

The intergovernmental epistemologies of soil and land degradation

Matteo De Donà

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Abstract

The role of science and scientific advice is crucial in global environmental governance. This thesis investigates this role by focusing on the practices and framings of the relationship between scientific advice and policy making in the United Nations (UN) context and by accounting for the agency and influence of relevant actors (member states, scientists, international bureaucracies) in these dynamics. Introducing new analytical concepts such as intergovernmental epistemologies, the thesis problematizes the “science–policy bridging” imperative that dominates the UN official discourse. The overarching argument made in the thesis is that the diverging knowledge-ways and political cultures existing across UN member states make the goal of bridging science and policy unattainable at the global level. Arguing that this science–policy bridging discourse is misdirected, I claim that efforts within intergovernmental environmental fora should be concentrated on bridging cultures and worldviews instead. By unearthing the performative dimensions of how diverging epistemic claims about soil and land degradation are understood, institutionalized and negotiated at the international level, the concept of intergovernmental epistemologies corroborates the argument that the political tensions emerging in relevant UN fora are strongly impacted by culturally specific ways of making sense of environmental issues. Theoretically, the thesis contributes to the interdisciplinary field of environmental social science (ESS) by developing a dialogue between the fields of science and technology studies (STS) and international relations (IR), claiming that these two social science traditions are complementary. As STS directs its attention to performative agency and epistemic aspects, IR problematizes power relations as well as the political weight of the actors operating in the international environmental governance sphere. Methodologically, the study adopts a comparative research design, relying on participant observation, elite interviews and qualitative content analysis. Thematically, the thesis focuses on the under-researched issue-area of soil and land degradation, comparing two cases of science–policy interplay within the UN system: the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS) of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Keywords

Science–policy bridging, soil and land, global environmental governance, UNCCD, FAO, science and technology studies, international relations

Articles

- I. De Donà, M. Is it only about science and policy? The intergovernmental epistemologies of global environmental governance (Accepted for publication in the *Journal of International Relations and Development*).
- II. De Donà, M. (2021). Matching institutionalized expertise with global needs: Boundary organizations and hybrid management at the science-policy interfaces of soil and land governance. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 123, 82–90. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2021.05.015>.
- III. De Donà, M. “IPCC-envy” ? Shaping global soil and land governance through science–policy activism’ (Under review).
- IV. De Donà, M. (2022). “Getting the Science Right”? Epistemic Framings of Global Soil and Land Degradation. *Land*, 11(9), 1418. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land11091418>.