Networking at the science-policy interface: Reflections from the EKLIPSE project

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Short abstract

The EKLIPSE Mechanism seeks to identify evidence relevant to decision-making by establishing dialogue between science, policy and society, through engaging a wide variety of networks whose knowledge has a key potential impact on biodiversity, ecosystem services and related environmental challenges in a 'network of networks' (NoN). Empirical findings from a mixed-method study will be shared to shed light on key characteristics of networks currently engaged in science-policy interfaces, and to identify major challenges and gaps in knowledge and capacity which might hinder effective collaboration between science, policy and society.

Extended abstract

Various initiatives exist in Europe and beyond to improve the use of scientific and other knowledge forms in policy decisions related to biodiversity and ecosystem services (e.g. IPBES, FutureEarth, BiodivERsA, etc.). Nevertheless, many of such initiatives are facing challenges in terms of effective communication, mobilization of diverse knowledge forms, and implementation of research findings, mainly because science-policy interactions are understood as linear processes (Young et al. 2014). The SPIRAL and the KNEU projects engaged various actors of the science-policy interface in a participatory dialogue and provided recommendations at the European scale to improve science-policy interactions. Three basic functions were identified that should be fulfilled in order to make the science-policy interface more effective, which include (1) the synthesis of available knowledge, (2) the development of a common research strategy, as well as (3) networking and capacity building (Nesshöver et al. 2016).

Different institutional setups can be designed to implement the above functions, but two main types stand out: the network approach and the platform approach (Görg et al. 2016). On the one hand, the network approach suggests an open and light model, complementary to existing structures, which engages individual network members on a voluntary (self-registered) basis. The platform approach, on the other hand, suggests a membership at the organizational level, which needs a stronger governance structure, and while guarantees rights to member organizations, also imposes requirements on them (Görg et al. 2016). As the transition between these two extreme ends is gradual, the KNEU project developed a hybrid approach as well, mixing features of the network based and the platform approach (KNEU Team, 2014), which also served as the main building block for developing the governance structure of EKLIPSE. The mechanism being developed by EKLIPSE seeks to identify evidence relevant to decision-making by establishing dialogue between science, policy and society. To this end, the major supporting objective of EKLIPSE is to promote the engagement of those networks, including structured scientific network, informal ones, communities of practice, learned societies, etc., whose knowledge has a key potential impact on biodiversity, ecosystem services and related environmental challenges in a 'network of networks' (Watt et al., 2018).

Between September 2016 and January 2018 we collected quantitative (128 survey responses) and qualitative data (28 semi-structured interviews) to better understand how a NoN approach can support evidence based biodiversity policy. Existing networks included in the research showed diverse characteristics. The networks have quite similar and standard/conventional governing and decision-making structures, but (informally) some members are always more active while others are rather passive. Except some of the learned societies, existing networks engage a wide range of actors, from scientists and practitioners to NGOs and policy-makers. Decision making structures and procedures are generally heterogeneous. Smaller and more focused networks tend to have a simpler governance model (either governed by its members or by a small central body), while large networks including a diverse range of actors have more formalized decision making structures, and several governance bodies (e.g. executive board, advisors, and secretariat). Funding is a key constraint for many of the networks interviewed, therefore diversifying the revenue sources is an important strategy for many of them.

Science-policy-society interfaces are familiar phenomena to networks and their membership who answered our questions, most of them already taking part in such interactions. The general perception suggests that the more diverse actors involved, the more effective the science-policy-interface. Key actors to be included are scientists with background in multiple disciplines, policy-makers from the national to the EU level or even broader, and representatives of the civil society and the business sector. Engaging citizens in science-policy-society interfaces is a contested topic. Our respondents mostly suggested to engage citizens indirectly, through representative organizations (NGOs). However, organizations or networks that focus on citizen engagement were underrepresented in our sample, therefore the above finding might be a result of ignorance or perceived irrelevance in science-dominated networks. Networks and their membership face several challenges at the science-policy-society interface, ranging from limited resources (funding, staff and time available) and tensions within and between existing networks to effectively communicate and create relevant impact.

Several capacity and knowledge gaps were revealed by the study, which hinder effective participation in science-policy-society interactions and could be improved by targeted capacity building actions. These included knowledge gaps with thematic foci (e.g. uncertainty, ES disservices, assessment) and concerning the way how science can link up with the policy cycle; capacity gaps in communication, networking and knowledge generation/sharing, and capacity gaps in networks' administrative functioning (e.g. fund raising, human resources etc.). Preferred tools for capacity building included trainings, workshop and conferences, and some less conventional formats engaging a truly diverse audience (e.g. matchmaking, hackathon).

Partly as a response to the findings above EKLIPSE has organized several capacity building events, started to build its Network of Networks, and fostered societal engagement in science-policy interfaces. The presentation critically assesses how such activities opened up and strengthened the mechanism, and whether the Network of Networks model proved to be a viable approach to actively engage with existing networks in science, policy and society.

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