



POST2015 Bulletin

A Briefing Note on the Workshop on the Institutional Architecture for the Science-policy Interface (SPI) on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
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BRIEFING NOTE ON THE WORKSHOP ON THE INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE FOR THE SCIENCE-POLICY INTERFACE ON THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: 19-20 JUNE 2015

The Workshop on the Institutional Architecture for the Science-policy Interface (SPI) on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) convened from 19-20 June 2015, in New York, US. Meeting at the Japan Society, the event was co-organized by the Earth System Governance Project, the Post 2015 Project and Keio University, with the support of Japan's Ministry of Environment and the Japan Science and Technology Agency. The workshop was also endorsed by Future Earth, a ten-year global research programme for sustainability, and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN).

Following previous workshops that addressed questions of governance and institutional fit, this workshop explored options for the institutional architecture of a science-policy interface to support SDG implementation. The workshop aimed to inform the discussion on strengthening the SPI for SDG implementation in response to paragraph 20 of UN General Assembly Resolution 67/290 on the format and organizational aspects of the High-level Political Forum on sustainable development (HLPF), which "decides that the HLPF shall strengthen the SPI..." Attended by 29 participants from academia, policy-making, administration and civil society, the workshop produced a list of options for strengthening the SPI, which will be reflected in a policy brief.

This briefing note summarizes the discussions during the workshop. The workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule and this briefing note therefore does not identify speakers in the plenary discussions.

OPENING

Norichika Kanie, Keio University, welcomed participants on Friday morning, 19 June 2015, and outlined the objective and format of the workshop, noting that it aimed to provide input on options for an SPI to both the ongoing Post-2015 intergovernmental negotiations as well as to inform the process after the adoption of the Post-2015 Development Agenda in September.

Ruben Zondervan, Executive Director of the Earth System Governance Project, gave an overview over the project's previous work, including a workshop on ideas on governance

"of" and "for" SDGs held in 2014, and a workshop on options and opportunities for the UN to respond to the SDGs, held in early 2015, that explored the UN's "institutional fit."

Several participants made short background presentations. The first presenter provided an update on the state of the negotiations with regard to the SPI, noting the need to improve linkages between existing bodies and the HLPF, strengthen input to the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), and consider ways to engage the scientific community. Another participant reported that initial reactions to the Zero Draft of the outcome document for the Post-2015 Development Agenda were generally positive, noting that the scientific community will be called upon to realize the vision laid out by the SDGs. The last presenter urged expanding the discussion on the SPI to include entry points at the regional and national levels for scientists as well as holders of other types of knowledge, noting that national governments have a responsibility to contribute to the development of indicators for assessing progress in SDG implementation.

In the ensuing discussion, one participant called attention to the outcome of a survey conducted by the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review, which revealed that UN member states do not consider the UN ready to support SDG implementation. The participant encouraged participants to consult the survey's suggestions regarding the SPI.

BREAKOUT GROUPS

In three rounds of small group discussions, participants addressed three questions on the role of scientific knowledge for SDG implementation, options for institutional design and options for an enabling institutional architecture. Each group reported its findings back to plenary.

THE ROLE OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE FOR THE TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE SDGS: Participants generally agreed that the role of science is to inform policy makers to ensure evidence-based decision making. They noted that the type of scientific input required varies with the issue at hand as well as with the stage of the decision making process. While explorative, curiosity-driven science can identify new risks, analyzing specific problems requires targeted research programmes. Some added that most science focuses on improving understanding rather than developing solutions. Others cautioned that the identification

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of problems does not automatically reveal socially-acceptable technological solutions, as acceptance also depends on value judgments.

Participants also discussed inherent challenges of SDG-related scientific advice, including: creating decisive, policy-relevant narratives in the face of scientific uncertainty; the lack of clear definitions of “sustainable development” and “sustainability science” or what constitutes “integrated science;” providing advice on fast moving issues; translating normative policy goals into tangible scientific categories for assessment; and the need to integrate other types of science and knowledge such as humanities, governance, design, corporate and citizen science, traditional knowledge, or new fields of research such as earth system analysis.

Participants further discussed the importance of capacity-building and education in developing countries and the need for curricula to include complex systems thinking. Several raised the problem of providing policy-relevant advice that is not policy prescriptive, given that both scientists and policy makers continuously develop new meanings and interpretations of language that lead to confusion and misunderstanding.

OPTIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN FOR A SCIENCE-POLICY INTERFACE FOR THE POST-2015 AGENDA: During the second round of small group discussions, participants focused on the need for a new body. Several groups suggested that, while the multitude of scientific advisory bodies, intergovernmental panels and assessment processes could provide advice on most SDG-related issues, there is a need to improve the orchestration of the system so that existing bodies can provide appropriate advice in a timely manner.

Participants also noted several gaps that may require a new body or mechanism, including to: enable continuing dialogue among scientists and policy experts over concepts, meanings and approaches similar to the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs); address issues and ideas on which there is no scientific consensus; and develop creative and integrative solutions. They further noted that a new mechanism should focus on transformative science and improve the alignment between economic development and science, technology and innovation in order to avoid unsustainable development pathways.

Participants stressed that the mechanism’s outputs must appeal to a wider community, not only policy makers, and in particular it should be accessible to non-state actors. Several suggested that a mechanism should foster opportunity-driven engagement of the private sector, while aligning it with the norms established by the SDGs. While some suggested recommending an intergovernmental panel similar to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), others felt this was not a practical solution because the SDGs address a much wider set of issues and require fast responses to emerging issues.

The small groups also identified the need to strengthen linkages across global, regional and national levels to improve engagement of national science actors, such as national academies, private sector scientists, civil society, actor groups and holders of traditional knowledge.

Participants emphasized the need for stronger involvement of the scientific community, in particular young scientists. They also noted that the current approach to providing scientific advice provides few incentives for scientists to participate as the system for academic performance evaluation does not recognize contributions to global assessments or participation in international scientific advisory bodies. Some suggested that engagement could be enhanced through an international scientific organization that mirrors the UN, recognizes the different situations, capacities and potentials of the scientific communities in different countries, and ensures that scientists from all countries are represented.

INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE: In the third round of small group discussions, participants were asked to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the following options to strengthen the SDG science-policy interface: *ad-hoc* expert groups, an intergovernmental panel, a collection of thematic reports, task-forces, and using the GSDR.

Participants cautioned that an intergovernmental panel would demand high monetary and personnel resources, noting that it would be difficult for a single panel to address all SDGs. Some noted differences between the SDGs and issues currently addressed by the IPCC and the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), including: a much broader scope, which also covers issues that may be better addressed at different scales or through different models; trade-offs between SDGs and the three pillars of sustainable development; priorities to be determined by countries; a need to focus on technologies for implementation; and the fact that the SDGs are framed as a vision to be achieved by societies, rather than as an objective to combat environmental degradation.

On using the GSDR, participants questioned whether it can be used as a tool to guide research and coordinate scientific inputs. Some also suggested that the GSDR would need a strong outlook component that could identify current and emerging gaps in research.

Regarding the use of task forces, participants suggested they could either be integrative or aligned with specific SDGs and be initiated in response to issues emerging from countries’ national reports. Some suggested that task forces could be used in an iterative process at the national level to collect input from various stakeholders for reports to be submitted to the HLPPF. The group suggested investigating whether the model of open-ended voluntary task forces used by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) could be adapted to address issues related to SDG implementation. One participant added that task forces and other bodies should be allowed to evolve in accordance with the self-organizing principles of the scientific communities in a bottom-up process.

Additional options suggested by the small groups included:

- A standing committee of scientists;
- A committee composed of the Chief Scientists or heads of UN agencies and other UN bodies that would advise

the HLPF and provide regular communication and coordination with other bodies;

- A global science conference that would meet every four years to provide inputs to the HLPF, building on the success of the Planet Under Pressure Conference which provided input to the Rio+20 Conference in 2012;
- *Ad-hoc* platforms at the national, regional or global level on specific issues; and
- Regional inter-agency science groups that would work with transnational science organizations, such as Future Earth.

Several small groups pointed to the need for an orchestrating entity that could make requests to existing scientific bodies, noting that it would need the political authority to do so. They also mentioned that such an entity would need support from the scientific community to formulate targeted and informed requests that are within the capacity of the scientific bodies to which they are addressed. One participant explained that this model would embrace the principle of co-design of research questions and support integration of knowledge from scientists and other actors.

In the ensuing discussion, participants considered other models that could enable co-design. On monitoring, they favored an iterative learning approach, such as the food-energy-water nexus, that would be implemented by a standing body on a four-year review cycle aligned with meetings of the HLPF. On explorative research, the group recommended using a collaborative process, such as a priority setting or grand challenges exercise, to build an SDG research agenda.

One participant suggested an incremental approach building on the current mandate of the HLPF to strengthen the SPI and the GSDR, noting that the time-frame until the first review by the HLPF in 2018 could be used to build trust and commitment among governments and develop a long-term vision. Another participant suggested encouraging policy makers to attend scientific conferences and invite scientists to participate in negotiations to build mutual understanding and personal relationships.

On ways to improve the uptake of key reports such as the GSDR, participants suggested framing messages as opportunities, rather than scenarios of “gloom and doom” or “cost of inaction.” One participant reiterated the need for reports to use clear and succinct narratives to be accessible to the wider public.

Noting lack of interest to commit to SDG implementation among some governments, one participant recommended that SPI mechanisms should allow scientists to engage regardless of their governments’ position and allow them to enter into “coalitions of the willing.”

Noting that science is often treated as a “black box” in the policy forum, one participant suggested educating policy-makers about the general principals and criteria for performance evaluation under which most scientists work. He noted that the absence of incentives to engage in SPI bodies means that these bodies are unable to recruit the best scientists working in relevant fields. The bodies therefore lack scientific merit which could affect the perception of the legitimacy of their advice.

The results of the discussion were recorded in a table for further discussion on Saturday.

CLOSING

On Saturday, 20 June, participants revisited the table of options they had developed on the first day for a mechanism or body to strengthen the SPI. Many participants stated that the table does not constitute a list of exclusive alternatives or ranking, but should be regarded as a list of potential elements that can be combined in accordance with needs. Several noted that the options reflect the general need for a forum where scientists and policy makers can meet and build mutual understanding. Participants also reiterated the need for an entity that can request existing bodies to provide advice and suggested follow-up research to determine which body could assume such a function.

Participants then discussed which of the options were most suitable to provide entry points for scientists and holders of other types of knowledge at the national, regional and international levels. One participant suggested using rosters of experts on all levels to ensure that experts are available for all issues to be addressed. Participants also supported the suggestion that national engagement can be improved through a network of networks that actively encourages scientists and research networks that conduct SDG relevant research to provide inputs to the SPI, noting that most countries have institutions that could provide this function.

Another participant suggested that expert panels are suitable for the regional and global level, since they are most effective if they are designed as standing committees that have regular interactions with policy makers and are composed of international members that are selected based on merit.

On emerging issues, participants suggested differentiating issues emerging during implementation or follow-up and review from the identification of new risks. While the former can be addressed by task forces that are established as needed at the appropriate levels, the identification of new risks requires regular foresight exercises and considering research that has not yet been published in peer-reviewed outlets.

Several participants discussed the advantages of independent advisory bodies that are outside the UN system. They suggested that, while the outputs of such bodies are more tangible to the public, they may not be directly usable by policy makers as their findings require further consideration by a committee for scientific advice under the respective governing body. The example of the use of Scientific Conferences and a scientific-policy interface body under the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) was noted in this regard.

In closing the workshop, Norichika Kanie informed participants that the outcomes would be reflected in a policy brief as well as conveyed to the ongoing intergovernmental negotiations on the outcome document of the Post-2015 Development Agenda.