Interdisciplinary conference in Berlin, 16–18 Sep 2019

Divergent values in sustainability assessments: Love them, leave them, or change them?

***** CONFERENCE REPORT *****

Our interdisciplinary conference 'Divergent values in sustainability assessments: Love them, leave them, or change them?' brought together leading experts on values and global environmental assessments to explore proposals to integrate value diversity. The key question of this conference was: How to organize a legitimate assessment of the desirability of future pathways & scenarios in light of divergent normative viewpoints in the field of environmental governance?

This 3-day international event was organized by the MCC Berlin and financially supported by the German Committee of Future Earth. 43 experts from 10 different countries participated in this conference that took place on a CO_2-neutral solar ship (https://www.seminarschiff.com/) on the Spree river in Berlin. One main theme that emerged was that global assessments such as those conducted by the IPCC and the IPBES currently handle values very differently and have different approaches to include the diversity in normative viewpoints. The IPCC Working Group III has primarily employed a single (welfare utilitarian) value perspective thus far, while the more recent IPBES process has made addressing value diversity a core task. The absence in particular of environmental values – such as inherent value of nature – from the IPCC was highlighted, especially in light of empirical findings demonstrating that non-anthropocentric perspectives are common across the world. As a result, assessment practitioners exchanged ideas on how value diversity could be better reflected in future.

An overarching theme of all three days was the promise of deliberative approaches to respond to divergent values and viewpoints. The promise of deliberation to clarify values and to facilitate policy and learning was presented from different standpoints, and included diverse conceptions of what

deliberation involved spanning political science and deliberative democratic theory, social learning, philosophy, and economics. Deliberation emerged as a meta-method for approaching value and policy disagreement both within and beyond assessments.

Dietz argued that values and worldviews fairly stable and change little over time, and are mediated through beliefs and contextual factors. Moreover, given the 'value-action gap', social norms are the key lever for behaviour change rather than values themselves. Drawing upon his extensive experience participating in such assessment processes, Dietz also emphasised the importance of clarifying the concepts we use among research traditions, to enable fruitful interdisciplinary collaborations. Concerning values in particular, this is especially important given the variety of relevant research traditions and discourses.

Saner also reflected on his experience in assessment processes, and the challenges he has observed in interdisciplinary collaboration, especially between descriptive and evaluative disciplines such as the natural sciences, on the one hand, and environmental philosophy on the other. Saner highlighted the tensions raised by seeking policy relevance and scientific rigour, and the trade-offs facing researchers in prioritising one over the other.

Similarly, Kenter and Raymond argued that some general values are highly stable and change little, while contextual values such as some environmental values depend upon interactions between people and places. Kenter proposed an innovative method of deliberative valuation to respond to the huge variety of values relevant for global environmental assessments, arguing that deliberative valuation can integrate instrumental, symbolic, deliberative, creative, and pragmatic lenses through which values are articulated.

Raymond explained how the IPBES process is currently adopting plural methods to incorporate multiple and potentially incommensurable environmental values in the assessment of ecosystems and biodiversity, and detailed a set of new theoretical papers outlining innovative methods of plural environmental valuation.

Eser explained how the concept of biodiversity is simultaneously descriptive and normative/evaluative, and thus how contrary to appearances this is not a pure 'scientific' concept. Drawing on recent experience in the IPBES process, Eser explained how the challenges of multiple value perspectives posed problems for defining and measuring biodiversity legitimately.

Niemeyer showed how case studies of mini-publics revealed that through deliberation people with apparently very opposing values and policy preferences converged on complementary discursive frames. Niemeyer also argued that it was the presentation of policy in media and by politicians themselves which give the appearance of irreconcilable value disagreement, and that this appearance can be corrected through deliberation.

Horcea-Milcu presented a case study showing how envisaging ideal environmental management scenarios builds more buy-in from participants, even among individuals whose values were not adopted. Scholz's case studies explored when social learning occurs in participating in decision-making processes, and the benefits and limitations of reframing goals and values for overcoming disagreement. Koessler showed how taking the perspective of others can overcome divergent viewpoints, can facilitate information exchange and empathy. Under certain circumstances, perspective taking can thus support collaboration and reduce divisions about policy choices.

Deliberation and value disagreement in assessments of climate change was also a key theme. Shue highlighted the importance of carbon removal and on climate scenarios produced by Integrated Assessment models, and cautioned against unrealistic research assumptions having unwanted

practical effects, drawing upon his earlier research on torture being improperly used as a justification for torture during G. W. Bush's prosecution of the 'war on terror'. Similarly, Shue argued that there was a need for researchers themselves to think carefully about the research they conduct, especially in the context of current global assessments on climate mitigation and the prospects of unwarranted reliance on unproven technologies.

Discussion highlighted how models informing global assessments of climate change involve normative choices. In his input, Adler showed how different normative principles support the design and adoption of rival social welfare functions, which are key components of climate mitigation models. Adler defended a priority-based view in place of the common focus on utility maximisation.

Kowarsch and Lenzi presented a proposal to integrate deliberation and ethical analysis into the design and ex post evaluation of climate mitigation scenario research. This proposal engaged with controversies raised by 'carbon removal' technologies in many climate mitigation scenarios, including those produced by the IPCC's AR5. In discussion, several added that IAMs and climate pathways be viewed as political rather than merely technical choices.

From the IPCC context, Kriegler provided a detailed update of how the most recent integrated assessments are constructed, and highlighted conflicts between normative assumptions and descriptive analysis. Kriegler defended the exploratory approach of IAMs, but conceded that the 'performative' aspect of such models raised problems for modellers as policy advisors and discourse shapers. With the example of bioenergy, Creutzig then explained how the disciplinary perspectives within IPCC assessments prioritise certain value perspectives in the presentation of climate solutions. Creutzig also explained how the IPCC's sixth assessment report will attempt to integrate ethical concerns in its main chapters, going beyond the experience of the AR5.

Thoren examined the context in which integrated assessments develop, highlighting potential conflicts given the interdisciplinary nature of models, and conflicts created by the policy context to which such models are addressed. Low's presentation on disputed expert judgements of the feasibility of carbon removal developed this theme further, interviewing integrated assessment modellers and critical experts on how they thought about feasibility and determined the feasibility of large-scale implementation of carbon removal, drawing attention to how expert judgements lead to a kind of anticipatory governance.

Morales explored narratives of sustainable transition and their importance for framing societal discourses surrounding the production of global environmental assessments, and offered a method for analysing the normative content of such narratives.

Bohle proposed a geoethics approach for integrating human beings and ethics into the geosciences, and into Earth system science and governance. He emphasized the need for deliberation in light of the lack of widely shared theoretical frameworks and values. Bellaubi examined how pedagogical and deliberative approaches to geoethics can emphasise leadership (addressing critical institutions and power) and cultural identity (emphasizing an "eco-ideology of hope" and the common "noosphere"). To substantiate this, he drew on case studies in Russia and Russian folk traditions of environmental value and protection, as, for instance, revealed in traditional "kitchen talks".

Vladimirova contrasted Sustainable Development Goals 4 (education) and 12 (responsible production and consumption), and argued that SDG 4 far better integrates value diversity and justice concerns than the more superficial SDG 12, in which relevant justice dimensions are completely absent. One reason is that there was more time and public participation for the development of SDG 4.

The theme of legitimacy provoked sharp exchanges. Drawing on bioethics methodology, Callies argued that the institutional legitimacy of assessments should be determined in light of normative criteria developed in a three-step process. From a different perspective, Gillerke argued that democratic legitimacy required creating institutions to represent future generations in the deliberative process, but that representative social discourses rather than individuals ought to be represented. These normative perspectives were challenged by researchers from the social sciences, who were interested in the perceived legitimacy of assessments and associated governance institutions.

Fesmire defended a general pragmatist conception applicable to climate ethics, which highlighted deliberation and social learning within research and policy as means to overcome value disagreement. Fesmire primarily cautioned against attachments to fixed moral positions which can often be more severe when left implicit than when articulated in a social context.

A first panel discussion – involving Jafry, Scholz, Bohle as well as Boettcher (moderator) – addressed the question as to how to implement the deliberative ideas proposed during this conference. Panelists inter alia emphasized the need for open spaces for (facilitated) dialogue, more capacity building and leadership, as well as addressing power issues. In a second panel discussion with the four keynote speakers (Dietz, Shue, Adler, Niemeyer), bridging different disciplinary paradigms and viewpoints turned out to be a crucial task, along with keeping an eye on basic human rights and power issues within deliberation processes.

A general take-away of this stimulating conference was that integrated scientific assessment processes are inherently political and value-laden in any case. They need more legitimate, deliberative responses to existing divergent normative viewpoints. As Niemeyer put it, the public is not stupid, but the politics and assessment design sometimes are. In the end, it's not primarily about changing values, but rather about better integrating and constructively deliberating about values in connection to (policy) beliefs and norms and alternative options. This can, for example, lead to the identification of policy overlap despite value disagreement, and to the activation of "sleeping" (e.g., pro-environmental) values by learning about ways to realize them, i.e. to overcome the value-action gap.

Further collaboration – including in terms of follow-up meetings and joint paper projects – on participatory, inter- and transdisciplinary deliberation about policy alternatives is envisaged, to test whether deliberation can activate pro-sustainability values and facilitate overlap despite moral disagreements.

For questions and comments please do not hesitate to contact the organizers Dr. Martin Kowarsch (kowarsch@mcc-berlin.net) and Dr. Dominic Lenzi (lenzi@mcc-berlin.net).


First, there was harmony
"Was this a Calophasia lunula? Yes, yes!"


Welcome


MCC


Social
values