

IPBES 11 Highlights: Thursday, 12 December 2024

The Nexus and Transformative Change Assessments dominated the day's deliberations, with delegates meeting in two working groups (WGs) into the night. WG 2 concluded its work on the agenda item on building capacity, strengthening knowledge foundations, and supporting policy.

Working Group 1

Nexus Assessment: In the morning, Co-Chair Douglas Beard (Western European and Others Group, WEOG) invited delegates to continue discussions on the background messages of the summary for policymakers (SPM) of the Nexus Assessment. A regional group and some members expressed concerns on terminology emphasizing subsets of developing countries, stressing that all face challenges in implementing nexus approaches.

Delegates then focused on future nexus interactions, discussing a box containing nexus scenario archetypes. The six archetypes represent different, plausible outcomes for the nexus elements and their interlinkages, and reflect: sustainability scenarios; scenarios where a specific nexus element is prioritized; and scenarios with little or no concern for environmental challenges.

On a scenario placing "conservation first," delegates agreed to refer to "unsustainable intensification of food production," noting that the scenario prioritizes positive outcomes for biodiversity through area-based conservation, but fails to improve conservation effectiveness or set up a sufficiently holistic and reinforcing system of sustainable management across all nexus elements. Some delegates urged addressing poverty and food insecurity.

On a scenario prioritizing the climate, a delegate opposed reference to biofuels. Members agreed on a more general formulation, noting that the scenario prioritizes positive impacts on climate, but results in negative impacts on biodiversity and food, reflecting the competition for resources. Explicit reference to competition for land resources remained bracketed.

On a scenario prioritizing food production, delegates agreed that the scenario is "globally negative for the environment, especially for biodiversity because of pollution and competition for land, negative for water because of resource overconsumption, and negative for climate change because of greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture." Finally, members decided that discussion of cases where increases in food production do not lead to negative environmental impacts should be placed under the nexus scenarios.

Regarding scenarios on nature overexploitation, characterized by overconsumption of natural resources, and negative impacts for biodiversity, food, health, and climate, a delegate suggested deleting references to dependency on fossil fuels and political and societal attitudes that assume that environmental challenges can be fixed later. Following a lengthy debate, the provision was bracketed.

Turning to background messages associated with these different scenarios, delegates agreed to highlight that, while there are regional differences, business-as-usual scenarios result, overall, in negative impacts on biodiversity and other nexus elements.

Considering scenarios that are characterized by more sustainable actions, delegates discussed whether to refer only to "healthy" diets, or to retain the original language of "sustainable healthy diets." Following clarification that the latter term has been agreed and defined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), delegates agreed to its inclusion, as well as to referencing reduced food loss and waste. Text associating such scenarios with "lower demand for energy" remained bracketed, with some delegates expressing concerns about ongoing energy poverty. Delegates also agreed to replace terminology on "cost-effectiveness" of action with reference to "greater effectiveness of investing in actions now rather than later."

On a paragraph discussing the multiple benefits of action, delegates agreed to include reference to actions that support nature conservation, restoration, "and sustainable use" of biodiversity.

In the afternoon, a lengthy discussion took place on language noting that evidence from scenarios shows that protecting 30% of the world's land by 2030, as stated in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) Target 3 (conserve 30% of land, water, and seas) can provide nexus-wide benefits if effectively managed. Delegates suggested better reflecting GBF Target 3 by referring to "terrestrial, inland water, and coastal and marine areas." They further debated "protection" versus "conservation," with some stressing that GBF Target 3 includes other effective conservation measures, in addition to protected areas. Some suggested noting that these efforts are "consistent with GBF Target 3," citing the Target in a footnote. Consensus could not be reached and the provision remained bracketed.

Following multiple suggestions, members agreed to state that higher levels of protection in terrestrial systems beyond 30% would have greater biodiversity benefits but also trade-offs for food production, food security, and nutritional health, including increases in food prices. Agreement could not be reached on text noting that in marine systems, further protection beyond 30%, if implemented effectively, could deliver synergies across all the nexus elements. A delegation suggested deletion and the provision remained bracketed.

On the potential for increases in food imports to cause land use changes in exporting countries, several delegations expressed concerns, noting that: there are examples where increased exports have not increased deforestation; such language may open the door for unilateral trade-distorting measures; and that such language is imbalanced by not, for example, referencing environmentally-harmful trade-distorting subsidies in the agricultural sector. The text was bracketed.

On language highlighting clear benefits of contextually relevant sustainable healthy diets, one delegation suggested it is "premature" to link such diets with reduced greenhouse gas emissions, to which an IPBES expert countered that it is "a well-established fact." Delegates eventually agreed to retain this language with additional reference to food loss and waste as also having environmental benefits.

Several other issues remained contentious. In a sentence on scenarios characterized by climate actions that have nexus-wide benefits, delegates did not reach agreement on whether to include examples of such actions. Some advocated for deleting examples

to achieve a “streamlined” text, while others underscored their usefulness for policymakers. Delegates further could not reach agreement on language referring to possible unintended consequences of climate adaptation.

In the evening, members resumed their discussion of background messages relevant to future nexus interactions, including consideration of how to reflect the challenge that current scenarios do not provide enough evidence to support achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 1 (no poverty) and 10 (reduced inequalities).

Working Group 2

Transformative Change Assessment: In the morning, Co-Chair Eeva Primmer (WEOG) invited delegates to continue textual negotiations on key messages. Delegates agreed to revise the first key message to reflect that financial flows of USD 135-156 billion for biodiversity conservation represent only 0.25% of the global gross domestic product (GDP) that is dependent on nature. On transformative change defined by fundamental system-wide shifts in views, structures, and practices, one delegate suggested that transformative change is not needed for Indigenous Peoples, who already have a “symbiotic connection with Mother Earth.” Delegates agreed to note that “many Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs) around the world have views, structures, and practices aligned with creating a just and sustainable world.”

On shifts in the *status quo* occurring from transformative change, delegates agreed to note that not everyone will benefit in the short term and discussed inequities between those who gain from and those who bear the costs of change, with one delegate noting that, in practice, existing power structures likely aim at conserving the *status quo*.

Delegates then engaged in detailed discussions on the systemic challenges that pose barriers to transformative change, comprising: persistent relations of domination over nature and people; inadequate policies and unfit institutions; unsustainable consumption and production patterns; and limited access to clean technologies. Some members suggested inclusion of “capitalism,” “materialism,” “globalization,” and “neoliberalism” as concepts that capture the idea of relations of domination over nature and people. Delegates expressed divergent views on how the terms relate to each other, with one delegate opining that modern worldviews with their rigid dichotomy between nature and people pose the root cause for unsustainable living. Views also diverged on whether the suggested concepts reinforce relations of domination from the colonial eras or if they provide new expressions of such dominance that reflect the prevalence of markets. Some members rejected inclusion of these specific terms, noting that the notion of “relations of domination over nature and people” functions well as an overarching term.

Delegates agreed to: state that relations of domination that emerged in the colonial eras persist over time; not include specific concepts relating to domination over nature and people in key messages but capture them in the background messages; and also address potential rebound effects in the context of clean technologies in background messages.

On weaving in insights from different approaches and knowledge systems to enhance strategies and actions for transformative change, one delegate requested clarity on “non-human ways of knowing.” Assessment co-authors emphasized that “different approaches” refer to multiple strategies that have synergistic and complementary effects and agreed that some restructuring of “non-human ways of knowing” is needed.

On the possibility of transformative change “through small and large-scale changes required to address underlying causes” of biodiversity loss, one delegate, opposed by another, suggested that “nature-based solutions” be introduced as ways to support transformative change.

In the afternoon, delegates discussed clarifications on: text referring to “non-human ways of knowing” versus “diverse ways of knowing”; ensuring that the strategies and actions associated

with each key message in Section B of the Assessment are clearly attributed to the relevant sections, and with references to the background chapters; and specifying the rights of Indigenous Peoples *vis-à-vis* the rights of local communities for transformative change.

One delegate requested the inclusion of “nature-based solutions and ecosystem-based approaches” as specific examples to include regarding conservation measures inspired by Indigenous and local knowledge (ILK), a suggestion that was deferred for later discussion. Some delegations requested the addition of a qualifier to the text, stressing that not all countries recognize the rights of nature.

In the evening, delegates considered a revised text that provides an overview of five key strategies with substantial potential to advance deliberate transformative change for global sustainability: conserving and regenerating places of value to nature and people; driving systemic change in sectors most responsible for biodiversity loss and nature’s decline; transforming economic systems for nature and equity; transforming governance systems to be integrated, inclusive, accountable, and adaptive; and shifting societal views and values to recognize and prioritize fundamental interconnections between humans and nature. Delegates discussed key messages relating to each strategy into the night.

Building capacity, strengthening knowledge foundations, and supporting policy:

Co-Chair Sebsebe Demissew (African Group) invited delegates to continue deliberations on the workplans for objective 4 (policy support tools and methodologies) of the rolling work programme up to 2030. With minor edits, including adding reference to nature-centered and Mother-Earth-centered scenarios and models, delegates accepted the workplan on scenarios and models.

On the workplan for advanced work on policy instruments, policy support tools, and methodologies, delegates discussed options for institutional arrangements. Many voiced support for maintaining the current arrangement with IPBES Bureau and Multidisciplinary Expert Panel (MEP) members overseeing the work and a Technical Support Unit (TSU) providing administrative support, instead of establishing a dedicated task force. The workplan was accepted. Delegates also agreed to a set of indicators, measuring the effectiveness of all workplans, with minor edits.

Noting that the accepted workplans and indicators will be added as annexes to the draft decision on the implementation of the rolling work programme of IPBES up to 2030 (IPBES//11/1/Add. 2), Simone Schiele, IPBES Secretariat, introduced sections III (building capacity), IV (strengthening the knowledge foundations), and V (supporting policy) of the draft decision. With minor additions, delegates accepted the text, and forwarded it to the contact group on financial and budgetary arrangements.

In the Corridors

Capitalism, colonialism, neoliberalism, and globalization, rarely discussed directly in intergovernmental settings, came to the fore during the third day of deliberations at IPBES 11, reflecting persistent relations of domination over people and nature. The buzz in the relevant working group following these discussions was palpable and might be seen again when these terms will be considered for the background messages, after they did not make it to the key ones. One delegate was overheard saying that such discussions may not penetrate outside the IPBES community given the structural obstacles that they attempt to address. Still, the Transformative Change Assessment is the first of its kind in the UN system to bridge social science with structural system change.

Later in the day, long-standing debates between delegations highlighting the special rights of Indigenous Peoples and those emphasizing those of local communities, as well as divergent approaches toward the rights of nature slowed down deliberations on strategies and actions for transformative change. Despite progress, as a participant murmured at the end of another long day, “the light at the end of the tunnel still feels distant.”