

5 • The politics of global assessments: the case of the IAASTD¹

IAN SCOONES

Introduction

Global assessments have become all the rage. The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) is one of many, coming on the back of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) and the Millennium Project's Millennium Development Goal (MDG) task forces, among others. The IPCC even won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007, the first assessment to do so.² All of these attempt to combine 'expert assessment' with processes of 'stakeholder consultation' in what are presented as global, participatory assessments on key issues of major international importance. Such assessments contribute to a new landscape of governance in the international arena, offering the potential for links between the local and the global, and present ways of articulating citizen engagement with global processes of decision-making and policy. In many respects such assessments respond to the critiques of the top-down, Northern-dominated, expert assessments of the past and make attempts to be both more inclusive and participatory in their design and process, offering new opportunities for mobilization and the articulation of alternative knowledges in the global policy domain. But how far do they meet these objectives? Do they genuinely allow alternative voices to be heard? Do they create a new mode of engagement in global arenas? How do local and global processes articulate? And what are the power relations involved, creating what processes of mediation, inclusion and exclusion?

Taking the case of the IAASTD, this chapter explores these issues through a focus on the underlying knowledge politics of a global process. Four intersecting questions, central to the concerns of this book (Gaventa and Tandon, this volume) and at the heart of contemporary democratic theory and practice, are posed: how do processes of knowledge framing occur; how do different practices and methodologies get deployed in cross-cultural, global processes; how is 'representation' constructed and legitimized; and how, as a result, do collective under-

standings of global issues emerge? Drawing on a detailed analysis of the IAASTD process between 2003 and 2008, the chapter argues that in such assessments the politics of knowledge needs to be made more explicit, and that negotiations around politics and values must be put centre-stage. The black-boxing of uncertainty, or the eclipsing of more fundamental clashes over interpretation and meaning, must be avoided in order for processes of participation and engagement in global assessment processes to become more meaningful, democratic and accountable. Following Mouffe (2005), the paper offers a critique of simplistic forms of deliberative democratic practice, and argues that there is a need to ‘bring politics back in’.

The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology (IAASTD)

The overall purpose of the IAASTD, which concluded with a final plenary session in Johannesburg in April 2008, was ‘to assess agricultural knowledge, science and technology in order to use it more effectively to reduce hunger and poverty, improve rural livelihoods, and facilitate equitable, environmentally, socially and economically sustainable development’.³ No one could argue with that, of course. But how was this ambitious aim to be realized?

The IAASTD was announced during 2002, and was initiated on five continents in early 2003 with a series of consultation meetings. Since then five regional reports and one global report (IAASTD 2009) have been produced, all contributing to a synthesis and summaries for decision-makers for each continental and the global report. A total of 400 authors were recruited to write the reports, and an overall framework was hammered out in a series of meetings,⁴ a process overseen by a complex governance structure (Scoones 2008).

The IAASTD had very substantial financial backing from a wide range of bilateral donors, UN organizations and the World Bank, with a total budget of over US\$15 million.⁵ With agriculture and technology rising up the development agenda again, many agencies saw this as an excellent opportunity to map out a way forward. A combination of a multi-stakeholder and an intergovernmental UN process appealed, as this offered the combination of inclusion and dialogue, including civil society and private business actors, as well as formal decision-making and buy-in by nation-states. Was this perhaps the model for the future – picking the best of the IPCC and the MA and combining them in an approach to global decision-making that was at once scientifically sound, politically legitimate and participatory?

A number of unique attributes are highlighted by the director, Robert Watson, including: an advisory structure which encompasses governmental representatives as well as civil society; the 'inclusion of hundreds of experts from all relevant stakeholder groups'; an 'intellectually consistent framework'; a global, multi-scale and long-term approach, resulting in 'plausible scenarios' to 2050; the 'integration of local and institutional knowledge'; and a multi-thematic approach, encompassing nutrition, livelihoods and human health, linking science and technology issues to policies and institutions.⁶ As a multi-stakeholder process involving everyone from grassroots groups to scientists and representatives of large corporations, with the final product being signed by national governments, there has to date been no parallel. As such the IAASTD provides fascinating insights into processes of participation and global engagement, and the implications these have for the contestation of global knowledge and the construction of global citizenship.

Globalization and civil society: the place of international assessments

The IAASTD, like the other global assessments, is seen by its proponents as a brave attempt at engaging a diverse group of stakeholders on a key topic with major global ramifications. In this regard it is a major departure from previous models of global expert decision-making, where attempts at dialogue and debate were largely absent and processes were open only to an exclusive expert elite.

In this way, the IAASTD chimes with a central theme of the more optimistic strands of the literature on globalization and civil society. These suggest that, with the opening up of opportunities for engagement at the global level, and the increasing connections between local-level actors and issues and those in global arenas, the opportunities for participation and influence increase through a 'global civil society' (Edwards and Gaventa 2001; Keane 2003; Archibugi 2008). With this opening up, processes become more complex and require increasingly sophisticated forms of mobilization by activists and movements in order to engage (Tarrow 1994). But the net result is a pluralization of knowledges, claims and inputs into cosmopolitan global contexts, resulting, it is argued, ultimately in a more democratic and accountable system of governance and policy-making (Held and McGrew 2002; Heater 2002).

The IAASTD could be seen as one avenue for such new styles of engagement, knowledge production and claim-making; and indeed, the rhetoric associated with it suggests that this is in part the wider aim. A vision of cosmopolitan diversity and democratic decision-making is