

# Reflecting on Science Uptake in Multilateral Environmental Agreements

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Science-policy interfaces (SPIs) are an increasingly important feature of the United Nations system, helping to generate, assess and mobilize scientific knowledge for policymakers. Recent efforts to establish new SPIs in areas including artificial intelligence, chemicals, waste and pollution, and antimicrobial resistance demonstrate growing demand for these institutions. Yet questions remain about how SPIs should be designed to ensure they are effective, adaptable and able to support policy decisions. Convened by the Global Governance Innovation (GGI) Platform, this collection brings together four experts who examine key design considerations, including governance structures, participation, institutional learning and knowledge uptake. Together, the contributions highlight lessons for building SPIs that can effectively support global governance challenges.

In recent years, the uptake of reports produced by science-policy interfaces (SPIs), such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) or the Global Environmental Outlook, has been a bumpy road. In 2018, a small number of countries, including the United States and Saudi Arabia, opposed welcoming the Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C (SR15) at the twenty-fourth Conference of the Parties (COP24) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), arguing for a weaker acknowledgement (“noting”) on the grounds that the report contained knowledge gaps and uncertainty.

The IPBES nexus and transformational change reports witnessed similar debates, with some countries opposing the welcoming of these reports within the Convention on Biological



*Photo by the author, 17 June 2026, Bonn Climate Conference*

Diversity.<sup>1</sup> Finally, in 2025, for the first time, the summary for policymakers of the Global Environmental Outlook, Seventh Edition: A Future We Choose, was not agreed upon, following disagreement between some governments and the report’s authors. The authors believed that some of the requested changes would “risk diminishing the assessment’s weight, reducing the political legitimacy needed to inform collective action, and impeding timely action on environmental goals ... .”<sup>2</sup>

These tensions clearly illustrate that scientific conclusions do not naturally flow from science into policy, as is often assumed. Scientific knowledge does not possess a superior status that would make it readily actionable or effectively acted upon. The way in which scientific knowledge informs policymaking at the international level, as well as across other levels of governance, is contingent upon windows of opportunity, the strategies of actors and epistemic alignments with policy needs and interests, among other factors. These tensions also reveal how poorly understood the processes are through which knowledge uptake is designed and orchestrated within international environmental agreements. It is therefore important to reflect on existing processes, with a view to placing the question of the design of knowledge uptake at the core of discussions shaping the establishment and working arrangements of SPIs.

There are generally no clearly defined processes through which the reports from these bodies are taken up in multilateral environmental agreements and organizations. In the case of the IPCC, for example, its rules of procedure do not formalize a process through which its reports are incorporated into the UNFCCC. The Principles Governing IPCC Work only broadly state that the organization “shall concentrate its activities ... on actions in support of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change process”.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Lim Li Ching, “CBD: Parties bicker over IPBES’ transformative change and nexus assessments”, *Third World Network* (2025). Available at <https://twon.my/title2/biotk/2025/btk251105.htm>.

2 Peter Alexander and others. “Protecting Science in Multilateral Environmental Assessments”, *Nature Sustainability*, vol 9, No. 2 (2025). pp 178–79. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-025-01727-1>.

3 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Principles Governing IPCC Work (IPCC, 2013). Available at <https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/09/ipcc-principles.pdf>.

The UNFCCC, for its part, mentions the IPCC only in its interim arrangements, noting that “the head of the interim secretariat ... will cooperate closely with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to ensure that the Panel can respond to the need for objective scientific and technical advice”.<sup>4</sup> There is no similar arrangement in the Paris Agreement, which instead recognizes, more broadly, the need to base its deliberations on the best available science.

Likewise, IPBES lacks a clear articulation of how its reports are integrated into relevant political institutions dealing with biodiversity, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity. Its rules of procedure state that IPBES can “respond to requests from governments, including those conveyed by multilateral environmental agreements related to biodiversity and ecosystem services ...”.<sup>5</sup> It may also collaborate with these institutions, but no formalized uptake process is specified.

This lack of clarity regarding how reports are taken up has resulted in an ad hoc incorporation. For instance, such reports may be referenced when they are released and subsequently mobilized through individual interventions by governments, or their authors may be invited for one-off presentations at mandated events. In the case of the IPCC, there have been instances where the organization was invited by the UNFCCC’s Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) or the Conference of the Parties to produce specific reports, such as the Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C (SR15). In recent years, the misalignment between the IPCC assessment cycle and the UNFCCC’s ambition cycle has proven particularly challenging, calling into question the IPCC’s capacity to provide inputs to support discussions on the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

Orchestrating knowledge uptake is thus often left to individual scientists, delegates and sometimes chairs (such as those of the subsidiary bodies), who must forge linkages between SPIs and multilateral environmental organizations through informal coordination, as well as through the organization of mandated events and dialogues. At the UNFCCC, for instance, the Research and Systematic Observation agenda item regularly considers reports and updates from the IPCC and other research organizations and may decide to highlight relevant findings for consideration across different work programmes. High-level decisions may also draw on IPCC conclusions, but this is often possible due to the efforts of coalitions that advocate for the inclusion of such findings, as illustrated in the 2023 Global Stocktake.

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4 “United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change”, UNFCCC, 1992. Available at [https://unfccc.int/cop3/fccc/climate/conv\\_023.htm](https://unfccc.int/cop3/fccc/climate/conv_023.htm).

5 Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, *Functions, operating principles and institutional arrangements of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (IPBES 2012). Available at [https://files.ipbes.net/ipbes-web-prod-public-files/downloads/functions\\_operating\\_principles\\_and\\_institutional\\_arrangements\\_of\\_ipbes\\_2012.pdf](https://files.ipbes.net/ipbes-web-prod-public-files/downloads/functions_operating_principles_and_institutional_arrangements_of_ipbes_2012.pdf).

A similar process occurs in the context of IPBES. For example, the UNFCCC’s SBSTA was invited in 2025 to consider IPBES outputs and discuss the relevance of their findings and implications for its work. However, this process was marked by controversy, as some countries, including Argentina, Brazil and the Russian Federation, opposed welcoming these reports, arguing that they were unbalanced and policy prescriptive.<sup>6</sup>

There is thus a need for greater discussion of what it means to design knowledge uptake for international SPIs, ensuring that clearly defined and regular processes are established through which their findings can be shared, discussed and integrated into the work of multilateral environmental agreements. This also requires careful attention to how these institutions are perceived, namely, not only as credible (consistent with established scientific methodologies and norms) but also legitimate (reflecting divergent values and perspectives) inputs.<sup>7</sup> This is particularly relevant in the context of the increasing politicization of science in multilateral environmental agreements.

This will also require adopting a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of science, acknowledging that far from speaking with a single, unified voice, it encompasses diverse forms of knowledge, each grounded in different assumptions about how global environmental problems should be governed. Scientific findings on the impacts of global environmental change on ecosystems and livelihoods, and on the need to transition away from environmentally unsustainable activities, will often constitute an “uncomfortable truth” for those who bear the greatest responsibility. However, not all tensions can be reduced to obstruction or denial. Discomfort can also stem from the limited attention to equity considerations in some scientific reports, which may assume equal contributions to addressing global environmental problems – despite widely unequal responsibilities – or privilege market mechanisms or technological fixes as primary solutions. There may also be blatant gaps between the financial needs identified in these reports and the actual provision and mobilization of finance, both between and within countries.

There is thus a need to acknowledge that the uptake of science in multilateral environmental agreements has never been, and will never be, a smooth process; that recognizing dissensus is as important as acknowledging consensus; and that distinguishing between different types of scientific inputs – rather than treating science as a homogeneous entity – may be an important step in moving beyond existing bottlenecks.

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<sup>6</sup> Lim Li Ching, “CBD: Parties bicker over IPBES’ transformative change and nexus assessments”.

<sup>7</sup> David W. Cash and others, “Knowledge Systems for Sustainable Development”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 100, No. 14 (2003). pp. 8086–91. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1231332100>.