Contribution from the International Science Council (ISC) to the second session of the ad hoc open-ended working group on a science-policy panel to contribute further to the sound management of chemicals and waste and to prevent pollution (OEWG-2)

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The International Science Council (ISC), which convenes a global membership of 245 scientific organizations, including international scientific unions, associations, and national and regional scientific organizations, has developed the following contribution in preparation for the second session of the ad hoc open-ended working group on a science-policy panel (SPP) to contribute further to the sound management of chemicals and waste and to prevent pollution (OEWG-2). The ISC has consulted a number of experts who have reviewed key documentation, i.e. OEWG 2.3 Draft scope and objective, functions, and operating principles and OEWG 2.6 Draft overview of work-related processes and procedures.

Several critical points and considerations have emerged from the review, ranging from clarifying the panel's impact and scope to scrutinizing operational challenges and functions.

As an overall comment, while the efforts to leverage existing experience at the science-policy interface (SPI) from relevant literature and engage in a consultative process are commendable, many experts have highlighted the considerable influence from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) model over the initial shaping of the SPP. It is therefore recommended that the relevance and limitations of the global assessment model such as IPBES to be discussed to enable learning and innovation. It was equally suggested that it might be beneficial to actively involve experts from the SPI academic field in guiding the process and providing input, albeit in a non-prescriptive manner.

The following comments and suggestions based on the existing documentation seek to inform the creation of a robust, responsive, and inclusive platform.

Vision, impact and scope of the panel

- It is recommended that the **intended impact of the panel to be clearly stated**, and a **theory of change** developed at this design stage. In addition, the panel's relevance (including over existing mechanisms) ought to be explicitly stated.
- It is suggested for the **focus of the panel to be global, while explicitly considering multi-scale scale impacts through to the local levels**. Chemical pollution at a global scale can have very local impacts and indeed these local impacts may be the principal symptom or consequence that leads to the recognition of a problem. A global vision in assessments is encouraged, with a specific emphasis on considering and evaluating impacts at local, national, and regional levels as solutions will be global in nature but applied locally. For example, the issue of (poor) urban air quality is global in the sense that the same problems occur all over the place, and often have much similarity of cause, but the extent of the impacts can be quite variable, dependent on local geography. The discussions/solutions may well be globally relevant. Much energy and resources can be diverted into a set of regional assessments that add little value.

Proposed functions of the SPI and operational challenges

Challenges related to practical implementation and emerging SPI lessons

- Unpacking and further defining **the nature of the intended functions of the science-policy panel and its practical implementation** is recommended. The current approach seems to emphasize political and diplomatic aspects rather than fostering a critical evaluation of relevant data and practical policy steps. In addition, no reference is included to the **operational challenges** associated with, for example, cross-scale interactions, effectively combining different knowledge systems beyond academia - all of which must be carefully addressed through, for example, establishing clear guidelines, frameworks and methodologies. The document does not mention a learning/reflexivity dimension, which is key in order to constantly self-assess, monitor impacts and improve practices.
- **Drawing lessons from existing mechanisms to build an effective interface** is important. For example, existing SPI mechanisms face a significant drawback by relying too heavily on a single sector and specific scientific disciplines, neglecting a balanced input from various fields. To truly enhance communication between scientists and policymakers, **it is essential to incorporate diverse scientific perspectives**. This entails fostering exchange among government representatives across sectors and engaging stakeholders for a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to complex issues. The emphasis on assessments as a final product raises concerns about the SPI's commitment to fostering inclusive and collaborative spaces across science, policy, and practice.

Assessment (b) and horizon scanning (a) functions

- The **high risk that the assessment function (b) might overshadow other equally important functions of the panel** was highlighted. Often assessments produce useful but not always usable knowledge. Additionally, it is recommended to clarify the **relationship between function (b) and (a)**. It is essential to determine whether assessments will be based on horizon scanning or if they will follow separate tracks. In addition, clarifications should be brought regarding how the horizon scanning function will be linked to other foresight exercises, for example, the foresight that UNEP is undertaking with the ISC.

Communication and outreach function (c)

- **Communication between scientists and policy-makers is crucial but appears to be slightly diluted** with the inclusion of other activities under this specific function. Function (c) would benefit from reconsideration as it is a combination of different and not always related activities. Assigning more weight and visibility to the communication role is suggested, as it constitutes the real interfacing activity. It is equally important to highlight the prerequisite for specific skills, competences, and activities to effectively support an effective communication, which goes beyond convening the two groups. Additionally, expanding the communication function to also include other relevant stakeholders and practitioners is recommended.

Capacity building function (e)

- Text suggests that capacity building will be provided through the four functions. While enhancing capacity is a crucial aspect, the proposed approach, which appears to be influenced by the IPBES model, has many limitations[1]. A comprehensive strategy is essential, with **focus going beyond governmental and public capacities or scientific skills**. This involves addressing institutional capabilities, such as the capacity of scientific institutions as knowledge providers and intermediary organizations to synthesize knowledge and facilitate collaboration between scientists, policy-makers and other actors involved in the policy process and implementation, and the role of public administrations in coordinating co-design and co-implementation of knowledge for action.
- Additionally, **recognizing the profession of SPI** as a meso-level capacity is essential, requiring dedicated efforts to enhance its overall effectiveness and legitimacy including through reflexive learning. Moreover, it is recommended for capacity building to encompass the Global South's development in science-policy interfaces and facilitating rapid technology assessment and transfer among different regions.

Diversity of expertise of the panel, recruitment and recognition

- **Providing clarity on the specific expertise and skill sets required for the panel** is recommended. It is important to define the types of individuals and the full scope of expertise needed, while developing strategies for identifying and recruiting them effectively.
- **Multidisciplinary representation across a wide range of scientific fields across the natural, social, human and health sciences** is crucial for shaping an impactful panel. The documents ought to explicitly emphasize the necessity of mobilizing a broad range of expertise to address the panel's objectives effectively. In addition, it is recommended to meaningfully engage and ensure participation in the SPP process of other stakeholders such as policy makers, manufacturers, government officials, regulators and more.
- **Recognition from host institutions for the panel contributions of participants** is encouraged. Due to participant fatigue and the voluntary nature of contributions to this kind of global science-policy mechanisms, supporting the participation of experts, irrespective of their affiliation with the Global North or Global South, is crucial. This is particularly important considering that experts might encounter challenges in securing national support for their involvement.

[1] Review of the first work programme of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), February 2019: https://www.ipbes.net/resource-file/24663

Closely working with the scientific community and other stakeholders

- **Closer involvement with the wider scientific community** is recommended as it can catalyze knowledge and action mainly on developing environment-friendly chemicals, assessing environmental impacts of new or alternative chemicals, formulating science-based policies for sustainable chemical production and waste management, promoting international research collaborations on recycling and recovery of chemicals and waste, and forming an international partnership among various stakeholders for sustainable use of chemicals.
- **Developing an effective participatory mechanism employing a more developed and nuanced approach** is recommended**.** Lessons from the participatory mechanism for Indigenous peoples in IPBES, which is not fulfilling its purpose, are important to inform the process. Differentiating between participants' engagement in the platform as knowledge holders/experts from participants' engagement as stakeholders, which require distinct rules of procedures and modalities of engagement, is equally advised.

Coordination and close work with existing related bodies

- It is recommended that **all relevant international science-policy mechanisms** covering aspects related to chemicals, waste and pollution to be mapped and explicit measures undertaken to promote effective and synergistic collaboration. Consideration should be also given to other emerging scientific mechanisms such as the potential scientific body related to the international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment. This is particularly important given the opportunity to establish working procedures from the outset, defining how these two bodies would interface to enhance effectiveness and avoid duplication.
- **A liaison-style mechanism** could be equally developed as part of the panel's evolution to facilitate collaboration and coherent and joint action among various panels, outlooks, and initiatives addressing global challenges. Examples include the Biodiversity Liaison Group and the Joint Liaison Group for the Rio Conventions.
- A sole **focus on assessments of the current status** of chemicals, waste and pollution, is not sufficient. It is recommended for the SPP to be inter-related with the current International Resource Panel (IRP) emphasizing circular economy and precautionary approach against waste discharge and pollution prevention at source.
- Involving the **UN Environment Management Group** in the development of the panel's processes is recommended to enhance coordination and collaboration among relevant agencies, ensuring added value.
- It is important for **Multilateral Environmental Agreements** (MEAs) to have the ability to submit requests to the SPP for addressing pertinent issues identified in their processes. In this regard, the establishment of clear working procedures is crucial to facilitate coordination and joint work.

Work programme, output development, review and adoption

- The **envisaged stages for establishing the panel's work programme** appear overly lengthy and could benefit from streamlining to ensure the prompt delivery of impactful outcomes.
- The **use of workshops** to develop quick responses to issues is recommended, along with ensuring that **assessments have timelines consistent with response needs**. The outputs could explore a wide range of innovative solutions to address the complex global challenges.

- It is recommended the **review processes for outputs to be clear, transparent, exhaustive, and efficient**. While consensus is important, refining the approval process could help minimize excessive political intervention - often observed in outputs of IPBES and of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) - and enhance the useability of outputs for decision-making by a variety of actors.

Institutional governance and operating principles:

- The Panel could comprise a **regionally based Bureau to address both political and scientific matters**, which would be useful to enhance its operational efficiency. The separation in the case of IPBES between Bureau/ Multidisciplinary Expert Panel is deemed ineffective and impractical.
- Creating **organizational structures and administration that encourage continuous learning** within the Panel is essential. It is therefore recommended to perceive the Panel as a learning organization from the outset.

Operating principles

- Following **operating principles** could be considered for inclusion:
    - Safeguard politically sensitive information to ensure the stability of participating countries
    - Address all forms of production and use of chemicals and chemical pollution and their ramifications on the atmosphere, land, water, and air.
- Regarding the **principle of 'policy relevance'**, it is recommended to address its ambiguity as it can have various interpretations. For instance, 'policy prescriptive' implies the imposition or enforcement of a rule, which can be challenging to defend under normal circumstances, but can be necessary as it was the case of the Montreal Protocol on ozone-depleting substances. The situation is increasingly moving towards having very limited viable options, although having a range of options is usually preferable. 'Policy relevant' could be replaced with alternative terms such as 'policy responsive' or 'policy and action focused' to ensure the panel's necessary attention not only in assessing the scope and scale of the problems but also provide evidence-based assessments of the range of possible solutions. The suggested alternative terms are more precise than 'relevant' and not as rigid as 'prescriptive'.
- The ISC has recently launched a policy brief on the theme *Creating a strong interface between science, policy and society to tackle global plastic pollution*[2] in preparation for the third session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC-3) to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment. The brief highlights a **set of key functions and principles for a science–policy–society mechanism within the framework of the instrument on plastic pollution**, which could be considered when formulating and deciding on the operating principles of the SPP.

[2] International Science Council, 2023. ISC Policy Brief: Creating a strong interface between science, policy and society to tackle global plastic pollution. Paris, International Science Council. https://council.science/publications/plastic-pollution-policy-brief/