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A network to enhance the contributions from the social sciences and humanities to IPBES

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ABSTRACT

IPBES requires enhanced contributions from the social sciences and humanities in order to meet its mandate and influence policy. However, achieving this has so far proved challenging, notably in the form of a shortage in nominations of experts from these fields. The Social Sciences and Humanities Network (the SSH Network) has been established in an effort to improve this situation. In this short communication, we present challenges identified by the network that hinders increased engagement from scholars from the social sciences and humanities, and strategies developed to overcome them. Among other initiatives, the SSH Network will function as a meeting place for scholars from the social sciences and humanities engaged in IPBES, interested in IPBES, or having IPBES as a study object.

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Introduction

Nature and human culture are inextricably linked. As a consequence, meaningful assessments of the state of biodiversity, and potential policies, practices and technologies to conserve and sustainably use it require the integration of knowledge on genes, species and ecosystems with knowledge on humans and societies. Moreover, an integrative approach is crucial to produce policy relevant knowledge for the achievement of global targets such as those under the post-2020 global biodiversity framework and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The value of engaging researchers from the social sciences and humanities in the work of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has been acknowledged both inside and outside IPBES. The same is true for the challenges encountered in the efforts to achieve such involvement (Stenseke and Larigauderie 2018; Vadrot et al. 2018; Díaz-Reviriego et al. 2019). The external review of IPBES at the end of its first work programme found that ‘IPBES still appears to have difficulty in engaging expertise beyond experts in the fields of biodiversity and ecosystem services. There are well-identified gaps in expertise, notably in the social sciences, that can potentially compromise

its capacity to meet its overall mandate and influence policy’ (IPBES/7/INF/18, finding 14).

The Multidisciplinary Expert Panel and Bureau, at their 14th meetings in January 2020, endorsed the piloting of an IPBES social sciences and humanities community of practice, with the purpose to enhance the contributions of these research fields to IPBES. After a successful pilot period, and as a result of communications with the IPBES secretariat on possible formats, the community of practice formally became a subgroup of the Open-Ended Network of IPBES Stakeholders (ONet) in the end of 2020, named The Social Sciences and Humanities Network (SSH Network) (<https://onet.ipbes.net/node/43>). During the piloting period, the network organized two workshops and communicated actively with a number of individuals that serve, or have served, in different IPBES roles. Through these activities, a number of challenges and opportunities was identified for improving the integration of social science and humanities scholars, knowledge and approaches in IPBES work and outputs. The established SSH Network is dedicated to overcome these challenges and utilize these opportunities, by effectively functioning as a meeting place for scholars from the social sciences and humanities engaged in IPBES, interested in engaging in IPBES, having IPBES as a study object as well as scholars with a general interest in themes addressed in the

IPBES work programme. In this short communication, we present the identified challenges and the strategies developed by the network to overcome them.

Background

The difficulties in engaging social science and humanities scholars in IPBES have manifested in multiple ways, notably the shortage in nominations of experts from these fields identified by the external review panel. In particular, IPBES assessments on topics more directly associated with biophysical sciences do not attract sufficient numbers of experts from the social sciences and humanities. Fundamentally, the issue is not about the labels of experts as such, but about the inclusion of high-quality competences in approaches, theories, and methods from the social sciences and humanities. In addition, the engagement of social science and humanities experts in IPBES have been dominated by a few disciplines. In this regard, the SSH Network found that IPBES would benefit from engaging a broader spectrum of disciplines, knowledge, and approaches from the social sciences and humanities. Further, engagement from social science and humanities scholars with IPBES in other regards, such as external reviewing of assessment drafts, seems to be low compared to that of other relevant research fields.

The challenges encountered in engaging social science and humanities scholars in IPBES are complex and cannot be solved by a quick fix. The issue is related to the longer history of global environmental assessments (Turnhout et al. 2012; Beck et al. 2014), in which experts, knowledge and approaches from the social sciences and humanities have generally been poorly integrated. IPBES has pioneered new ways to integrate these research fields, for example in its emphasis on including different knowledge sources and approaches in its conceptual framework (Díaz et al. 2015), and in listing relevant disciplines from the social sciences and humanities in calls for assessment experts. However, a focused and continuous effort seems to be needed in order to fully enable such innovation in practice.

In order to participate in IPBES assessments, or provide contributions in other ways, scholars from the social sciences and humanities must find it meaningful and attractive to engage in this way (Stenseke and Larigauderie 2018). The SSH Network found that such engagement requires broad commitment by experts to collaborate across diverse disciplines and equal possibilities to contribute knowledge and approaches. Interdisciplinary work and addressing different knowledge sources and approaches is challenging in practice (Vadrot et al. 2018). To add to

this, IPBES might have inherited some ballast from the history of global environmental assessments, notably the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Millennium Assessments (MA) (Díaz-Reviriego et al. 2019). This both in terms of assessment practices, tools and understandings of what such assessment constitutes and how it should be operationalized, as well as some skepticism from communities within the social sciences and humanities regarding the possibilities to participate and contribute in such assessment on equal terms with experts from other research fields.

Challenges to enhanced integration of the social sciences and humanities in IPBES

Some of the concepts and framings employed in IPBES work and outputs constitute challenges to the integration of knowledge and approaches from the social sciences and humanities (Díaz-Reviriego et al. 2019). The conceptualization of evidence in IPBES assessments is one example. The SSH Network found this conceptualization not to be fully compatible with some perspectives prevalent in the social sciences and humanities, in particular the generalization of knowledge, addressing non-linear change, approaches to modelling, and the drivers, pressures, state, impact and response model of intervention. In addition, explicit discussions of power and ethics, especially in relation to the knowledge being assessed, has been largely absent in IPBES assessments, including in the presentation of frameworks for policy options. Contributions from the social sciences and humanities often depend on a more reflexive understanding of power, ethics, and political aspects of knowledge in order to be meaningful (Vadrot et al. 2018).

Other challenges relate to the organizational structure and arrangements of IPBES, such as the processes for expert nominations from member nations for IPBES assessments. The SSH Network found indications that the national nominating bodies and related functions often are based in institutions traditionally associated with biophysical sciences, such as environmental agencies. These bodies might also have closer bonds to communities within such sciences, be more experienced in communicating with them, and thus facilitate more nominations from them than communities within the social sciences and humanities (Stenseke and Larigauderie 2018). Another example is the economic support provided by IPBES to ensure participation of experts. Institutions hosting social sciences and humanities are generally poorer than those hosting other research fields, and the SSH Network found that the economic support in many cases was not sufficient to enable participation. As such, lack of funding has been a barrier to increased

IPBES engagement for scholars within the social sciences and humanities (Timpote et al. 2018).

Another aspect of increasing engagement by scholars from the social sciences and humanities with IPBES concerns communication with different scholarly communities. Tight networks were often established between involved scholarly communities through collaboration in the global environmental assessments that preceded IPBES, and in other conservation-oriented efforts. The social sciences and humanities were typically involved in these networks to a lesser degree, with the exception of specific disciplines such as economics. The SSH Network found that these networks play a pivotal role, both autonomously and incited by IPBES, in communicating information and opportunities, as well as encouraging participation in IPBES. These well-functioning networks constitute a strength of IPBES, but do not function well to increase the number of expert nominees from the social sciences and humanities since relatively few experts from these research fields take part in them. In addition, communication through these networks is often shaped by academic and epistemic priorities that is not necessarily shared by SSH scholars (Timpote et al. 2018; Díaz-Reviriego et al. 2019). Some networks focused around biodiversity issues exist within the social sciences and humanities, but it is crucial to build a network dedicated to IPBES in order to create fertile ground for more expert nominations and other engagement from these research fields.

Efforts by the SSH Network to overcome the challenges

The SSH Network is dedicated to aid IPBES in overcoming the challenges described above, and thus facilitate enhanced contributions from the social sciences and humanities, by functioning as such a network. It seeks to establish a pool of experts from the social sciences and the humanities which could be interested in seeking nominations as experts for IPBES deliverables, contribute to the review of draft IPBES scoping documents and assessments, and engage in outreach activities to bring the work of IPBES to the attention of more experts in these fields, among other activities. In particular, the SSH Network is dedicated to contribute to a better understanding of and engagement with a broader spectrum of disciplines, research fields, and approaches from the social sciences and humanities in IPBES. In its efforts to achieve this, the network seeks to highlight the relevance of IPBES work to experts and institutions in the fields of the social sciences and humanities, for example, by helping national focal points reach out to scholars within these fields, and articulating clearly the need for expertise from the social

sciences and humanities in assessments more directly associated with biophysical sciences.

Further, the SSH Network is dedicated to reflect and provide feedback for continuous improvement in the role of the social sciences and humanities in IPBES, by providing a forum where scholars engaged in diverse IPBES deliverables can exchange information about the platform's processes and identify options for ways and methods which can support IPBES in better integrating social sciences and humanities in its work. The network is also actively working to identify key areas where the social sciences and humanities could support IPBES, for example, in dealing with context-specificity or political aspects of knowledge, and to stimulate new IPBES-relevant research agendas and publications in the social sciences and humanities. In these efforts, the SSH Network has so far benefited from providing a space for interaction between scholars from the social sciences and humanities engaged in IPBES and scholars doing critical research on the organization.

IPBES is recognized as a pioneer among global environmental assessments in its efforts to engage scholars from the social sciences and humanities (Arpin et al. 2016; Balvanera et al. 2020; Montana 2021). Establishment of the SSH Network, in addition to other efforts, is indicative of this. As such, the SSH Network might serve as a role model for improvement of contributions from the social sciences and humanities in other global environmental assessments. While some challenges related to this will be specific to the particular topic and framing of an evaluation or platform, many challenges will likely be similar and take the form of assessment practices, tools and understandings inherited from the larger history of such scientific processes. Therefore, the focused and continuous effort of the SSH Network to provide a forum for meaningful engagement by scholars from the social sciences and humanities, as well as the analyses of the challenges and opportunities related to this, could constitute a useful and inspirational model for other global environmental assessments.

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