

In 1988, Swedish academic Bert Bolin and colleagues set up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This body was to assess the science produced by the World Climate Research Programme and IGBP, themselves driven by the far-sighted Bolin. IPCC has proven to be highly successful and credible.



In the two decades or so since IPCC was set up, we have come to see that global challenges from poverty eradication and fisheries depletion to climate change and the financial crisis are interconnected and interdependent. What is now needed is a science-policy interface that connects the dots, proposes solutions and sounds alarm bells on emerging issues. It is striking that there is of yet no independent, impartial assessment that provides a comprehensive and integrated look at all the issues the planet faces.

For several years we at IGBP have been discussing the need for greater integration. In the policy brief "Interconnected risks and solutions for a planet under pressure" for Rio+20, commissioned by the Planet Under Pressure conference and led by IGBP, periodic global sustainability assessments are explicitly called for. One option is to create a multi-stakeholder panel with a focus on risks and solutions to produce regular state-of-the-planet assessments that include the environmental, social, economic and political dimensions. An assessment of this type would not compete or negate existing assessments such as the IPCC and Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). On the contrary,

it could build on them and maximise their effectiveness to provide the knowledge necessary for achieving global sustainability.

Recent developments suggest that things are finally moving in the right direction. The UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Global Sustainability has called for a sustainable development outlook report. And the

first draft of the Rio+20 outcome document recommends regular state-of-the-planet assessments. We at IGBP have spoken regularly with the Secretary-General's panel since its inception and are delighted to see our thinking resonated in the panel's report. IGBP also submitted a similar proposal to the Rio+20 draft outcome document. We now need a mechanism to implement these recommendations, including a full analysis of what structure will work best – a multi-stakeholder panel might be deemed too cumbersome, so a refined model may be required.

The new Future Earth – Research for Global Sustainability initiative could have an important role in this context. This ten-year initiative, being developed by the International Council for Science and other leading international organisations, including UN bodies and major science funders, is expected to emerge from the realignment of IGBP and the other global-change programmes. If this initiative is to be as successful as its predecessors, it will need an international policy forum that can use the new knowledge generated and synthesised. A new, overarching assessment that brings together all global interconnected challenges could provide this focus. ■

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