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Biodiversity research: social sciences under-represented

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Bonn, 20 May 2016. The rapid loss of biodiversity can be traced back to human activity, and yet social scientists, who analyse the impact of human society on the environment, are under-represented in the field of biodiversity research.

Climate change, the destruction of forests and habitats, pollution, over-exploitation of resources, and poaching are all directly contributing to species decline. And then there are other factors which put indirect pressure on species diversity. For example, the only way to meet the growing demand for meat is to convert species-rich habitats to pasture and feed crops. At the same time, even well-intentioned climate change mitigation measures such as biofuel production can lead to biodiversity loss, as it requires significant changes in land use.

It is estimated that we are already losing up to 2,000 species each year, and that is only a rough figure, as most of the species in existence have more than likely not been discovered yet. On the whole, we are still very limited in our knowledge about how best to conserve biodiversity, and there are few resources to aid political actors in the decision-making process.

Consequently, the international community established the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) under the umbrella of the United Nations in 2012. IPBES deals with biodiversity issues in the same way that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) deals with climate change issues. As an interface between policy-making and research, IPBES is responsible for analysing independent and credible information on the state and development of biodiversity, on the factors causing its loss, and on possible options for action, thereby providing policy-makers with a better basis for making informed decisions on species conservation.

There are 124 governments and 1,000 experts involved in the work of IPBES. The body released its first report on biodiversity among pollinators in February 2016. The publication served as a real wake-up call, underscoring the importance of biodiversity for human life. It found that 40 per cent of pollinating insects are at risk of extinction and pointed out that fruit, vegetables, seeds, nuts, oil, coffee and cocoa, which together account for be-

tween USD 235 and 577 billion worth of global food production, are all dependent on these pollinators.

The links between humans and biodiversity are clear. As such, the original idea behind the establishment of IPBES was to create a platform for collaboration between researchers from a wide range of disciplines (including natural scientists, social scientists and human scientists) and representatives of indigenous and local communities. The reality is somewhat different. It is estimated that less than 10 per cent of IPBES experts are social scientists, despite researchers calling for a minimum quota of 30 per cent. This imbalance is also reflected in the field of biodiversity research as a whole. There is significantly more research funding available for natural scientists, which is in turn enlarging the pool of natural science experts.

Currently, 80 per cent of IPBES experts are proposed by member states and 20 per cent by environmental and research organisations. This means that only those specialists who already work with governments and are recognised as biodiversity experts are included. The heavy use of natural science terminology in IPBES tenders means that certain groups of researchers, such as anthropologists and ethicists, do not feel that IPBES is for them. However, the organisation has already made adjustments to its current tendering process, setting up new networks to appeal to and attract social scientists as well. Nonetheless, the ultimate responsibility still rests with governments, as it is they who must nominate the experts.

There is a need for greater diversity in biodiversity research. If social scientists are to be better integrated into IPBES's work, then more research funding must be provided as a matter of urgency for the social science dimension of biodiversity research. At the same time, IPBES and the member states themselves need to do more to mobilise and carefully select experts. IPBES aspires to influence future policy and research agendas through its reports and evaluation work. It would be a step in the right direction to recognise that we can only conserve biodiversity if we combine a wide range of experiences and scientific methods to tackle the far-reaching issues in this area.