

AfriBes

Cross-cutting Intelligence on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services in Africa

Towards a social network of scientific and technical information for Africa

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Abstract

In 2005, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) was the first global assessment tasked with measuring ecosystem services for human well-being worldwide.

In 2006, an international consultation was launched to assess the need, scope and options for an International Mechanism of Scientific Expertise on Biodiversity (IMoSEB). The African regional consultation provided a set of needs and recommendations for how knowledge could be better harnessed to meet the needs of African Biodiversity stakeholders, namely: to foster a spirit of information sharing; to develop a wiki type system; creating a synergy between possessors of traditional knowledge and scientists; to promote South–South cooperation.

After completion of IMoSEB consultations and the MA Follow-up, UNEP (United Nations Environment Program) took the lead to set-up an Intergovernmental science-policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

An African social network could be seen as one of the means to create and strengthen social ties among African communities, researchers, and policymakers, and contribute to science-policy interface with individual inputs. Such a social and non-institutional network could also bring real added-value to existing information and expertise, while fostering their dissemination and use in decision-making processes for sustainable development.

This network on biodiversity and ecosystem, based on Web 2.0 technologies, and characterized by user participation, openness, interconnectivity and interactivity of web-delivered content will allow envisaging a

number of objectives: building up an African collective and distributed intelligence; using peer-to peer networking; -fostering dialogue; creating a forum between information suppliers and producers; and establishing an E-learning capacity building centre.

The development of AfriBes in 2010 will go through its representation as a case study of the EC-FP SPIRAL (Science-Policy Interface for Biodiversity).

Initial situation

The major national, regional or global initiatives to assess or use data, knowledge and know-how concerning biodiversity are the foundations for designing, constructing and assessing public sustainable development policies. African scientists take little part in these initiatives and it is essential that African expertise potential should be strengthened and mobilised to achieve a better balance in the global governance of biodiversity and ecosystem services.

These scientific data and expertise are also needed for decision-making on the management of biodiversity and the wide variety of activities that are closely related, such as sustainable use of renewable resources or ecological functions, prevention of emerging diseases and the protection of natural heritage.

The importance of the issues at stake and the complexity of the phenomena require policy-makers to use the most up-to-date knowledge and methods. Unfortunately, public and private policy-makers in Africa have little or no scientific expertise on biodiversity to meet their needs, since this expertise is hard to identify, mobilise and concentrate, even though it often exists.

In line with its commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity and within the high expectations raised at the 2005 Johannesburg Summit, France submitted to the G8 in 2004 the idea of an international conference on Biodiversity, Science and Governance, presented at the Unesco headquarters in Paris in January 2005. President of France at that time, Jacques Chirac, used the occasion to call for an “intergovernmental group on biodiversity change” like the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for climate change. Since then, the French government has given diplomatic and financial support to the consultation process for an International Mechanism of Scientific Expertise on Biodiversity (IMoSEB) to assess the requirements, design and options of such a mechanism. An international executive committee co-chaired by Michel Loreau (Canada) and Alfred Oteng-Yeboah (Ghana) launched the process in February 2006.

The consultative Process towards an IMoSEB

At its first meeting, the international steering committee of the consultative process towards an IMoSEB agreed for a consultation to identify and agree on the current gaps and needs for the biodiversity science-policy interface, and explored several possible options to address the needs identified during the first part of the consultation.

A 18-month action plan for the consultation was planned with first the achievement of a number of case studies (in 2006), and then, based on the outcome of these studies, different options and recommendations were proposed in 2007. Finally an open and broader consultation was done by holding meetings on each continent.

For the African meeting there were about a hundred participants from 28 countries including 26 countries of the African continent and islands, and 10 representatives of regional and international organisations

The African Consultation

The African regional consultation of the consultative process towards an IMoSEB was held from the 1st to the 3rd of March 2007 at the Palais des Congrès in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

After two and half days of discussions, the meeting recommended to:

- develop spirit of cooperation and information sharing;
- make sure traditional knowledge is conserved, respected and used;
- foster the dissemination of knowledge that may stimulate the emergence of small and medium businesses working in biodiversity sustainable use;
- mobilise expertise while taking account of the national, sub-regional, regional and international levels, bearing in mind that conserving biodiversity may involve specific requirements in different countries or sub-regions, and that some activities may be best undertaken at the national level;
- profit of the knowledge coming from the assessment of past or ongoing activities;
- use and develop tools to facilitate and sustain the process of capacity building and information sharing to build up collective, distributed intelligence (shared tools, but adapted to each one's needs);
- consider a “Wiki” type system, addressing the problems this can entail (i.e. information checking, validity and appropriation of the information, selecting the experts, etc.);
- include traditional knowledge and socio-economic aspects in order to ensure sustainable development of biodiversity while complying with local and national legislative structures;
- create synergy between possessors of traditional knowledge and scientists, and between scientists in different subject areas;
- promote South-South cooperation and stimulate it through North-South and South-North cooperation, considering the possibilities of providing a service of expert group reviews or joint reviews (a committee could be made responsible for responding to a specific demand);
- foster identification of fields of study and emerging questions on which no expertise exists yet;
- ensure in-service training for researchers, making use as much as possible of partnerships and existing scientific and technical information systems.

The challenge is to globalise knowledge, making global knowledge local and the most local knowledge global.

The meeting also requested the IMoSEB Executive Secretariat to explore the possibility of establishing a pilot project for Africa.

The results of the IMoSEB consultation

The IMoSEB consultation ended in 2007 presenting recommendations to implement an effective science policy interface for biodiversity and *Invites* the Executive Director of UNEP (United Nations Environment Program), in collaboration with the Government of France and other governments, the CBD (secretariat, SBSTTA and COP Bureaus) and the partners of the IMoSEB consultation process, to convene an intergovernmental meeting with relevant governmental, and non-governmental organisations, the relevant Multilateral Environmental Agreements, academic institutions and civil society (including local communities and indigenous people) to consider establishing an efficient international science-policy interface to address the above objectives, and with the following characteristics:

- a) be flexible, be intergovernmental but also include non-governmental stakeholders, and build upon existing networks of scientists and knowledge-holders,
- b) work in collaboration and as a follow up of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, consider the need, scope and requirements for assessments of biodiversity and ecosystem changes at the global level
- c) ensure the interaction with other relevant assessment processes,

d) develop monitoring procedures for measuring its effectiveness, and for programme evaluation, development and continuation.

Following these results, the release of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Follow Up Strategy, a new International consultation started in 2008 led by UNEP called IPBES (Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) . It should be achieved in fall 2010.

Towards an Afribes information system

In 2008, during the development of the IPBES consultation, the idea to develop a pilot project of science-policy platform on Biodiversity for Africa was still considered. The European Project SPIRAL “Science Policy Interface for Biodiversity: Research, Action and Learning” proposed to put Afribes as a case study in its project. In fall 2008, Cirad and FRB (French Foundation for Research on Biodiversity) decided to commit technical and human resources to push forward the Afribes project.

The aim of such work was to identify actors, works and initiatives in this field in Africa and to clarify, the needs and expectations of different actors and to establish the basis for the Afribes network. To achieve this aim, a survey was conducted among a number of networks, organisations, institutions and actors in Africa and elsewhere through a questionnaire sent by email. The results of this survey show a need to collaborate and exchange experiences around issues on biodiversity and ecosystem services.

On this basis and within the support of the Cirad Scientific and Technical Information System (SIST) and the involvement of a French Non Governmental Organization “ Outils Réseaux “ –with a strong expertise in supporting cooperative knowledge exchanges using information and communication technologies and open-source informatics Tools, a first wiki web site, <http://www.afribes.net> was developed.

This first afribes website, based on Web 2.0 technologies, and characterized by user participation, openness, interconnectivity and interactivity of web-delivered content will allow envisaging: building up African collective and distributed intelligence; using peer-to peer networking; fostering dialogue; emancipating people and communities; creating a forum between information suppliers and producers; establishing an E-learning capacity building centre.

What is Afribes offering now and what will do in the future?

Afribes is still in a development phase. The first tools proposed in December 2009 are a voluntary directory to drop and share publications, books, articles, conference proceedings, job opportunities, propose thematic surveys or discussion on the forum; and a search engine that will access to local and international databases, websites, scientific documents. At present more than 200 participants enrolled in the Afribes network but a lot of work is still needed to have a successful network. Even if a good indicator is the number of members involved we give a key priority to the interactions among all the members. Indeed, the issue of animation of this network is crucial in order to show the liveliness of the network and to be able to respond to members’ requests in term of development of the network (new characteristics and tools etc....)

The SPIRAL project will allow Afribes to have an increased visibility and be considered as an important opportunity to promote the scientific expertise on biodiversity and ecosystem services for African knowledge transfer.

Several partners and institutions have already shown a deep interest in the Afribes network and its framework. The possibility to duplicate it on specific research thematic (health, agriculture, adaptation and mitigation for climate change...) and in specific countries (Gabon, Madagascar...), reveals the important potential and interest of this tool to improve capacity building in Africa.

References

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