

The challenges of implementing global policy: the ecosystem approach and forests

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Headlines

- Numerous policy approaches have been developed for the conservation and management of the natural environment and to reduce biodiversity loss and ecosystem destruction.
- These approaches tend to be distinct but overlapping, which can be challenging for those involved in their application.
- The frequency of change between different and often ambiguous environmental concepts provides further difficulty to those involved in their implementation.
- Therefore, there is a need for clear definitions, principles and guidelines for any policy innovation to ensure that it yields the intended effects.
- There is also a need to drastically reduce the frequency of environmental policy innovations – there needs to be continuity and consistency for any policy approach to be successful.
- Similarly, there is a need to address the frequent conflation of policy approaches as it hinders their successful implementation.

Introduction

Numerous policy approaches have been developed for the conservation and management of the natural environment. These include the ‘ecosystem approach’, the concepts of ‘ecosystem services’, ‘multi-purpose forestry’ and ‘sustainable forest management’. These approaches are all different from one another but often overlap, which can be challenging for those involved in their implementation and practical application. The ecosystem approach, for example, despite being formally endorsed by the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in 2000 has been difficult to implement in specific environmental contexts and institutional settings¹.

Like many other international agreements, the CBD’s 12 ecosystem approach principles and five supporting guidelines are vague and open to a range of interpretations. Global environmental policy approaches are often kept ambiguous to satisfy the needs of the multiple stakeholders involved. Governments have therefore

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found it difficult to distinguish the CBD's ecosystem approach from other approaches. These governments are already obliged to implement other approaches, such as the concept of ecosystem services, sustainable forest management and integrated ecosystem management through their commitments to various international environmental agreements.

This paper explores the ways in which governments implement these different policy approaches and makes recommendations about how to make the global environmental policy landscape more practical and effective in the future.

Biodiversity conservation – the ecosystem approach

The CBD has defined the ecosystem approach as “a strategy for the integrated management of land, water and living resources that promotes conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way.” The ecosystem approach is the CBD's primary framework for delivering its three main objectives: conservation, sustainable use and benefit sharing on the level of ecosystems, species and genes².

The CBD's ecosystem approach principles and guidelines were formally adopted in 2000 and aim to support the implementation of the ecosystem approach. Principle five of the twelve ecosystem approach principles states that the “conservation of ecosystem structure and functioning, in order to maintain ecosystem services, should be a priority target of the ecosystem approach.”³

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) assessed the state of the global environment and integrated the concept of ecosystem services in the international policy arena by giving explicit attention to the benefits or ‘goods and services’ that nature provides to human wellbeing³. The concept of ecosystem services has also been adopted by the United Kingdom (UK) National Ecosystem Assessment, the first national level assessment since the MEA⁴.

The increasing prominence given to the concept of ecosystem services, especially since the publication of the MEA and the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in 2012, adds to the complexity involved in the implementation of the CBD's ecosystem approach³. Many decision-makers and environmental managers, both in the UK and elsewhere, appear to struggle to understand the differences between the ecosystem approach and the ecosystem services concept and use them interchangeably⁵. Others layer the idea of ecosystem services on top of existing environmental policy concepts. In UK forestry, for instance, ecosystem services have increasingly been layered on top of the prevailing sustainable forest management approaches⁶.

Sustainable forest management

Since the early twentieth century, forestry in the UK has been subject to a series of policy reassessments and changes in emphasis. Beginning with the 1919 Forestry Act⁷, policy has focused on timber production through organised plantation forestry. This was followed by a gradual widening of forestry objectives, (commonly termed multi-purpose forestry), especially from the late 1980s onwards, and the adoption of sustainable forest management in the 1990s⁸.

Sustainable forest management has since been the overriding guiding principle for forest management in the UK. It places particular emphasis on the need to balance economic, social and environmental objectives⁹. The Statement of Forest Principles, a non-legally binding authoritative statement of principles for a global consensus on the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests, has defined the concept of sustainable forest management as follows: “forest resources and forest lands should be sustainably managed to meet the social, economic, ecological, cultural and spiritual needs of present and future generations.”¹⁰

Sustainable forest management displays many elements of the ecosystem approach¹¹. In the UK, a lot of the principles of the broader ecosystem approach are embedded in two existing forestry mechanisms: the UK Forestry Standard and the voluntary certification schemes. Over the years, a balanced compromise has evolved under sustainable forest management in the UK to give equal emphasis to the social, economic and environmental objectives of forestry. These include timber, fibre and fuel wood production, carbon sequestration, and the recreational and landscape importance of forests.

There is, however, a potential danger that the recent emphasis on ecosystem services and the development of markets and payment schemes for ecosystem services, could impact on current sustainable forest management practices. There are concerns that this shift, if not fully embedded within the framework of sustainable forest management, could lead to a return of unsustainable forestry practices and to a management focus on single services for which there is a market, e.g. the provision of carbon sequestration schemes or fuel wood⁹.

Challenges of global policy implementation

Today, and in common with most of the western world, environmental policy and management in the UK is affected by a range of world views and concepts, translated into various transnational policies and regulations. Figure 1 illustrates the pathway from global influences to local practice.

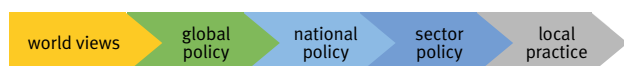


Figure 1: Illustrates the policy pathway from world views through national policy, to local practices.

Globally conceived policy approaches, however, tend to be interpreted and used in different ways by a wide range of stakeholders and used to support and justify different objectives, often without consideration of their true meanings as shown in Box 1. A lack of clear definitions, principles and/or guidelines has led to confusion and poor policy implementation⁶.

Box 1: Understanding conservation and forestry approaches

Our analysis found that stakeholders involved in the implementation and practical application of global environmental policy are found to:

- Frequently confuse policy concepts, especially during the early stages of a new introduction.
- Tend to conflate old and new concepts, with different levels of understanding in different communities.
- Seem to use the specific terminology of different concepts interchangeably, arguably layering new ideas on top of existing ones.
- Sometimes consciously re-brand existing ideas because it better suits their goals and interests.

These stakeholders were mostly conservation and forestry practitioners, but also policymakers and researchers.

There was also some indication that conservation and forestry practitioners were getting weary or even disillusioned about the frequency of policy innovations¹².

Motivations for the different interpretations and uses of policy concepts range from economic, environmental or partisan political motives. For example, the development of the ecosystem approach to reduce biodiversity loss and ecosystem destruction coincided with a general political trend towards the increased use of market-based approaches in public policy¹³. The concept of ecosystem services (which was given much emphasis in the CBD’s fifth ecosystem approach principles and in the MEA), lends itself to be used in such an economic way, indicated, for example, by the strong interest in the development of markets and/or payment schemes for ecosystem services (PES)¹⁴.

Ironically, the ecosystem approach’s strength in providing a flexible and transferable set of principles and guidelines to allow the integration of different objectives from a wide range of stakeholders, also appears to be its main disadvantage. This has been highlighted by the strong emphasis given to market-based

approaches and the provision of ecosystem services, as stated in the CBD’s ecosystem approach principle five. The recent anthropogenic and neoliberal trends in international policymaking have, arguably, swayed the shift towards this perspective¹⁴.

On the other hand, the complexity of natural systems and the even more complex socio-economic and ecological relationships involved in the functioning of healthy ecosystems made the comprehensive implementation of the CBD’s ecosystem principles challenging and potentially unappealing.

Conclusion

Our research has found that the application of globally conceived policy approaches are frequently presenting policymakers and environmental managers with a significant set of difficulties, including their confusion and conflation, and frequency. There are too many approaches that are interpreted and used differently by various people in many countries and contexts. Stakeholders involved in their implementation are also getting weary or even disillusioned about the frequency of policy innovations.

Although many emphasise the importance of incorporating diversity and the voices of indigenous people, and call for a dial back of global demands for control and standardisation, there is a pressing need for clear definitions and equally unambiguous principles of any policy approach to ensure that its implementation yields the intended effects. Above all, environmental policy innovations need to be drastically reduced both on the international and national level. With this briefing, we would like to stimulate a critical debate on this urgent need.

Policy recommendations

- There is a need for international and national policymakers, especially the CBD, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and UK Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) to drastically reduce the frequency of environmental policy innovations – there needs to be continuity and consistency for any policy approach to be successful.
- There is a need for international and national policymakers – especially the CBD, the FAO, and Defra – to provide clear definitions, principles and guidelines for any policy innovation.
- Similarly, there is a need for Defra, its agencies and their devolved counterparts to address the frequent conflation of policy approaches as it hinders their successful implementation. One way of doing this could be to articulate environmental policy approaches in a way that it is generally acceptable, easy to understand conceptually and more concrete to facilitate implementation.

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