



Institute for Biodiversity - Network e.V. (ibn)

Pathways to a Regional Biodiversity Platform in Central Asia

Final report

Funded by The Norwegian Environment Agency.



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1. Introduction

A well-functioning science-policy interface (SPI) is vital for effective environmental policy-making and resource management. Robust networks and dedicated boundary organizations that act as mediators between experts and scientists on the one hand and decision makers on the other are vital components to this process. Such networks and structures have a wide scope of positive effects on the SPI and provide benefits to both sides of the interaction. Science benefits from the improved communication and cooperation among experts, which, e.g., improves data quality and quantity. Policy-makers benefit from improved access to data and its interpretation, which results in better, more informed decisions. As an added benefit, such structures can be easily integrated into global science-policy processes and initiatives.

While a healthy SPI is important in every aspect of environmental governance, this document concerns questions of the SPI in relation to biodiversity in Central Asia. These questions are not only inherently important. Biodiversity is enmeshed in a nexus of environmental and political issues, some of which are becoming ever more pressing to the region. It is also a crucial aspect of policy-making oriented towards sustainable development, sustainable livelihoods, and responsible governance.

In this project, the Institute for Biodiversity-Network (ibn) aimed to kick-start the conversation around the possibility of establishing a regional biodiversity platform to serve as the coordinating body in the region's science-policy interface, connecting local stakeholders and allowing greater regional participation in the global biodiversity SPI, which is spearheaded by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

ibn has been active in the region for a number of years, and has done a lot to promote IPBES and its products. Since 2017, we have conducted a number of regional and national workshops, encouraging national and regional participation in the intergovernmental platform, informing about IPBES procedures and products, and connecting stakeholders. The present inquiry comes as a follow-up to a previous research project that identified the need for institutional capacity building in addition to continued IPBES-related individual capacity building measures.¹

We took a three-pronged approach to the task of elucidating the possible functions and format of a regional biodiversity platform in Central Asia. We interviewed local stakeholders to further concretize

¹ Paulsch and Shakhnazarov, 2020

the SPI needs that could be fulfilled by improved cooperation at the regional level, identified some of the local structures and organizations that could serve as the basis of a regional platform, and conducted a stakeholder workshop to discuss how a platform might be structured, what functions it might perform, and what further steps might be taken towards its establishment.

We found that in many cases, local organizations already possess capacities that would be necessary for a regional platform. In our analysis, we sought to identify the “low hanging fruit” – goals that can be achieved and needs that can be fulfilled with a minimal organizational set-up – to avoid redundancies and emphasize initial steps that would require minimum effort and expenditure.

The following sections will describe a small selection of the variety of existing biodiversity platforms in other parts of the world (section 2), present the SPI needs identified during the interviews and the workshop and the corresponding organizational capacities necessary to fulfill them (sections 3 and 4), followed by a presentation of some of the existing capacities in the region (section 5), a discussion of the potential format options for the platform arising from the interviews and the workshop (section 6). Before concluding in section 8, the report also presents possible obstacles to the establishment of a regional platform (section 7).

2. Existing biodiversity platforms on national and regional levels outside of Central Asia

Biodiversity platforms around the world vary in their formats and functions. Three platforms presented themselves at the project workshop and will be described below - the German IPBES Coordination Office, the Belgian Biodiversity Platform, and the West African Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services initiative (WABES). The three platforms differ in their focus and organization and thus present a variety of options and examples for a potential regional biodiversity platform in Central Asia.

The **German IPBES Coordination Office** is a German biodiversity-oriented science-policy interface organization. Established by the country’s Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU - NFP) and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), the IPBES Coordination office has a strong and clear mandate from the government to engage in activities that enable the country to contribute to IPBES and better utilize IPBES resources. It is hosted by the project Management Agency within the German Aerospace Center (DLR-PT).

The office performs a number of functions. Firstly, it supports the government in expert nomination for IPBES assessments by coordinating national nomination processes, organizing expert committees to review incoming expert applications, and providing technical support to the experts. Secondly, the Coordination Office supports the governmental review process by organizing a national IPBES forum before each IPBES plenary, providing scientific and technical support for the process, compiling expert comments, and compiling its own review of IPBES reports. It also engages in communication and capacity building by informing interested parties about ongoing and planned IPBES activities, managing a mailing list and a website, as well as a biannual electronic newsletter. The organization also publishes explanatory brochures and cooperates with other IPBES-related platforms. To sum up, the Coordination office is a government-funded organization with a strong IPBES-focused mandate that is hosted within a larger body.

The **Belgian Biodiversity Platform** is an example of a biodiversity platform with a wider focus. In addition to a focus on IPBES, the organization is also active in the international biodiversity science-policy interface, as well as national and international knowledge brokerage. The platform is hosted by four institutions simultaneously - the Belgian Science Policy Office (Belspo), the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (RBNIS), the Institute for Nature and Forest (INBO), and the Natural and Agricultural Studies Department (DEMNA). Practically, this means that the platform staff hold office in the different institutions, but work jointly as members of the platform.

As regards its work in the context of IPBES, the platform informs relevant experts of notifications issued by IPBES Secretariat, supports the national expert nomination process, organizes information sessions and uptake events to support the implementation of the IPBES work program, organizes expert consultation sessions to review IPBES deliverables, and coordinates the national positions for the IPBES Plenaries and acts as the head of the Belgian delegation. Alongside these activities, the platform is also the focal point for a number of other initiatives, such as the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The plurality of activities and the presence of the organization's staff in other institutions allow the Belgian Biodiversity Platform to find and create synergies between the initiatives and have a wider reach in the country's science-policy interface.

By contrast to the two national biodiversity platforms presented above, **West African Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (WABES)** is a regional organization covering all 15 West African ECOWAS² states. WABES is a consortium of West African and German institutions that works to strengthen the science-policy interface in the region and improve its linkages with IPBES. For these purposes, WABES runs a regional expert network and the MSc. Program on “Managing Science-Policy Interfaces on Biodiversity & Ecosystem Services for sustainable development in West Africa – SPIBES.” WABES organizes regular expert workshops to promote communication and inform local experts about IPBES activities and ways for them to get involved. The organization also works to improve the awareness and recognition of IPBES in the region to improve assessment uptake. The master’s program is a two-year degree hosted at the African Excellence Center of the Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny (UFHB) in Abidjan. The program is designed to empower its students to take part in biodiversity-related work by preparing them to work at the science-policy interface in their countries, strengthen interdisciplinary thinking, and provide the technical and methodological skills to contribute to IPBES assessments.

3. SPI needs as a basis for platform functions

Previous research identified a number of SPI needs in the Central Asian region. Among these are IPBES-related cooperation, improved data availability, as well as access to relevant international expertise in general and IPBES products in particular. All of these were confirmed in the course of this project. However, in addition to these, somewhat IPBES-focused set of needs, a number of others came into view.

3.1. Share and exchange experience

First, the need to **share experience** was mentioned in the majority of the interviews. The region’s five countries share a number of biodiversity-related issues that can either only be tackled by adopting a regional approach or could be alleviated by sharing solutions already existing in other countries of the region. Issues of land degradation, pasture management, and water were given examples of such issues. Sustainable pasture management was mentioned by one of the research participants as an example of an area where cross-border exchange could lead to improvements. Certain practices, developed with the aid of the German ‘Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit’ (GIZ) were recently introduced

² Economic Community of West African States

in Uzbekistan. According to the respondent, many aspects of these practices could also be of use in other Central Asian countries. This is a particularly good example, because in addition to highlighting an opportunity for cooperation, it also illustrates the way in which such exchange can help leverage international efforts and investment as a tremendous force multiplier.

A minimal set-up approach to this comes in the form of professional and stakeholder networks. The majority of the research participants saw the establishment of formal intergovernmental ties as a long-term goal. However, the establishment of communication between stakeholders, and especially between IPBES focal points in the region, has a lot of potential in regard to this need. Potential platform functions having to do with communication are further discussed below.

3.2. Data gathering and knowledge database

Secondly, **data-related needs** were brought up by a number of the research participants. These can be broken down into the need to generate more data, and the need to centralize and enable access to already existing biodiversity-related information. For example, one of the participants brought up the issue of certain species whose habitat spans two or more of the countries. Accounting for the population and addressing, for example, epidemiological issues and questions of habitat preservation all rely on accessible and existent data related to the species and their habitats. The interviewee indicated that one of the functions of a regional biodiversity platform could be finding and making available such data as exists, and identifying information gaps that may need filling. This is further complicated by the fact that data often exists in institutional enclaves that either have no motivation to share their data freely, have no platform to share it on, or simply have not considered doing so.

A minimal set-up approach to a response to data-related needs was difficult to concretize in the course of the interviews. While it suggests a knowledge database, such an idea implies willingness of those organizations that produce data to share it freely. Some of the interviewees indicated this would help them in their work and improve the science-policy interface in Central Asia. However, they also spoke of how difficult it can be to get access to some of the data. Interviewees expressed frustration when facing the issue of certain organizations not being willing to share what data they do have. This is further complicated by the fact that some research presupposes cross-border cooperation. Examples provided by the interviewees included migrating animals and specially protected areas adjacent to borders.

The “low-hanging fruit” in this case is a survey of existing data that is in free access and establishing a knowledge database that could then be further populated by promoting it among knowledge producers.

In the long-term perspective, some of the interviewees envisioned a platform capable of carrying out its own assessments, similar to those conducted by IPBES, but with an exclusive focus on the region.

During the workshop, however, it became clear that the necessary infrastructure already exists in the region. For example, the Regional Environmental Center for Central Asia (CAREC) already runs a climate information portal which could also be used as a hub for biodiversity data. Similarly, the Central Asian Desert Initiative (CADI) is compiling online herbaria for the region's temperate deserts (more on these examples in section 5 below). Integrating biodiversity data into these initiatives and bringing them together is significantly easier and less resource intensive than establishing a new database and promoting it. Section 5 below contains a more detailed look at structures and capacities that already exist in the region.

3.3. Communication

Another set of needs had to do with stakeholder communication. This includes communication **between the countries' scientists, local communities and civil society with decision makers, as well as communication within stakeholder groups**. It is in this context that the importance of including as wide a set of stakeholders as possible was expressed most strongly. While the involvement of scientists and policy-makers was discussed most deeply, the involvement of other stakeholders also constituted an important part of the research. Included in the number of potential platform participants or people who have access to the platform are farmers directly involved in agriculture, junior researchers and students, as well as environmental activists and environmental NGOs. Not only would that enable the platform to function as a tool for connecting decision-makers actively looking for scientific input with people who can provide it, it would also make it possible to inform practitioners about their rights and responsibilities, as well as highlight research gaps for people to fill.

Communication between stakeholder groups is also an important need. For example, experts and scientists may be unaware of other people in their field doing similar work, and NGOs have reported difficulties in finding contributors for their work. This is especially pronounced in the cross-border context. We find that while there are existing informal networks, such as Facebook groups (or communication channels on other social media) within countries, there is much less communication across borders. This lack of communication and awareness can lead to good ideas going ignored and staying "on paper" and contributes to the perception that the countries share few problems. It also affects trust by perpetuating a zero-sum approach to certain issues (such as water disputes).

The issue of communication is especially important for indigenous people and local communities. Lack of communication channels between them and decision makers along with a lack of awareness of existing legislation sometimes prevents some local communities from protecting their livelihoods from the encroachment of business or industry.

The most practically feasible solution to the problem that came up in the interviews is the establishment of a regional expert database that could serve as a guide for decision makers in search of relevant expert knowledge. One of the interviewees suggested that this can take the form of a simple Microsoft Excel spreadsheet managed by the platform, which could then make recommendations as expertise requests come in. Another approach could be the establishment of an online database to which experts could add their names and means by which they could be contacted alongside a description of their area of expertise. Both approaches have clear advantages and disadvantages. It was reported by one of the representatives of an existing national biodiversity platform in the European Union that while they started with the more public variant, they had to switch to an Excel spreadsheet because people with insufficient or irrelevant expertise would sometimes add themselves to the database as experts.

Such a database would also allow for networking between experts working in the same fields or looking for input from those outside of their field. In fact, networking was brought up quite often in the course of the interviews. This included simply accommodating contact between stakeholders and social events. The latter, for example conferences, could be financed on an ad-hoc basis.

Many of the research participants stressed the importance of an online presence for the platform. This would support all of the communication-related functions described here. Suggestions for the exact format for such a presence ranged from a fully established website with a regularly updated blog component to an actively managed Twitter account or a monthly newsletter.

Finally, an easy place to start with improving communication across borders could be the establishment of a network among the region's IPBES focal points. This is not to say that communication between focal points is non-existent. Country focal points are aware of each other, and such events as the previous workshops organized by ibn have encouraged communication. However, a more official communication channel in the form of a regional biodiversity platform could increase the frequency of communication by making it easier and providing more opportunities for in-person meetings.

3.4. Awareness of existing political commitments

The absence of an information platform in the region also affects the efficacy of political decisions related to biodiversity. Some of the interviewees said that the **lack of awareness of existing political commitments** is a serious problem in the region's SPI. A common theme in regards to this issue was a process whereby national commitments, such as National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans requested under the CBD to meet global goals (such as the Aichi 2020 targets), or national environmental legislation can remain relatively unknown and with time turn into simple formalities. One of the participants described a process whereby the task of concretizing international commitments can be delegated down the bureaucratic ladder. The resulting commitments are then passed back up for confirmation and approval. However, if the information regarding these decisions is not shared widely enough, the regulations or commitments can bear limited practical results. This can sometimes result in a situation where the people on the ground, those who carry out the actual day-to-day biodiversity-related activities (such as e.g. people in charge of specially protected areas), are unaware of the country's legislation and development strategies or its international commitments. The lack of awareness also means that biodiversity stakeholders inside and outside the government may not have the necessary bargaining chips in negotiating the political process.

It was suggested by some of the research participants that one way to deal with this problem is to involve relevant decision-makers in the establishment and continued function of the platform. Alongside stakeholder engagement, some of the research participants suggested that the platform conduct a regular survey of existing legislation, development strategies and international commitments. By making the results of such analyses publicly available, the platform could increase public awareness of the legislature. Another important component here is the presence of informational campaigns that would inform the general public as well as the relevant stakeholders of their rights and responsibilities under existing legislation. The question of commitments under such international conventions as Ramsar, UNCCD on biodiversity, and World Natural Heritage also came up during the workshop. A regional platform could facilitate targeted work on the countries' various international obligations.

3.5. Contribution and engagement with IPBES

Those participants that knew of IPBES and its role in steering the global science-policy interface in regards to biodiversity and ecosystem services stressed how valuable a platform could be in **strengthening the region's contribution to IPBES in particular and global biodiversity efforts in**

general. Broken down into concrete terms, this comes down to boosting processes such as expert nominations for IPBES assessments and improving regional input into IPBES more generally on the one hand, and promoting the use of IPBES-published tools and materials on the other. A vital component here is language-related work. Apart from summaries for policy makers, the majority of IPBES products are only available in English. The lack of availability of such tools in local languages, combined with the general lack of awareness of these products means that IPBES work often goes unused.

Obviously, there is room for improvement regarding the integration of Central Asia in the global science-policy-interface which would allow easier take-up of solutions to environmental problems. However, the issue is compounded by insufficient attention to commitments to biodiversity and ecosystem conservation. In some cases, this can lead to distortions of the actual situation on the ground, resulting in the global picture also being skewed.

The degree to which the potential regional biodiversity platform is to be focused on IPBES was a matter of some disagreement among research participants. A minimal set-up approach in relation to this question would be establishing a streamlined expert nomination process. However, it is important to remember that all of the functions described above will result in better regional integration into IPBES and potentially wider use of IPBES products in the region.

This section presented the existing needs that a regional biodiversity platform could address and suggested some ways in which it could do so. It bears repeating that iteration is an important feature of a well-functioning SPI, so the list of functions presented here is not meant to be exhaustive.

4. Organizational capacities

While estimating the financial means necessary to establish a regional platform was not a goal of this project, this section presents a brief and tentative overview of the sorts of capacities necessary for the platform to function.

Broadly speaking, regional SPI needs that could be fulfilled by a regional biodiversity platform fall into four categories:

- Data management:
 - original research,
 - centralization of existing data;

- Communication:
 - expert database,
 - facilitation of contact between stakeholders and within stakeholder groups,
 - online presence, and cross-border communication;
- Promoting awareness of existing political commitments:
 - raising stakeholder awareness, including that of the general population,
 - survey of existing development strategies, international commitments, and national legislature that concern environmental protection and biodiversity;
- Regional participation in IPBES:
 - expert nomination,
 - promotion of IPBES-created tools in the region,
 - identification of research gaps that IPBES could assist with.

Three overarching categories of organizational capacities follow the set of functions described above:

- Managerial capacities:
 - Platform administration, including finances,
 - Day-to-day communications (responding to stakeholder requests and inquiries, etc.),
 - Event organization,
 - Continued upkeep of the expert database;
- Knowledge management capacities and academic expertise:
 - Continued upkeep of the knowledge database,
 - Data acquisition,
 - Original research;
- Ability to navigate the regional political landscape in Central Asia.

Two important observations have to be made in addition to the fact that the list above is far from exhaustive. First, the majority of these capacities can lie outside of the organization and be recruited on an ad-hoc basis. Secondly, a good number of them, excluding those that deal with platform management, are already being performed in the region. Therefore, an important step in the process of establishing a regional platform in Central Asia is the identification of existing organizations and institutions, both governmental and those outside the sphere of government, that may have the necessary capacities.

5. Existing structures and capacities

5.1. Existing regional capacities

There are a number of important organizations and initiatives already in operation in the region that exercise some of the functions outlined above. It is true that some of these organizations work in discrete domains of biodiversity, and some take a national rather than a regional approach. Nonetheless, the capacities of these organizations constitute excellent potential in need of opportunities and structures for cooperation. Presented below are those organizations that were present at the workshop on 16.03.2021 - 18.03.2021, which had also emerged as relevant from the interviews: the Central Asian Desert Initiative (CADI), Central Asia Sustainable Innovation Bureau (CASIB), the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), the EcoMuseum, as well as the Biodiversity Conservation Fund of Kazakhstan and the Regional Environmental Center for Central Asia (CAREC). Other organizations can still be included in the further process of establishing a platform.

The Central Asian Desert Initiative (CADI)³ is a project implemented by the University of Greifswald and the Michael Succow Foundation in Germany, as well as the Sub-regional Office for Central Asia (Ankara, Turkey) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). CADI includes a number of project partners in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, including state-level partners in each country. Part of the International Climate Initiative (IKI), the project concerns itself with the biodiversity and ecosystem services of the temperate deserts of Central Asia, a biodiversity hotspot that is one of the WWF Global 200 priority ecoregions.

The project is relevant to the questions at hand in two dimensions - its cross-border nature and the data it has generated. As regards data generation, CADI has developed and collected data for virtual herbaria of the temperate desert biome in the three partner countries. The project has made this data available to all, which is also an important step towards improving data accessibility and sharing.⁴ In terms of cross-border cooperation, the project has established a lot of interaction between Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. However, in addition to the activities that have taken place within the framework of the project, CADI has established the CADI Secretariat, which will continue to operate after the project comes to an end. The regional secretariat will be supported by local secretariats in each of the three countries. Its activities will be aimed towards improving biodiversity policymaking, facilitating information exchange and dialogue between scientific institutions and national policymakers,

³ <https://cadi.uni-greifswald.de/en/home/>

⁴ The herbaria are available at www.flora-kaz.botanik.uni-greifswald.de (Kazakhstan), www.flora-tm.botanik.uni-greifswald.de (Turkmenistan), and www.floragridmap.uz (Uzbekistan).

supporting national activities aimed at biodiversity protection. Importantly, the secretariat will also assume an advisory role for regional and national climate change strategies.

To sum up, while the project limits its activities to questions of temperate deserts and is active in only those countries to which these questions are relevant, CADI has gathered a lot of data pertinent to biodiversity and has done a lot to establish cross-border ties. Going forward, the CADI secretariat will be an important part of any potential regional biodiversity platform both as a source of data and as an already internationally recognized body.

The Central Asian Sustainable Innovation Bureau (CASIB)⁵ is a project focused on the Central Asian region, Mongolia, and the southwestern Siberian part of Russia. It aims to establish better cooperation and information exchange among the countries. The project achieves that by taking a multi-pronged approach to the issue. CASIB works to improve cooperation and coordination among German-funded sustainable development projects in the region by establishing a network of communication for them. It also aims to encourage inter-state research initiatives and their uptake in policymaking by supporting the projects and making their results public. Additionally, CASIB facilitates networking and transfer activities within and between the countries where it operates by, for example, establishing ties between universities in the countries. Finally, the project aims to synthesize the activities and results of sustainable development projects in the region to identify further challenges and potential fields of operation. Much like CADI, CASIB aims to establish a more permanent structure that would function outside of the project timeframe, the German Innovation Centre for Central Asia.

CASIB can be a very important part of a potential regional biodiversity platform by virtue of its ties to the region's universities and the breadth of its existing network within the sphere of sustainable development. Universities, such as the German-Kazakh University (DKU) in Central Asia and the Martin Luther University (MLU) in Germany are involved in CASIB and have a lot of the necessary expert capacities necessary for the functioning of a regional biodiversity platform in Central Asia.

Established as early as 1993, **The International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS)⁶** is a very well-established organization in Central Asia. The organization is of critical importance to the region because in it, all five of the Central Asian republics are represented. Additionally, the organization deals with water management - a crucial issue in the region, and one that impacts all other issues relating to

⁵ <https://casib.eu/en>

⁶ <http://ec-ifas.waterunites-ca.org/index.html>

sustainability, development, and biodiversity. IFAS has a broad mandate to “to finance and credit joint practical measures, programs and projects for saving the Aral Sea, ecological rehabilitation of the Aral Sea surroundings and Aral Sea Basin as a whole, taking into account the interests of all States in the region.”⁷ The organization also maintains an environmental monitoring system for the region and a database with the data on the Aral basin and its environment. While the focus of the fund is the ecological issues related to the drying up of the Aral Sea, efforts that it supports have positive effects on all spheres of ecological sustainability in the region. The organization remains an important boundary organization that supports the science-policy interface in the region in questions to do with environmental and biodiversity conservation in the Aral Sea Basin as well as water management in general. Projects funded by IFAS include training workshops focused on the development of craftsmanship to improve local employment opportunities, workshops on using open standards for the practice of conservation for people involved in environmental projects among others. In addition, the fund is involved in data generation and projects that introduce new practices aimed at improving the region’s ecology, and such projects as the 2020 organization of the Aral Sea Center for Conservation and Adaptation of Wild Animals to the Effects of Climate Change, which involved allocating a plot of land on which favorable conditions for the development of biodiversity could be established, including measures to combat illegal hunting and fishing. The fund carries out these projects in partnership with local and international funding.

There are also regional initiatives in Central Asia aimed at providing networking opportunities and facilitating communication among the region’ environmental experts. One such initiative is **Green CA**, a **Regional Environmental Expert Network**⁸ administered by the **EcoMuseum** in Kazakhstan. The network currently consists of 58 experts from 13 organizations and covers all of the Central Asian countries. The network provides its members with regular newsletters to communicate funding, employment, and capacity building opportunities. It also conducts on -line discussions and webinars and serves as a platform where experts can find each other and jointly develop projects. Finally, Green CA manages a Facebook group and hosts a website. Thematically, the network encompasses the areas of sustainable management of natural resources, ecological expertise and industrial ecology, and environmental education and capacity building. While the network is not exclusively focused on biodiversity, its breadth and existing infrastructure make Green CA a useful partner and model for the potential regional biodiversity platform.

⁷ http://ec-ifas.waterunites-ca.org/aral_basin/institutions/ifas/index.html

⁸ <http://greenca.tilda.ws/>

The Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC)⁹ is another organization that already has many of the vital organizational capacities necessary for the establishment of a regional biodiversity platform. Established in 2001 by a joint decision of all five Central Asian states, CAREC has a long history, a regional mandate, and a high degree of political legitimacy. At the same time, as an independent NGO with local representation in each of the Central Asian states, CAREC is very well-positioned to facilitate political dialogue and communication within a wide set of stakeholders all over the region. The center provides services in four areas - it hosts an environmental information portal, contributes to capacity building, provides analytical support for decision makers, and serves as a dialogue platform to support multi-stakeholder and cross-sectoral dialogue in the region. In many ways, the organization already performs many of the functions of an environmental platform with a wide focus. One example of this is the Central Asian Climate Information Portal (CACIP). CACIP is an online information portal that covers all five Central Asian countries and provides a central hub for existing regional climate and climate-relevant data in the public domain. The portal is implemented by CAREC and the Executive Committee of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (EC IFAS). While the platform is not specifically focused on biodiversity, it can be updated to include the relevant data. Funded by a large number of international donors and already in possession of much of the necessary infrastructure, the organization has a stable financial basis and has expressed the possibility of continued support for certain aspects of a potential platform.

In addition to the existing organizational capacities described above, the region has a number of local funding options. For example, the **Biodiversity Conservation Fund of Kazakhstan** is an organization that “aims to create a mechanism for financing projects aimed at preserving the biological diversity of Kazakhstan and sustainable nature management by providing appropriate grant support to individuals and legal entities.”¹⁰ While the fund is active only in Kazakhstan, its activities have regional impacts, especially when it comes to projects involving the Aral Sea basin. The fund is also involved in developing innovative agricultural and water management practices by financing projects such as the recent “Demonstration of water-saving agricultural technologies for growing crops in the Kyzylorda region.” Another example of the fund’s activities is an ongoing project titled “Improving the management efficiency of specially protected natural areas of the Western Tien Shan.” Financed by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund and the World Wildlife Fund via the Biodiversity Conservation Fund of Kazakhstan, the project focuses on areas inside and around three nature reserves - the Karatau State

⁹ <https://www.carececo.org/en/main/>

¹⁰ <http://fsbk.kz/en/about-the-fund>

Natural Reserve, Aksu-Zhabaglinsky State Natural Reserve, and the Sairam-Ugam State National Natural Park. The latter two lie on the borders with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

5.2. Relevant extra-regional organizations

There are also relevant extra-regional organizational structures active in biodiversity-related work in Central Asia. The two most relevant to the question at hand are the Europe and Central Asia network of platforms engaging in IPBES (ECA) Network and the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia branch of the Climate Action Network (CAN EECCA). Both organizations include countries outside the Central Asia region, but provide invaluable opportunities for networking, organizing, and participating in the international science-policy interface.

The **Europe and Central Asia network of platforms engaging in IPBES (ECA)**¹¹ is a regional network that consists of 21 IPBES National Focal Points (NFPs) and various national biodiversity platforms (NBPs). The network provides opportunities for networking and sharing best practices, knowledge and resources in regard to IPBES, it stimulates and supports the establishment of national biodiversity platforms, disseminates information regarding IPBES activities, and regularly organizes joint activities, such as the regular Pan-European Stakeholder Consultations (PESC), which allows participants to engage with IPBES by, for example, providing comments and feedback to ongoing assessments.

The **Climate Action Network Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (CAN EECCA)**¹² is part of the global Climate Action Network. Comprising 59 NGOs from the three subregions, the organization is an excellent platform for NGO cooperation and networking. CAN EECCA is active in a large number of thematic areas related to the effects of climate change. In 2021, the network organized a series of “Climate Dialogues.” Within the scope of this project, six working groups with various foci were organized. Work areas include renewable energy, climate policy, climate adaptation and biodiversity, cities and transportation, and fair transformation. The project is ongoing at the time of writing, and presents an excellent opportunity for the region’s NGOs to partake in the discussions, expand their networks, and become involved in the climate dialogue at the local, regional, and global levels.¹³

¹¹ <http://www.eca-ipbesnetwork.org/>

¹² <https://infoclimate.org/>

¹³ Further information on the 2021 Climate Dialogues can be obtained at <https://infoclimate.org/eng/can-eecca-launches-climate-dialogues-2021-as-working-groups/>

6. Platform format options

The majority of interviewees came to the conclusion that the format of the platform will be largely determined by who takes the initiative to establish it. A disagreement emerged in the analysis of the interviews between those that envisioned a regional biodiversity platform as an official intergovernmental body and those that saw it as a structure within the NGO sphere. In either case, however, the involvement of a set of stakeholders as comprehensive and inclusive as possible was emphasized by many of the participants. This includes representatives of decision makers.

Each approach comes with its own set of difficulties. While everyone involved in the project agreed that the involvement of decision makers is crucial, some suggested that the establishment of a platform as a new regional intergovernmental body is a lengthy complicated political process due to a number of possible differences in the countries' national priorities. On the other hand, a platform established in the non-governmental domain may not be able to secure sustainable financing and could lack legitimacy in the eyes of decision makers. This may express itself in a number of ways from the agenda of the platform to its sources of funding being questioned. It is important to remember, however, that the two are not mutually exclusive and a platform established at the level of an NGO has the potential to evolve into a more official body down the line.

6.1. Platform format options arising from the workshop

A good guideline for the process of establishing a regional biodiversity platform in Central Asia is making maximum possible use of the existing structures, utilizing and leveraging existing capacities, and facilitating continued financial support. With this in mind, workshop discussions yielded a number of possibilities. The options vary in the centrality of the potential platform's potential role as a regional mediator for IPBES, the degree of the platform's formalization and the necessity of a governmental mandate to carry out its functions.

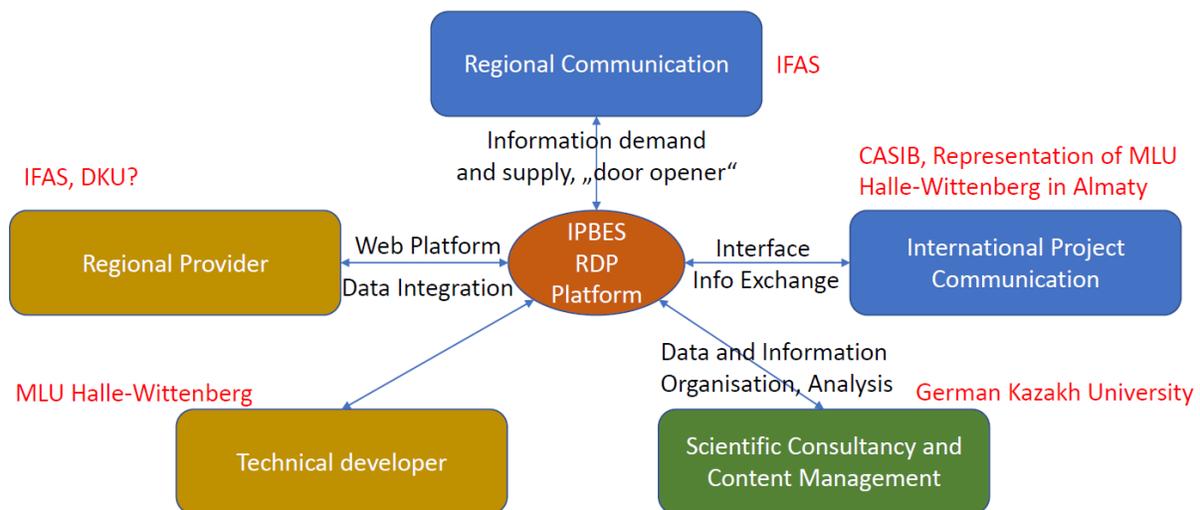
Two tentative propositions were made during the workshop. One structure, described by Prof. Dr. Christopher Conrad of the Martin Luther University in Halle-Wittenberg, and one by Günter Mitlacher, Consultant and former WWF's IPBES focal point.

Presented below, Professor Conrad's model breaks down the potential functions of a regional biodiversity platform in Central Asia and provides tentative mentions of potential partners in the region

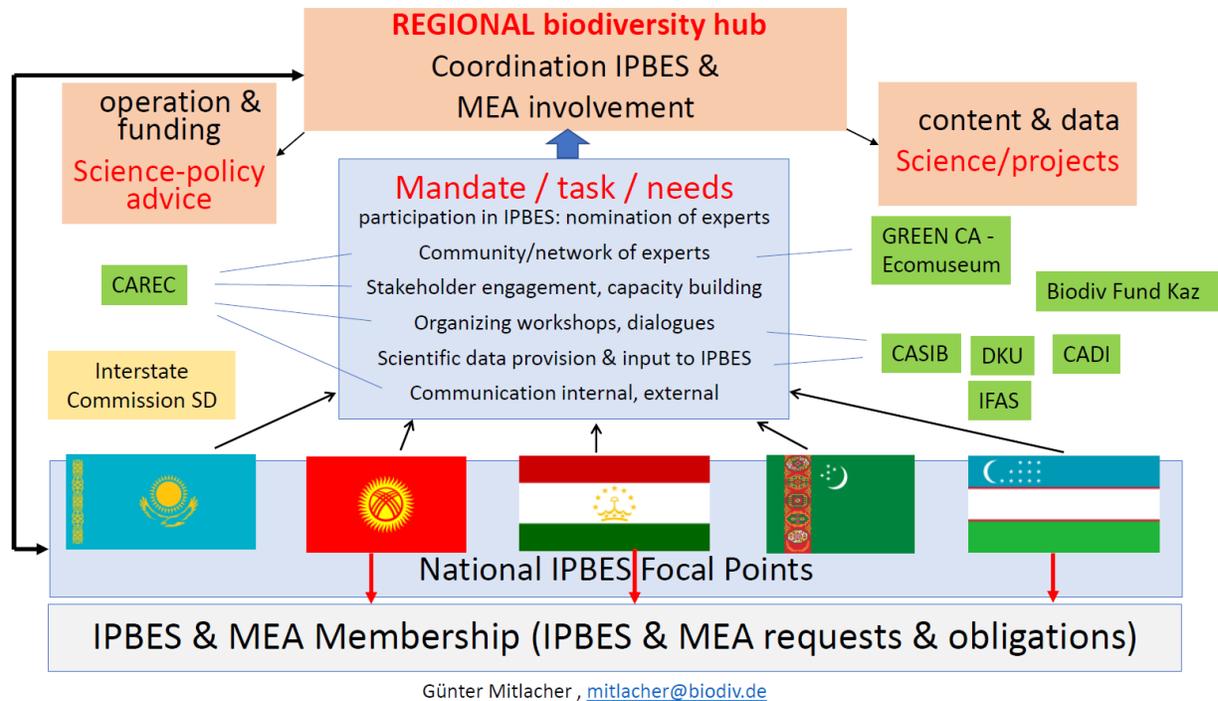
that could perform those functions and how Martin Luther University and its partner institutions in the region could assist. The model envisions the platform as performing the following functions:

- (1) a facilitator of regional communication, a door opener that allows the necessary information to freely flow between stakeholders;
- (2) a platform for the intercommunication of ongoing international projects in the region;
- (3) a provider of scientific consultancy and content management to support access to data and its generation;
- (4) technical development;
- (5) a regional data provider and web platform.

Regional Biodiversity Platform in Central Asia Tasks and Roles – who?



Another sketch of the platform format was proposed by Günter Mitlacher. With a view to the organizations present at the workshop, it describes a regional biodiversity hub with a strong governmental mandate that consists of participation in IPBES via expert nominations, the establishment and maintenance of an expert network, stakeholder engagement, capacity building, the provision of scientific data and regional input to IPBES, as well as internal and external communications. Two organizational pillars would be useful to fulfill this mandate. On the one hand, the hub would require organization (management) and funding. On the other hand, it will require content and data management capacities as well as scientific and project expertise.



A third possibility would be for an existing organization, or a number of organizations at once, to host the regional platform, following a similar structure as the Belgian Biodiversity Platform, which is hosted by four institutions at once (see section 2). A number of organizations have the capacities, the expertise, and possibly the political backing to do so. Although this is not an option that came up at the workshop, we would nonetheless suggest that it remain on the table for future consideration.

Further discussion will, of course, be necessary to flesh out the potential platform. However, what remains to be discussed is the possible necessity of a substructure at the national level in the form of national biodiversity platforms.

7. Obstacles

The necessity of sustainable financing was one of the most often identified obstacles to the establishments of a regional biodiversity platform. Many emphasized the need for sustainability. While short-term project funding is the norm in the region, an effort such as what is proposed here needs a sustainable financial basis. Some of the functions listed in sections 3 and 4 require continued capacity and financial engagement. This is especially important for database management and its population, both in relation to the expert and knowledge databases. Other functions, such as ongoing in-person and

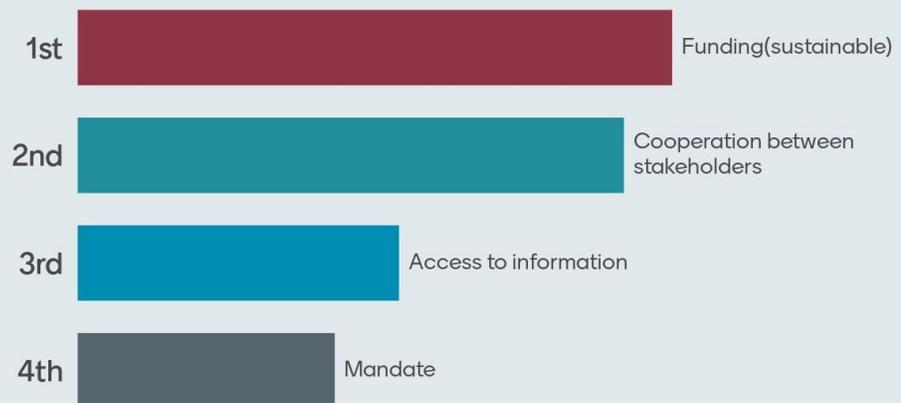
online networking events and conferences can be funded on an ad-hoc basis. Thus, while ongoing maintenance costs may be relatively low, many interviewees indicated that sustainable funding is difficult to obtain, both from international and national sources.

Another obstacle has to do with divergent national interests among the five countries when it comes to questions of environmental conservation and biodiversity. These questions rate differently on different countries' political agendas. In addition, some aspects of the topic have more weight in some of the countries than others. Mountainous ecosystems, for example may be important for Kyrgyzstan, but questions surrounding the Aral Sea may be higher on the agendas of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Biodiversity is a very wide umbrella term, and different countries will have different priorities under this umbrella. This can impede the functioning of the platform by making it difficult to focus on a narrow set of issues.

A number of interviewees and workshop participants identified the political climate itself as a possible obstacle to the formation of a regional platform. Some interviewees mentioned a lack of trust among the countries in the region as a major obstacle to, for example, sharing data. They were of the opinion that the same lack of trust could negatively affect a regional platform.

The results of the workshop discussions surrounding obstacles to the establishment of a regional biodiversity platform in Central Asia are presented below. Workshop participants found that the most important issues were those of sustainable financing and cooperation. Access to information and the possible necessity of an intergovernmental mandate for the platform's activities may also pose difficulties.

Важность препятствий / Ranking obstacles



Of them, finding sources of sustainable funding was seen as the most challenging. Participant votes are presented below. How challenging the obstacles are was rated from 1 to 5. While the task of establishing sustainable funding was rated at 4.1, issues of cooperation, access to data, and acquiring the necessary mandate were rated at around 3.

8. Summary, conclusions, and next steps

A regional biodiversity platform would be conducive to improved science-policy interface in Central Asia. If set up correctly, using existing local capacities and given access to a sustainable source of funding, the platform could become an effective and valuable institution. As this report has shown, many of the SPI-related needs in Central Asia are interlinked and require a coordinated approach. Expert interviews and workshop discussions have shown that the necessary capacities exist in Central Asia. However, their effectiveness is hindered by insufficient coordination among the organizations already active in the region.

Difficulties also still exist in concretizing a complicated general demand for “better SPI,” largely because although the countries have a lot in common, the focus of environmental policies in the different countries varies. Another reason for this difficulty is the fragmented nature of the local SPI. However, communication and cooperation are the best means of establishing what can and needs to be done. The iterative nature of a well-functioning SPI is not a new idea.¹⁴ At this stage, it suffices to observe that what is being discussed here is a structure we must expect to evolve and change after its establishment, one that will continue to carve its niche and accept new roles as it does so.

Another question that remains open is the necessity for a substructure at the national level. The countries of Central Asia differ in how their national-level science-policy interface functions. While Uzbekistan, for example, is moving to establish a national biodiversity platform, other countries rely on NGOs or state institutions to carry out these functions. It is clear that such national-level structures do not have to be uniform across the region. However, further, more focused research is needed to explore the SPI needs in the individual countries.

At the end of the workshop, it was decided to continue the discussion of the next necessary steps in the process of establishing a regional biodiversity platform in Central Asia. The region has the expertise, capacities, and the enthusiasm necessary to move this process forward. A series of small-scale, more focused discussions of the subject will allow to keep this momentum.

¹⁴ For a more theoretical overview of this, please see (Sarkki et. al., 2015)

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