

WIPCAD LECTURE

Innovation in Science-Policy Organizations: Stakeholder Engagement in the IPBES Alejandro Esguerra

I base my talk on a paper that I have written jointly with Silke Beck (Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ) and Rolf Lidskog (Örebro University Sweden). The following extended abstract summarizes the paper.

Experts have come to play a significant role in global environmental governance. The growing demand for policy-relevant knowledge has led to the emergence of a new class of expert organizations to fulfill this role (Gupta et al 2012; Jasanoff and Martello 2004; Mitchell et al 2006). This trend has been accompanied by another demand, namely for stakeholder involvement. A number of international science-policy initiatives call for stakeholder engagement, often framed in terms of knowledge co-production, to make scientific knowledge more relevant and usable (Klenk and Meehan 2015).¹

The newly established Intergovernmental Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) is one of the first international expert organizations to have systematically developed a strategy for stakeholder engagement in its own right. This paper explores how IPBES addressed this challenge and finally adopted a formal stakeholder engagement strategy (SES). In doing so, the paper addresses a crucial research gap: although there is a growing literature on the opening up of international organizations (Nasiritousi et al. 2015; Tallberg 2013; Zürn 2014) and on the construction of local, situated legitimacy (Connelly 2010; Turnhout et al 2015), little empirical research has been conducted on such participation in international expert organizations (Lidskog and Sundqvist 2011). One reason for this gap is that stakeholder engagement is almost always conducted as a local, small-scale and place-based practice with only few systematic and ambitious efforts to engage stakeholders in global environmental assessments (Saurugger 2010). For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) already includes stakeholders, but has not yet developed a formal strategy (Beck et al. 2014; Gupta et al 2012). Institutional aspects of

¹ A current example of this is the global research platform *Future Earth*, which promotes the *co-production of knowledge* by including stakeholders at different stages of the research process (van der Hel 2016).

stakeholder engagement at the global level “have yet to be investigated sufficiently” (van der Hel 2016, 167).

In this paper, we explore how an international expert organization incorporates stakeholder engagement into its operative norms. We apply the concept of “politics of legitimation” by reconstructing how, why, and with what effects rules and principles guiding stakeholder engagement were justified and finally adopted (Reus-Smit 2007). We focus in particular on the contestation of operative norms that are regulating stakeholder engagement because they determine membership, assignment of tasks, and accountability (Klenk and Meehan 2015; Reus-Smit 2007).

The emergence of SES offers an excellent case for studying the politics of legitimation. The idea to (simply) bring stakeholders to the table was challenged at a very early stage. This moment of uncertainty triggered the politics of legitimation. While there was relative broad support for the participation of stakeholders in general, implementing it became a matter of justifying who should participate, for what purpose, and with what corresponding rights. Whereas expert organizations such as the IPCC claim to be neutral and are reluctant to openly deal with the politics underlying their activities,² IPBES “got its hands dirty” and put “messy” political questions such as participation and representation on the agenda of its intergovernmental negotiations (Lenk and Mehan 2015). Furthermore, IPBES also faced the challenge of coping with a plurality of stakeholders each defending their own particular claims for engagement; the spectrum ranged from representatives of United Nations organizations, multilateral environmental agreements, and the scientific community to stakeholders from indigenous organizations and private organizations. Given the broad and diverse spectrum of actors engaged, we reconstruct how IPBES was finally able to adopt a strategy that was accepted by all the actors involved.

Our empirical material consists of (i) participant observations of small-scale workshops on stakeholder engagement, where for three years we followed the negotiation process, mostly involving representatives of science, conservationist and indigenous NGOs; (ii) participant observation of the 2013 and 2015 IPBES-plenary meetings in Bonn; (iii) document study of official documents from IPBES (retrievable from the IPBES website) and reports from multi-stakeholders and intergovernmental meetings (retrievable from the IPBES website and IISD Reporting Services).

The paper is divided into five sections. The second section provides an introduction to the concept of the politics of legitimation in International Relations (IR), which serves as our framework for

² see <http://ipcc.ch/organization/organization.shtml>, last accessed March 15, 2016.

analysis; we discuss how it can be applied to and operationalized for an expert organization. The third section describes the genesis of IPBES and explains the rationale behind its development of an engagement strategy. The fourth section analyzes the process of negotiating the design of the SES. Focusing on the politics of legitimation, it examines how operative norms about the membership, tasks, and accountability of stakeholders are justified, included in intergovernmental negotiations, and finally adopted by the plenary. The concluding section discusses what lessons can be learned from the IPBES regarding stakeholder engagement in international expert organizations in general and the politics of legitimation.