

Impact on Decision-Making of Findings from National Ecosystem Assessments



Case study based on the Colombian experience: Proposal for Influence

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Introduction

This case study is based on the Colombian experience in the development of its national assessment on the state of biodiversity and ecosystem services. Its purpose is to provide guidelines for incorporating the information generated in these types of assessments into various contexts, especially in local and national political agendas, research agendas, and, in general, decision-making spaces.

The development of the National Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Assessment (hereinafter referred to as the Colombian National Assessment) brought together a group of over 100 thematic experts and knowledgeable individuals from Indigenous Peoples and black, Afro-descendant, Palenquero, Raizal, peasant, and local communities from all regions of Colombia. They dedicated at least 93,000 hours of voluntary work over nearly 4 years to gather and analyze more than 1,500 sources of secondary scientific information associated with terrestrial, freshwater, coastal, marine, and insular ecosystems¹.

The purpose of the Colombian National Assessment was to provide a clearer understanding in political realms by characterizing the historical context of the state and change of nature and society attributes and the reciprocal linkages between them. Additionally, it aimed to illustrate the potential trajectories of change and possible futures².

Thus, a national assessment not only expands a country's knowledge about its biodiversity and ecosystem services but also aims to be a scientific foundation for decision-making. Keeping this in mind and following the IPBES methodology, in addition to theoretical or technical chapters, both national, regional, global, thematic, and methodological assessments should include a Summary for Policy-Makers (SPM), which, based on the analysis of information, synthesizes and presents the main findings of the assessment in the form of key messages.

In the Colombian case, the SPM outlined four main messages constructed from a broad and cross-cutting vision of the country, informed by different perspectives and themes developed in its six technical chapters³:

1. Colombia, as a megadiverse, multiethnic, and multicultural country, has grounded the well-being of its people in nature, with an emerging understanding and inadequate appreciation of it⁴;
2. The most significant challenge for municipalities and districts is to reconcile different units of analysis, objectives, approaches, and guidelines derived from environmental territorial planning instruments, as they must address the environmental determinants established to carry out their territorial planning processes⁵;
3. It is essential to advance comprehensive knowledge about nature and its contributions to improve ecosystem integrity and people's well-being⁶;

1 Script for the presentation of the results of the National Assessment of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of Colombia, within the framework of the final report of the Final Project Report, contract No. 19-17-059-248SP of 2019, prepared by Rosario Gómez-S, p34

2 Summary for Decision Makers, National Assessment of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of Colombia, p27.

3 Ibid., p28.

4 Ibid, p36.

5 Ibid., p48.

6 Ibid., p64.

4. To break the dynamics of biodiversity and ecosystem services loss and degradation, it is crucial, in addition to implementing comprehensive nature management, to foster transformative changes through the dialogue of knowledge, generating transformative knowledge and quality information for effective decision-making⁷.

Decision-makers

A decision-maker encompasses any individual or collective entity affiliated with the public sector, at the local, municipal, regional, or national levels, whose work involves the development, management, planning, execution, monitoring, and evaluation of public policies⁸.

In the case of Colombia, the SPM is directed towards professionals involved in normative support and policy formulation, as well as the scientific community and funding organizations⁹.

Similarly, the discussions arising from the Colombian National Assessment concluded that when referring to decision-makers, it is not limited to national-level state actors who establish the national political and legal framework. It also includes local and regional actors, both from the state and the private sector, as well as organized communities, who make decisions that, in one way or another, impact biodiversity and nature's contributions to people¹⁰. This approach aims to influence decision-making in as many spaces as possible.

Returning to the concept of the system of actors¹¹, this approach theoretically allows for a two-way influence, both bottom-up and top-down, in the construction of public policies. It recognizes that state power, in a democratic context, lacks the capacity to make decisions in isolation and must depend on a multitude of other organized actors to conceive and implement public action¹². This perspective prompts an examination of the point at which the issue can be influenced in the formulation of public policy.

Moreover, it is crucial to understand that the key messages of a SPM place the intricate relationship between science and policy at the core of the discourse. The establishment of IPBES in the Busan Declaration in 2010 articulates, among other objectives, the following: "The new platform should identify and prioritize the key scientific information needed by policymakers at appropriate scales and catalyze efforts to generate new knowledge through dialogue with major scientific organizations, policymakers, and funding organizations, but it should not directly undertake new investigations"¹³. In this regard, it is proposed that the design of public policies takes into consideration the scientific evidence provided by the assessment.

Incidence process in decision-making

To begin, it is important to understand the process of public policy formulation to identify the right moment to include scientific evidence and achieve effective impact.

Charles Jones¹⁴ defined the sequence for public policy formulation as follows:

7 Ibid., p70.

8 Guide: How to Communicate Public Health Knowledge to Decision Makers, p14.

9 Summary for policymakers of the assessment report of the methodological assessment of hypotheses and models of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, p74.

10 Summary for Decision Makers, National Assessment of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of Colombia, p28.

11 Crozier M. y Friedberg E., L'acteur et le système, Paris, Seuil, 1977

12 Gaudin J.P., Gouverner par contrat, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 1999

13 UNEP, Report of the third ad hoc intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder meeting on an intergovernmental science-policy platform on biodiversity and ecosystem services, 2010

14 Jones C., An introduction to the study of public policy. Belmont, Wadsworth, 1970

- a. Identification of the problem – individuals or groups empower themselves on a subject for the production of public action. Integration of the problem into governmental work.
- b. Formulation of solutions or an action program.
- c. Decision-making at the opening of a “window of opportunity”.
- d. Implementation of the program.
- e. Evaluation of results.
- f. Termination of public policy.
- e. Evaluation of results.
- f. Termination of public policy.

This sequence indicates, on the one hand, that the key messages of such assessments should be conveyed to decision-makers (stage a) so that the process of designing public policies that formulate solutions to identified issues can commence. On the other hand, key messages can argue and scientifically reinforce issues already raised, as well as serve as one of the foundations for formulating solutions (stage b). But not only that, according to UNESCO, “decision-making must be accompanied by a process of monitoring, follow-up, and continuous improvement. This new paradigm changes the role of the scientific sphere, which ceases to be a mere provider of information and actively engages in decision-making processes and their evaluation”.

In this regard, the collective/actors conveying key messages can and should engage in the phases of the public policy design process outlined by Charles Jones, playing the following roles in each of them:

- a. Advocating for the inclusion of the issue in the political agenda.
- b. Supporting the formulation of solutions.
- c. Seizing opportune moments to communicate decisions made based on scientific evidence.
- d. Providing support during the implementation of public policy.
- e. Monitoring and tracking the impact of public policy.
- f. The phase that Jones describes as the “termination of public policy” is addressed as what is considered in political sociology as “inscription in the institutional agenda,” meaning that it should be integrated into periodic discussions, such as those arising from the national budget allocation, for example.

Proposal for the formulation of the advocacy action plan

In the case of the Colombian National Ecosystem Assessment, the following Action Plan was formulated as a policy tool for the adoption of the results in different national, regional and local bodies:

Definition of strategic lines: Prioritize strategic lines based on key messages outlined in the SPM to advance the design of actions to be implemented in the short, medium, and long term. To carry out this prioritization, a workshop was proposed with the support of the entities involved in the assessment.

IPBES National Committee: Validate and provide feedback on prioritized strategic lines through the IPBES National Committee. A strong leadership of the Committee was also proposed, to move and position the key messages of the RTD in different instances.

Triologue: The defined strategic lines will be the basis of the Action Plan, for the elaboration of which a triologue was proposed. The BES-Net Trilogues are multi-stakeholder dialogues between the three communities of policy, science and practice that focus on specific policy issues at the national and regional levels.

In this context, it is suggested to convene the scientific community, academia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Indigenous Peoples, local communities, the National Government (including sectoral ministries), and regional authorities (governorates, major mayors, and Regional Autonomous Corporations - CAR-) with the following objectives:

- Raising awareness of the relevance of the findings of the Colombian National Assessment.
- Facilitate the exchange of knowledge in the policy, science, and practical domains among communities regarding the assessment findings.
- Identify regionally and nationally relevant risks and opportunities for biodiversity and nature's contributions to people.
- Foster a commitment to collaboration and action to protect biodiversity and its contributions, endorsing the recommendations of the National Assessment of Colombia, in alignment with the competencies of participating organizations and the diverse realities and contexts at the regional level.

High-level meetings between government authorities and donors: Given that the implementation of the Action Plan is likely to require additional financial resources beyond those of the various participating organizations, it is suggested to hold at least one high-level meeting involving the leadership of the National Government and the IPBES National Committee. This meeting should include sectoral ministries, associations, and international donors with the aim of discussing the key messages of the Colombian National Assessment and the Action Plan formulated as a roadmap for regional collaboration.

Recommendations

To influence decision-making, it is important to consider the following aspects (see Table 1), which first indicate the type of influence one aims to achieve. Although the political scenario is crucial, there are other spaces where key messages from an assessment are equally necessary and relevant. Second, Table 1 suggests the channels that can be used to achieve influence. Lastly, it outlines the inputs, roles, and actions that can be undertaken to exert influence.

Table 1. Types of incident, channels and medium. Own elaboration.

Type of incident	Where? Through which channels?	How? By what means?
Evidence & Advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National and international discourses and debates on public policy • Formal and informal meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research and analysis of “best practices”. • Argument-based evidence. • Support provider with counseling. • Development and follow-up of new public policies.
Public Campaigns and Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public and political debates. • Public meetings, speeches, presentations. • Media: social media, television, radio, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public communications and campaigns. • Public education. • Sending messages. • Defense.
Lobbying and negotiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal meetings. • Informal and semi-formal channels. • Membership and participation in tables and committees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face meetings and discussions. • Relationship and trust. Direct incentives and diplomacy.

Lessons learned

It is essential to recognize that a national assessment can have various audiences, and thus potential users of key messages should be identified from the beginning. This will help determine the language of the SPM to speak in terms that resonate with the target audience and set expectations. Decision-makers are typically defined as political groups, but, as mentioned in the case study, there are diverse actors and scenarios of influence.

Clarity about the assessment’s target audience is crucial for forming the working group. In the Colombian case, co-chairs were selected based on the interest in influencing decision-making in political, scientific, and local scenarios.

Understanding that Colombia is a multicultural and multiethnic country, and requiring a specific chapter to delve into Indigenous and local knowledge, it is necessary to adapt the language of the SPM and design communication channels that enable conveying key messages to decision-makers from various Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

On another note, it is important to reach a regional analysis scale. In the Colombian case, achieving greater acceptance and ownership of key messages required refining the analysis scale so that local decision-making bodies, such as municipalities, feel that the situations, complexities, and needs of their territories are included in the assessment analyses. This presents a significant challenge, as there is often insufficient or hard-to-access information.

Given the different scenarios they navigate, the role of authors in disseminating and influencing the key messages of the Colombian National Assessment has been crucial. In this regard, it is essential for authors to empower themselves with assessment information and design strategies to maintain their interest in becoming ambassadors for the findings.

The impact of the assessment on decision-making in the case of Colombia is not unidirectional, as the influence in the academic sphere has been equally relevant. As an analytical exercise, academia can find in a single document updated and synthesized information on ecological economics, socio-environmental conflicts, drivers of biodiversity degradation, etc. This results in the design of new research projects based on the findings of the Colombian National Assessment.

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