espa ecosystem services for poverty alleviation

Policy and Practice Briefing

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Wellbeing: for whom and how?

Environment-related policies and programmes are often assumed to generate 'win-wins' for communities and the environment. In reality, they can work against people who are already disadvantaged. After nine years of research, spanning 125 projects in over 50 countries, the Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA) programme is calling for a stronger focus on the quality of life for disadvantaged people, based on approaches that recognise the multiple dimensions of their wellbeing.

Key messages

1. Research suggests that 'win-win' assumptions about links between ecosystem services and human prosperity should be treated with caution: what looks like a 'win-win' may involve hidden trade-offs that harm disadvantaged people.
2. Those who are most disadvantaged are also the most dependent on their natural environment and, at the same time, most likely to be marginalised by policy interventions that ignore links between the environment and their wellbeing.
3. Wellbeing is a multidimensional phenomenon that goes beyond income to include subjective cultural values, relationships and access to resources, as well as varying personal aspirations.
4. The benefits of ecosystem services are often distributed unfairly because of formal and informal governance processes – that work against the interests of disadvantaged people, fuelling structural or historical marginalisation related to, for example, gender and indigenous cultures.
5. Environment-related development interventions that emphasise justice, equity and governance from the outset could enhance nature's positive contributions to people's wellbeing.
6. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) is encouraged to build on its existing work on nature's contributions to people (NCP) and quality of life by enhancing:
   - its work on multidimensional aspects of wellbeing and their variations across social groups, and;
   - understanding of the influence of formal and informal institutions on access to NCP for different social groups.
7. This aligns well with the broader development aims of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), contributing to their ambition to 'leave no one behind'.

Background

Environment-related programmes to reduce poverty, such as agricultural intensification, renewable energy projects, and forest conservation and restoration, often fall short of, or work against or inadvertently undermine, their original aims. This can arise because of a lack of disaggregated evaluations of specific impacts on local people, particularly those who are already disadvantaged and who depend most directly on nature. They are also the most vulnerable to global pressures such as climate change and have the least access to the benefits of ecosystem services.[1] They can be further disadvantaged by interventions that overlook their wellbeing, their dependence on nature, and their perceptions of both.

Research by the Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA) programme suggests the need to examine access to ecosystem services beyond their aggregate availability and potential to enhance incomes. As the leading international body on assessment of such services, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) looks closely at nature's contributions to people (NCP)[2] and aspects of quality of life. In addressing issues of wellbeing that determine the impact of interventions, IPBES

contributes to the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In that way, IPBES upholds the moral commitment within the SDGs to leave no one behind and ensure that resources channelled to environment-related interventions achieve their intended goals.

Trade offs

In line with the pursuit of sustainable development, current policy discourses on ecosystem services and poverty alleviation generally emphasise 'win-win' solutions to improve incomes and the protection of ecosystems.

ESPA research suggests, however, that 'win-wins' should be treated with caution. Trade-offs are commonplace, and while some benefit from enhanced availability of ecosystem services, there can be heavy costs to others – particularly those already disadvantaged and whose wellbeing is not prioritised in development objectives or ecosystem conservation (Box 1). While aspects of wellbeing – such as income – may improve for some people, others may deteriorate, including social relations, affecting more people (and more deeply).

Wellbeing

Trade-offs and conflicts between stakeholders are often shaped by their different perceptions of what constitutes wellbeing (Box 2) and, therefore, their perceptions of the benefits of ecosystem services. The way in which nature contributes to people's wellbeing also varies for different social groups. Men and women, in particular, use, experience and benefit from ecosystem services differently,[3] with women often more dependent on common property resources (e.g. collecting firewood and agrobiodiversity).[4] Women are also more vulnerable to the risks presented by nature. In Sierra Leone, for example, their role in agriculture makes them more susceptible than men to Lassa fever, transmitted by burrowing rats.[5]

Research by the P4GES project (www.p4ges.org) found that local perceptions of wellbeing can provide invaluable insights into local support (or not) for conservation interventions.[6]

Photo credit: Rina Mandimbiniaina, P4GES project, ESPA

Box 1: When trade-offs and taboos collide: the unintended impact of fisheries protection

Research on a small-scale coastal fishery in Kenya suggested that profits could be boosted by reducing the amount of fishing and banning small-meshed fishing nets: the assumption being that only larger and more valuable fish would be caught, and this would safeguard a marine ecosystem. This apparent 'win-win' was, however, characterised by trade-offs. First, it would reduce the volume of fish landed, particularly the small, cheap fish eaten by local people. Second, the livelihoods and wellbeing of those already socially disadvantaged would be traded off, particularly for women who buy, fry and sell small fish locally. Constrained by taboos that limit their participation in trade, women would lose out as larger, more expensive fish were bought by men and sold on to higher value markets.[7]

Box 2: Wellbeing: a multidimensional and fluid phenomenon

Ecosystem services and development research highlights the importance of understanding wellbeing in a multidimensional manner, which includes:

- an objective dimension, such as the ability to meet basic human needs, including health and physical security;
- a subjective dimension, comprising social and cultural values (including those related to gender, land use and the value placed on nature); and
- a relational dimension, emphasising the importance of social relations, interactions with others in and through nature, and power relations between people, as well as their views about these processes.

Land-use intensification may, for example, increase incomes but – at the same time – lead to a reduction in other aspects of people's wellbeing such as access to culturally important wild-harvested products.[8]

Wellbeing is a fluid and dynamic phenomenon shaped by changes in environmental, social and economic contexts. When people face new circumstances, such as rapid changes in social norms or mass migration, their perceptions of wellbeing can quickly change and this, in turn, can change the way they perceive and depend on nature.

Yet ESPA research reveals a 'blind spot' on social differentiation in decisions about ecosystem management. Similarly, a failure to consider culturally specific, local perceptions of wellbeing mean that well-intentioned agricultural modernisation can have a negative impact on those who most depend on nature's contributions to their wellbeing.[9]

ESPA research confirms the importance of genuine participation, agency and support for collective goals that do not merely reflect the aspirations of local elites. In Tanzania, households in villages participating in community forestry do not experience significant changes in self-defined wellbeing, but nevertheless value the process as a way to secure community land and protect it from outsiders. They are also proud that their conservation efforts have been recognised.[10]

It is important, therefore, to work with the grain of social complexity, disaggregating the ways ecosystem services work for or against the wellbeing of different people to evaluate how ecosystem changes and policy interventions shape their lives.[11] This is not just about income: people also want to feel recognised as stakeholders and citizens with a particular identity. Ensuring that disadvantaged people have a role in the process requires governance approaches that reflect the dynamic and multidimensional nature of wellbeing.

Governance

Governance involves decision-making about how nature is managed, who benefits and who bears the burdens. It includes formal processes as well as the customary and informal institutions that underpin social relations and values. What matters is the way decisions are taken.

In reality, the most disadvantaged people are often constrained by social structures and institutional arrangements that prevent their participation in governance and, therefore, their enjoyment of the benefits of environment-related policies and interventions. Efforts to 'empower communities' may overlook how external drivers influence people's agency, including global markets and political pressures, as well as deep-rooted social norms that exclude marginalised groups from decision-making.

Governance is often about conflict resolution and managing trade-offs. As such, it is a crucial part of assessments of NCP and wellbeing.

Next steps

ESPA's research confirms the need to scrutinise the way in which people perceive their own wellbeing. IPBES has already unpacked and rolled out the concept of NCP as well as its multiple values.[12]

Building on the findings of the ESPA programme, IPBES is encouraged to continue unpacking the wider concept of a good quality of life, which shapes people's views on – and exploitation of – nature. It could look more closely at the impacts of NCP on the multidimensional wellbeing of different social groups, including those most likely to bear the burden of environmental decision-making.

As ESPA's research shows, interdisciplinary and holistic approaches to NCP assessments are vital in order to explore such issues as justice, equity, power and social difference, which can determine how different people access the benefits of NCP.

An important step is to avoid the general assumption that environment-related interventions automatically lead to win-win scenarios and instead start by anticipating trade-offs. Mapping these from the outset would reveal potential losers and winners from NCP, enabling policy decisions to generate more equitable outcomes. A greater southern ownership of this research agenda is needed to narrow knowledge gaps on, for example, varied perceptions of wellbeing among different people over time.[11] IPBES is encouraged to continue pushing in this direction in its Second Work Programme.

Assessments are a means to an end: they need to spur action. By considering what is meant by wellbeing, as well as trade-offs, governance and related policy options, IPBES provides the science-policy foundations for action to ensure that nature supports the achievement of the SDGs. This should be recognised as a substantial contribution from IPBES assessments to the emphasis on environmental justice as the basis for lasting progress in the global agenda for sustainable development.

An ESPA study looked at the impact on human wellbeing of agriculture and land-use changes in western Rwanda

Photo credit: Neil Dawson for ESPA

Credit

This Policy and Practice Brief draws on discussions at a workshop organised by ESPA and the Basque Centre for Climate Change (BC3) in Murua, Spain, 1-2 February 2018.

About the ESPA Programme

ESPA is a nine-year global development research programme established in 2009 with funding from the Department for International Development (DFID), the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). ESPA is one of the most comprehensive research programmes on linkages between ecosystem services and human wellbeing, aiming to provide world-class research evidence on how ecosystem services can reduce poverty and enhance wellbeing for the world's poor.

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Endnotes

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