

Policy Engagement for Biodiversity Primer 3

Critical Perspectives on Engaging with Biodiversity-Related Policy

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While most researchers and policymakers agree policy engagement for biodiversity is necessary to enact positive change for biodiversity—whether that be meeting international targets or conserving the biodiversity of a local ecosystem—such engagement is not simple. Due to these complexities, critical perspectives have emerged surrounding the research-policy interface and biodiversity-related policy itself.

What are critical perspectives? ‘Critical’ does not necessarily mean ‘negative.’ Instead, critical perspectives are those that question, debate, test, and build upon others’ thoughts in the pursuit of developing one’s own idea of a topic. Critical perspectives are focused on the goal of a more just society. However, taking a critical perspective, one must ask, ‘a just society for whom?’

Emergent critical perspectives on biodiversity-related policy

In a review of recent research-driven editorials and opinion pieces across a variety of relevant blogs and news sources, three critical themes emerged: silos, priorities, and science-policy relations.

Silos: the policy engagement process is made difficult when different participants are siloed within disciplines, groups, or around particular issues.

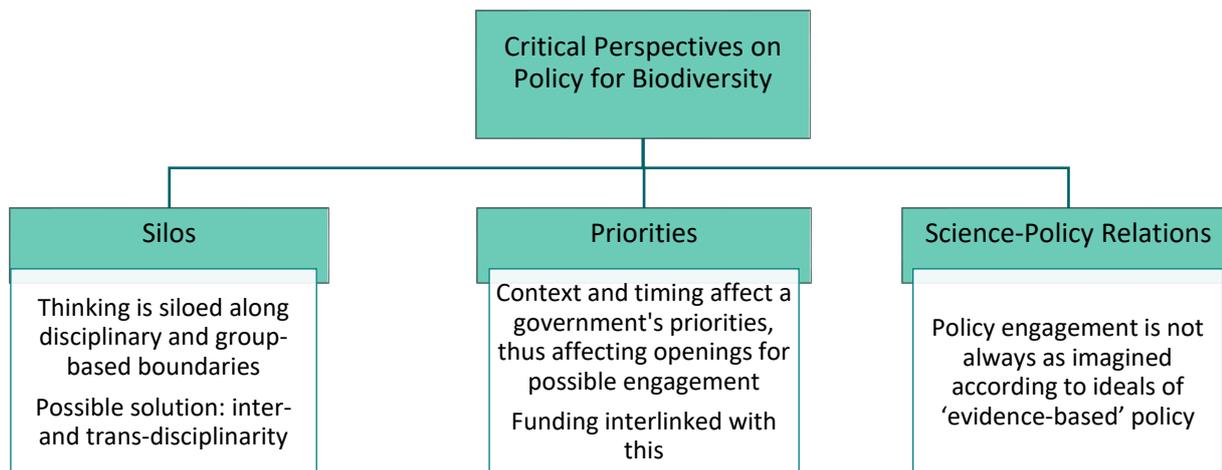
- One proposed solution is an increase in inter- and trans-disciplinarity throughout the policy engagement process^[1-4]. Interdisciplinarity is defined as collaborating between and across academic disciplines, while transdisciplinarity includes other groups (i.e. Indigenous peoples) in knowledge production. It is argued that including diverse perspectives will lead to more effective engagement and better outcomes for biodiversity.
- Silos are not limited to those wishing to engage in policy, but to policymakers as well. In the UK, for example, Boyd^[2] points out that scientists are underrepresented in parliamentary positions. Thus they will interact with biodiversity in different ways given the disciplines from which they came. Those wishing to engage must consider policymakers’ disciplines and tailor communication to ensure collaboration across silos^[1].

Priorities: policy engagement for biodiversity is always influenced by the priorities governments may have, affecting openings for engagement.

- These critical perspectives reflect upon the context and governmental discourses at the time of potential engagement. For example, the context of 2020 brought with it the COVID-19 pandemic. Some are worried that the pandemic has disrupted progress with biodiversity-related policy, and in turn, engagement. However, others ponder the potential of the pandemic to prioritise biodiversity policy, as it illuminates humans’ entanglement with the natural world^[5].
- Critical perspectives often focus on how government priorities are connected to the distribution of research funding. Engagement with policy for biodiversity will be encouraged or discouraged based on this funding and will thus influence the kind of science being done^[6].

Science-Policy Relations: There are different ways of thinking about the relations between researchers, policymakers, and the policy engagement process.

- These critical perspectives suggest that it matters how science-policy relations are conceived, as they are not always as imagined according to ideals of ‘evidence-based’ policy^[7].
- Instead, academics can learn to navigate these relations as advocates for particular approaches to policy engagement, as analysts that try to understand how science-policy relations work in practice, or as applicators that work within policy settings to support evidence-informed policy^[8].



What can we learn about policy for biodiversity from these perspectives?

Taking critical perspectives on policy engagement for biodiversity helps to ensure that researcher engagement with policy and its outcomes are critically reflected upon and improved through knowledge and experience.

According to science studies scholars, the more perspectives you accrue, the closer you will get to serviceable 'truth'^[9]. Critical perspectives, by definition, build upon other perspectives, inclusive to multiple knowledges and ways of doing policy for biodiversity, thus getting closer to truth and best interventions.

Critical perspectives often work off particular case studies, contextualizing past engagements with policy for biodiversity in relation to current ones.

In attempts to get closer to a 'just' society, critical perspectives teach us how policy engagement is best done, for whom, and by whom, keeping the process self-reflexive and adaptive.

What are future challenges and opportunities?

- One challenge is the presence of dualisms, or conceptual separations between two concepts or things, pervading policy (i.e. between humans and nature, or problems and solutions). These imposed, often Western, separations can limit who may engage with biodiversity-related policy, leading to exclusion of certain knowledges and limiting the innovation and effectiveness of the policies themselves.
- Another challenge is that policy processes are value-laden and researchers, no matter the discipline, are situated with their own biases. While this is a challenge, it also provides a future opportunity for researchers to be self-reflexive and form similar connections as they enter into policy discussions.
- One opportunity is opportunity to learn from critical perspectives and build findings from such debates into future goals for biodiversity. Researchers have an opportunity here to influence goals across levels.
- As discussed above, there is an opportunity to build inter- and trans-disciplinary practices through policy engagement for biodiversity. As biodiversity is so multifaceted, so too should be the engagement in policy.

References

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For further reading see Primer 1: 'Biodiversity-related policy and why academics might engage with it' and Primer 2: 'Resources for effective engagement with biodiversity-related policy' of the Policy Engagement for Biodiversity Initiative, University of Oxford, August 2021. This publication arises from activities funded by the Higher Education Innovation Fund through the Oxford Policy Engagement Network (OPEN) Leaders Scheme. Visit the Oxford Policy Engagement Network website at www.ox.ac.uk/policyengagement for more resources and information.