

THE IPBES ASSESSMENT GUIDE SUMMARY

The Intergovernmental Platform
on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services



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The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) promotes knowledge on the diversity of life on earth (biodiversity) and on how it contributes to the quality of life of people (nature's contributions to people/ecosystem services).

Life on land and in water is reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹ as contributing to many of today's key societal aspirations. The pathways towards the attainment of these aspirations are however often also shaping the human-nature interactions and thereby the way in which nature contributes to people.

Established in 2012, as an independent body inspired by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA), IPBES aims at strengthening the science-policy interface for understanding the dynamics in the human-nature interactions. It does so by undertaking international assessments and promoting national ones; by catalyzing knowledge generation; by promoting the development and use of *policy support tools*; and by undertaking and facilitating *capacity building*.

An IPBES assessment is a critical evaluation of the state of knowledge by independent experts interacting with government representatives and other stakeholders in a stepwise process to ensure legitimacy, relevance and credibility. The evaluation is undertaken by a geographically and gender balanced multidisciplinary group of independent experts selected on their credentials from among a group of nominees. Their interaction with government representatives, observers and stakeholders takes place at the initiation, scoping, reviewing and approval stages of the assessment.

The assessment relies on financial and in-kind contributions from governments, experts and partners according to the institutional arrangements and agreed norms (See box 1). Assessments focus on global, regional, methodological and thematic aspects of the interactions between society and nature as approved by the Plenary. The rationale for the assessments often targets specific international initiatives and strategies, such as those under the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

The independent critical expert evaluation in an IPBES assessment entails a collective and iterative review, synthesis, analysis and judgement of policy relevance and confidence levels of available knowledge.

This knowledge is drawn from peer-reviewed scientific literature, grey literature and other available sources such as indigenous and local knowledge (ILK). The analysis involves summarizing findings and highlighting their policy relevance without being policy-prescriptive. The confidence level in assessment findings is determined by considering the quality, quantity and consistency of evidence. The analysis does not involve the undertaking of new primary research but may include re-analysis of data and use of existing models to address specific questions and the identification of knowledge gaps to be addressed by others. Experts are guided in their work by a Conceptual Framework and supported by task forces and expert groups on capacity building; data and knowledge; ILK; models and scenarios; valuation; and policy support tools. The expert evaluation is subject to expert peer review as well as reviews by governments and stakeholders and a final consideration by the IPBES Plenary.

¹ United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Box 1. IPBES at a Glance

Objective: To strengthen the science-policy interface for biodiversity and ecosystem services for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, long-term human well-being and sustainable development.

Operating Principles: IPBES addresses terrestrial, marine and inland water biodiversity and ecosystem services and their interactions, ensuring the Platform’s credibility, relevance and legitimacy, and promoting its independence. The Principles further include: facilitating an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach; engaging with different knowledge systems, including indigenous and local knowledge; recognizing the need for gender equity in its work; ensuring full and effective participation of developing countries; ensuring the full use of knowledge gained at all spatial scales from local to global; integrating capacity-building into all relevant aspects of its work; and promoting a collaborative approach which builds on existing initiatives and experience.

Functions

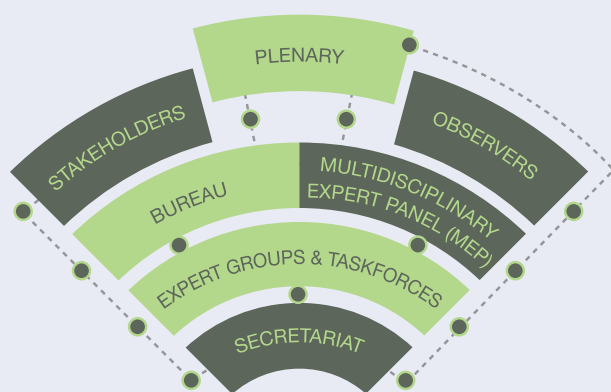
Catalyses the **generation of new knowledge** to address gaps in knowledge identified in IPBES assessments

Deliver global, regional, sub-regional and thematic **assessments**, and at the same time promote and facilitate assessments at the national level

Promote development and use of **policy support tools and methodologies** so that assessment results can be more effectively applied

Identify and prioritize capacity building needs for improving **the science-policy interface** at appropriate levels, and provide, call for and facilitate access to the necessary resources for addressing the highest priority needs directly relating to its activities

Institutional Arrangements



Procedures, programmes and other resources

- Rules of Procedure for the Plenary
- Financial Procedures
- Procedure for receiving and prioritizing requests put to the Platform
- The Work Programme 2014-2018
- Conceptual Framework
- Procedures for the preparation of Platform deliverables
- Guidelines on how to carry out work in the context of IPBES (assessments, scenarios, valuation)
- Catalogues (of assessments and policy support tools)
- Information and Data Management Plan
- Strategic partnerships
- Stakeholder engagement and outreach

IPBES assesses ecosystem services through the lens of nature's contribution to people as anchored in the IPBES Conceptual Framework. The framework models the interactions between people and nature, and presents scientific concepts and parallel notions from indigenous and local knowledge systems under inclusive new concepts. One of the key overarching inclusive concepts is “nature's contributions to people” (NCP). It includes and allows for the assessment of both the scientific concept of “ecosystem goods and services” and the notion of “nature's gifts” from indigenous and local knowledge systems. NCP can be beneficial or detrimental to people depending on the cultural context and be assessed from two mutually supportive perspectives: - a generalizable and a contextual perspective. The generalizable perspective includes 18 NCP reporting categories organized in three partially overlapping groups: regulating, material and non-material contributions. The contextual perspective caters for the geographical and cultural specificities of indigenous and local knowledge systems. This inclusive approach allows for the reflection of a diverse range of scientific and social disciplines, perspectives and knowledge systems.

An IPBES assessment report is the result of a staged process designed to also produce an enhanced understanding of what we know, what is uncertain, the knowledge needs and policy opportunities among actors in science and policy (see also Figure 1). **This IPBES assessment guide is aimed at those who are involved in an IPBES assessment, and, in particular, its authors.** The core part of the guide sets out the four stages of an IPBES assessment and what happens at each of these stages. The roles and responsibilities of the different actors involved in the assessments are included along with guidance on developing a Summary for Policy Makers (SPM) and the use of confidence terms. The Guide is supported by a series of modules (see box 2), which contain further information that those involved in IPBES assessments will need to know. Further support is provided through other resources such as webinars, e-learning modules, and the IPBES Catalogue for Policy Support Tools and Methodologies.

Box 2. Modules of the assessment guide

A Addressing Conceptual Issues

(the IPBES Conceptual Framework, IPBES Terrestrial and aquatic units of analysis and the IPBES classification of Nature's Contributions to People)

B Use of Methodologies in Assessments

(conceptualising values, scenarios and models, and indigenous and local knowledge systems)

C Identifying and Assessing Data, Information and Knowledge Resources and Gaps

(data and indicators)

D Enhancing the Utility of Assessments for Decision-makers and Practitioners

(Policy support tools and methodologies)

E Approaches to Undertaking a Government Review

(under development)

F Strengthening Capacities in the Science-Policy Interface

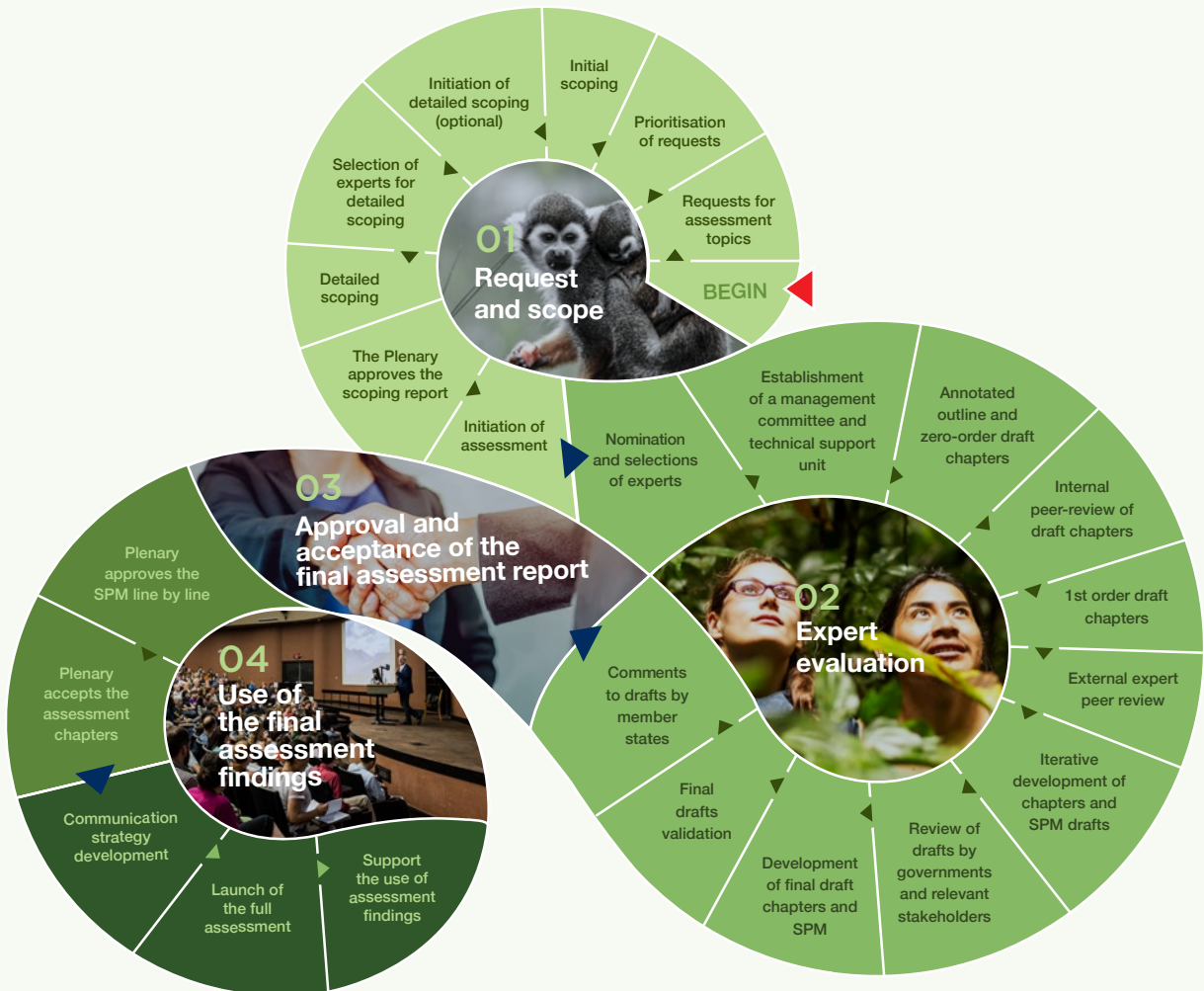
(how to address capacity building in assessments)

G Undertaking National Ecosystem Assessments

(under development)

H IPBES Core Glossary

Figure 1. The IPBES assessment process



Stage 1.

Request and Scope

Governments and multilateral environmental agreements related to biodiversity and ecosystem services are invited to make requests (i.e. to propose topics) for future IPBES assessment reports, according to agreed procedures. Inputs and suggestions from United Nations bodies or relevant stakeholders are also encouraged. Topics are provisionally scoped by the Bureau and MEP, and then presented to the Plenary for discussion and approval. The Plenary can either initiate Stage II of the process, based on this initial scoping, or request further scoping. Further scoping is carried out by the Bureau and MEP and typically supported by a group of experts, following a nomination and selection process. Scoping typically involves an examination of the rationale, utility, thematic and geographic coverage, chapter outline and key questions, partnerships, data needs, costs and timetable. The product from this process is a draft Scoping Report, which is presented to Plenary for approval in consultation with experts. The Plenary may approve the draft Scoping Report, request further scoping or reject the draft Scoping Report. The Plenary may delay the start of Stage II or initiate the assessment immediately based on the Scoping Report.

Stage 2.

Expert evaluation of the state of knowledge

Nomination and selection of experts.

Governments and relevant² stakeholders are invited to nominate independent experts and fellows with expertise relevant for the chapters approved in the scoping document by Plenary. The MEP, in consultation with the Bureau, then selects the Co-Chairs and a pool of authors from among the nominees, and the Bureau selects a host for the Technical Support Unit (TSU) from among offers. An assessment Management Committee (consisting of representatives from the Bureau and MEP, TSU and the Co-Chairs) is formed and finalises the allocation of Coordinating Lead Authors (CLAs), Lead Authors (LAs) and Review Editors (REs) to the respective chapters, from the pool of authors selected by the MEP, with a

view to achieve scientific excellence while maintaining a satisfactory balance of disciplines (natural and social sciences, scholars from the humanities, and knowledge holders and experts in ILK), geography and gender. In the case of gaps, a gap filling procedure approved by the Plenary is followed, involving the identification of suitable experts by the Management Committee, their approval by MEP and their nomination by Governments or relevant stakeholders. Fellows (one or two per chapter in each assessment) are also selected by the MEP through the IPBES Fellows programme, based on a separate call for nominations. Contributing Authors (CAs) are selected by the CLAs, with the approval of the assessment Co-Chairs. They do not have to be nominated and do not attend expert meetings. The role and responsibilities of experts and support structures are set out in box 3. Experts are required to complete and sign a conflict of interest form, for review by a conflict of interest committee, to ensure that none of them has a conflict of interest that could undermine confidence in IPBES assessment reports.

Drafting of an assessment.

The draft follows the chapter outline and addresses the guidance and questions set out in the approved Scoping Report. It involves an iterative and collective expert evaluation of the state of knowledge which entails the preparation and review of successive draft chapters and summaries:

The first draft chapters with Executive Summaries.

The chapter outline is considered in a First Author meeting where it is annotated and developed into a zero order draft for internal review. This is the basis for the development of the first order draft of all chapters, which is submitted to an independent external peer review open to all interested and qualified reviewers.

- *Each chapter contains an Executive Summary with 10-12 main findings (1500 words) aimed at technical decision makers and experts. The summary, which is not an abstract, but a synthesis, analysis and collective expert judgment of the chapter findings.*

² Relevant stakeholders are qualified national, regional and international scientific organizations, centres of excellence and institutions known for their work and expertise, including experts on indigenous and local knowledge on issues related to the Platform's functions and programme of work (IPBES/2/17, p. 20).

- *Each finding* is formulated in one or two bolded sentences and supported with a short paragraph of text. The findings are assigned confidence levels in accordance with agreed terms to communicate how robust the knowledge foundation is in terms of quantity, quality and consistency of evidence. Findings can be traced back to the chapter section (s) from which they are drawn, and provide an explicit link between the Summary for Policymakers and the supporting evidence in the chapters through a traceable, evidence ‘paper trail’.
 - telling a short, coherent and compelling story on the state of knowledge aimed at non-technical decision makers and the public;
 - conveying illustrative and striking perspectives, facts and numbers from the assessment; and
 - setting the stage for the negotiation of the SPM in IPBES Plenary, and once approved by the Plenary, serving as a key source for media and outreach material.

The second order draft chapters with Executive Summaries and the first draft Summary for Policy Makers (SPM).

The draft SPM and the second order draft chapters are submitted to an independent external peer review as well as to a review by governments and stakeholders. The process for preparing the draft SPM and the second order draft chapters is initiated at the Second Author meeting and takes into account the comments on the first order draft chapters received from the external peer review. This process for preparing the draft SPM and the second order draft chapters is iterative and mutually informative and supportive. It represents a sequence of steps aimed at facilitating a collective and iterative review, synthesis, analysis and assessment of the confidence levels of available knowledge. The SPM responds to the scoping document and is primarily based on the chapters’ Executive Summaries. It contains the main policy-relevant findings of the assessment in a synthesized and less technical language as follows:

- *Up-front, preferably fifteen to twenty top key messages (2000 words max) categorized under a few headings and presented without reference to the main chapters.* They represent the highest level of synthesis of the assessment, and may be structured differently from the set of main findings in the SPM. Each message is carefully formulated in a bolded sentence with assigned confidence levels, and supported by a paragraph of non-bolded text, which substantiates the message. These messages aim at:

Followed by a set of main findings categorized under a set of headings (10,000 words max). They tell a comprehensive story based on the state of knowledge specific to the scoping document and are aimed at the non-technical decision makers but with higher level of technical but non-jargon specificity than the top key messages. Each finding is formulated in one or two bolded sentences, substantiated and supported with statements amounting to one paragraph of text. The statements in the messages are assigned confidence levels and often start with the ones with highest confidence. Findings can be traced back to the underlining chapter sections from which they are drawn.

The final drafts of the Summary for Policy Makers and of the chapters with Executive Summaries.

The preparation of the final draft SPM and draft chapters is considered at the Third Author meeting and takes into account the comments received. Only under exceptional circumstances can literature references not mentioned in earlier drafts or brought up in the review process be added at this stage. This stage is critical for fine-tuning the articulation of key findings and policy relevant messages in the SPM, for developing graphics, for quality assurance of chapters and ensuring consistency and traceability of confidence statements between the SPM and the chapters. The drafts are process-validated³ by the Bureau and MEP and presented by the secretariat to the Plenary during Stage III.

³ “Validation” of the Platform’s reports is a process by which the Multidisciplinary Expert Panel and the Bureau provide their endorsement that the processes for the preparation of Platform reports have been duly followed (IPBES/3/18, p.75).

Box 3. Roles and responsibilities in an IPBES Assessment

The Plenary initiates calls for requests, initiates scoping, initiates assessments, approves Summary for Policy Makers and accepts the assessment chapters.

The Bureau oversees the policy and administrative aspects of the scoping process and the assessment process including the preparations of Summary for Policy Makers, takes part in the Management Committee and validates the final draft report. Some of its members may also act as review editors.

The Multidisciplinary Expert Panel (MEP) oversees the scientific and technical aspects of the scoping process and the assessment process including the preparation of the Summary for Policy Makers, selects nominated experts, takes part in the Management Committee and validates the final draft report. Some of its members may also act as review editors.

The Management Committees support the co-chairs and assist the Bureau, MEP and the secretariat in overseeing the assessment processes, including in the filling of expertise gaps and in handling non-performing authors.

Assessment Co-chairs oversee the preparation of an assessment report and ensure that the assessment is delivered to the highest scientific standard and addresses the key scoping questions.

Coordinating Lead Authors (CLAs) coordinate and oversee the expert evaluation in major sections and/or chapters of an assessment report and ensure that any cross-cutting issues are addressed in a complete and coherent manner.

Lead Authors (LAs) produce designated sections or parts of chapters by overseeing and undertaking an expert evaluation of the best information from the available literature or other fully-justified unpublished sources.

Contributing Authors (CAs) prepare technical information in the form of text, graphs or data for inclusion by the lead authors in the relevant section or part of a chapter.

Review Editors (REs) identify reviewers, work with authors to ensure that peer review comments are afforded appropriate consideration and advise on how to handle difficult issues and how to reflect genuine controversies.

Peer reviewers critically review the content of the assessment, and identify missing knowledge.

Fellows collaborate with CLAs and LAs, and, under their guidance, develop content for the chapters.

Technical Support Units (TSUs) provide technical, scientific and administrative support to assessment author groups and other assessment activities. They can also make accessible to reviewers sources related to the assessments which are not publicly available, and submit the material to the IPBES secretariat for archiving.

The IPBES secretariat support the Bureau, MEP and Management Committees in overseeing the production of the assessment report, oversee the provision of support by the TSU and store and provide access to assessment related materials that are not publicly available. Other key roles include supporting the Plenary, interacting with governments and ensuring that governments and other stakeholders receive all relevant documents.

Stage 3.

Approval/ Acceptance

The draft SPM and chapters are presented by the secretariat to the Plenary for its consideration. Governments are given the opportunity to submit written comments to the secretariat prior to the Plenary. These comments assist the assessments experts in preparing for the Plenary but do not result in a revised draft. The SPMs are normally discussed line by line in a contact group⁴ where they are provisionally approved and then forwarded to the Plenary for final approval. Plenary also accepts the chapters in consultation with the assessment Co-chairs and a representative group of CLAs in the presence of observers who may also speak on the matter.

The key actors in this stage are:

- Governments who through their representatives consider the drafts in dialogue with each other and the assessment experts and observers at the Plenary;
- Members of the Bureau who co-chair the contact groups under the Plenary where the drafts are considered;
- Assessment co-chairs and CLAs who are present on the podium to explain and defend the scientific basis for the findings and provide scientific clarification and advice on any reformulation of the findings under consideration; and
- IPBES chair who chairs the Plenary

Stage 4.

Use of the assessment findings

The release of the assessment report including front matter (preface), the SPM, the chapters and back matter (annexes) is supported by a communication strategy. The aim of the communication strategy is to ensure that the assessment results are appropriately communicated, and reaching the target audiences. The strategy includes media training of the experts who will act as spokespersons for the findings of the assessment and issuance of background material on the assessment. IPBES uses embargoed releases and interviews prior to the launch of the SPM, but only after approval of the SPM by member States in Plenary, as a means to ensure a disciplined approach to the dissemination of its key messages and findings.

Other activities which can be undertaken to encourage the use of the key findings of the assessment include:

- Working with key partners on the use of findings, such as the parties, UN agencies, Multilateral Environmental Agreements, other observers and stakeholders.
- Making knowledge and data gaps identified within the assessments available to the scientific community and research funding agencies (through the use of the knowledge catalysis function of IPBES), in order to generate further research, monitoring and modelling;
- Working, through capacity building activities, with countries to implement mechanisms which will help to leverage further impact of IPBES products such as through national platforms and national assessments
- Capturing information on policy support tools in IPBES assessments and include it in the Catalogue to allow users to search and access the tools.

⁴ Contact groups co-chaired by Bureau members may be established by the Plenary to address the issues raised and to revise the summary for policymakers accordingly for further consideration by the Plenary (IPBES/4/19, p.7).



Science and Policy
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