandings of the forms and objectives of mainstreaming. The paper draws empirically on a review of legal, policy, and scientific documents and on a focus group with six policy-makers from several EU Directorate Generals. The article finds that mainstreaming the ES concept into EU policy-making is no 'silver bullet' and that expectations management – in particular with respect to the use of economic valuation methods – is necessary to avoid frustration of involved stakeholders. Further, while participatory approaches may be helpful for local policy integration and balancing trade-offs across policy fields, they may fail in face of administrative challenges of vertical policy integration or of imbalanced power relations and opposing agendas on the horizontal policy integration. To become trustworthy and effective organisational structures, new participatory elements need to be effectively linked with the relevant existing administrations and (other) democratically legitimised decision-making structures. Finally, a well-facilitated and careful process of reflection of the boundary work involved may improve the potential of mainstreaming the ES concept.

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1. Introduction

Since the publication of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the ES concept has gained momentum not only in research, but also in policy-making. The mainstreaming of the concept, i.e., introducing it in a variety of policy fields at governmental level and in the private sector, has already started in the European Union (EU) but also in countries like New Zealand (Greenhalgh and Hart, 2015) or the USA (Schaefer et al., 2015). This process comes along with great expectations from practitioners, policy-makers, and scientists alike to improve environmental policy and halt the loss of biodiversity. Indeed, ES related governance tools, such as ES

assessments, economic valuation, or market-based instruments, like payments for ecosystem services, feature prominently in the European environmental policy field, including policies such as the Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 and the Green Infrastructure Strategy, but also in water-related policies (e.g., Blueprint to Safeguard Europe's Water Resources). Expected benefits are, for example, that the ES concept helps to understand, define, and conceptualise more clearly the links between human well-being and the state of ecosystems and that it facilitates communication of economic and non-economic values and their integration into accounting and reporting systems at the EU or the national level across the different sectors (e.g., Hauck et al. (2013a)). Some authors even assume that the ES concept itself can increasingly be considered as a driver in several policy fields, (re-)shaping existing and emerging environmental and other policies in the coming decades (e.g.,

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Matzdorf and Meyer (2014)). There is also another set of current and emerging policies where ES-related governance tools are incorporated implicitly, i.e., without referring to the ES concept explicitly. This includes, for example, the Water Framework Directive (WFD), the Cohesion Policy (e.g., European Commission (EC) (2011) and Maes et al. (2013a)), and the Climate Change Adaptation Strategy.

Further, there are policies like the Trans-European Network-Transport (TEN-T) which are largely ignorant of the ES concept (at least explicitly), but have often tremendous impacts on social-ecological systems (SES), and consequently on ES throughout Europe. Indeed, for most EU – and also national/regional – non-environmental policies mainstreaming the ES concept has, if at all, just begun. One reason for this hesitation is the concern among scientists and policy-makers alike that the ES concept might not be able to live up to its manifold promises (e.g., Muradian et al. (2013) and McShane et al. (2011)). In their recent review of critiques, Schröter et al. (2014) identify a number of weaknesses of the ES concept, including the vagueness of definitions and classifications as well as its normative nature. The same authors argue, however, that instead of looking at this vagueness as something negative, one could also see it as a starting point to better address the challenges of ES mainstreaming. Other authors, for example Abson et al. (2014) and Kull et al. (2015), are more precise and emphasise that the vagueness of the ES concept allows that it can serve as a boundary object. Following the same line of reasoning, this paper addresses the ES concept as a boundary object (Star, 2010) or boundary concept. ‘Boundary concepts are words that function as concepts in different disciplines or perspectives, refer to the same object, phenomenon, process, or quality of these, but carry (sometimes very) different meanings in those different disciplines or perspectives’ (Mollinga, 2010, p. 4). We argue that ES are defined at the boundaries between several scientific disciplines and between science and practice, with the latter including policy-making. Thus, the ambiguity and vagueness of the ES concept are to some degree the outcome of different perspectives related to the aims and intentions of its users, often coming from very different policy fields like nature protection or agriculture. Following the approach of ES as a boundary concept, it is possible to better understand the controversies and debates around this concept both within science and between science and practice as an important precondition for improving its societal relevance (see Dempsey and Robertson (2012) and Barnaud and Antona (2014)). In sum, the list of critiques, further elaborated on in Section 2, indicates that an effective mainstreaming of the ES concept in policy fields – environmental or other – faces substantial challenges, emerging from its character as a boundary concept. At the same time, however, the concept and its vagueness offer opportunities to address – and to some extent integrate – the perspectives of several policy fields while dealing with respective differences in meaning and definition – i.e., by boundary work, as discussed below in Section 6.

This article addresses three major challenges for mainstreaming the ES concept into a wide range of EU policies: the need for (1) vertical and (2) horizontal policy integration, and (3) the question of stakeholder involvement in policy-making. As overarching question, it asks whether and how the ES concept may inform current and upcoming policies. We analyse opportunities and challenges for mainstreaming ES at EU, national, and regional levels by examining the different meanings of ‘mainstreaming’ and scrutinising the underlying reasons for these different understandings. It concludes on how the ES concept can be used as boundary concept in participatory processes to overcome the challenges, in particular to mediate between the different understandings of the forms and objectives of mainstreaming.

The article is structured as follows: In the subsequent section, we elaborate on the three major challenges for mainstreaming the

ES concept, and introduce in Section 3 the research background of this paper and the methods used. Sections 4, 5 and 6 are organised according to the above posed questions to introduce and discuss main opportunities and challenges for mainstreaming as well as mitigation options for the challenges employing participatory processes where the ES concept serves as a boundary concept. Finally, in Section 7, we summarise our findings and draw some conclusions.

2. Theoretical challenges of mainstreaming the ES concept

Mainstreaming the ES concept requires the consideration of at least three main dimensions: first, the need for vertical policy integration challenges decision-making about ES in several ways. Competencies in the various policy fields are differently distributed between the EU and Member States: some, like agriculture, are completely transferred to the EU level, while other policy fields important for ES, such as forestry (Primmer et al., 2013), remain at the Member State level, and for a third group, including water, responsibilities are shared between EU and Member States. Thus, competencies to address the management of ES are dispersed over several levels, and strategies to improve effective decision-making on ES must be balanced ‘vertically’. Moreover, approaches to mainstream ES must often deal with distinct information needs of stakeholders on these different levels (Hauck et al., 2013a, 2013b).

Second, the need to ensure horizontal policy integration accounts for the fact that the management of concrete ecosystems is affected by a number of policies – within and, in particular, beyond environmental policy. Thus, it is crucial to not only look at policies designed to explicitly improve the functioning of ecosystems, but also to consider other policies that depend on and impact ES, but often do so unintended (e.g., agricultural, urban and regional developmental, infrastructure, and trade policies). Mainstreaming the ES concept into a variety of different policy fields, however, faces problems that are common to those of coherent policy integration more generally. Policy integration in a horizontal dimension is a challenge for every kind of policy reform (Mickwitz and Melanen, 2009).

Third, when introducing the ES concept in such a broad range of policies, many different actors with often quite heterogeneous interests are simultaneously affected. Implementing the ES concept has inescapably normative dimensions, including issues of justice and ethics (Abson et al., 2014; Hauck et al., 2013b; Jax et al., 2013). Thus, policy-makers should address variances in the cultural perceptions, values, and socio-economic interests of various stakeholder groups (Hauck et al., 2013b; Sagoff, 2011). According to Menzel and Teng (2010), the ES concept becomes an essentially stakeholder-driven approach. This raises the question of how inclusive or participatory related processes of policy development and implementation ought to be.

3. Methods

The article is based on research conducted in the EU-FP7 OpenNESS project (<http://www.openness-project.eu>), which focuses on the conceptual challenges involved in using the ES concept in decision-making at European, but also at regional and local level. To provide an overview about existing policies at EU level, the research started with a review of a wide range of legal and policy documents, including the drafts, final versions, and updates of the regulations and strategies themselves, evaluation and monitoring reports, ‘white and green papers’, press releases, and position papers as well as scientific articles and studies related to

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