



Finding Ground at the Science–Policy Interface: A Letter for the Next Generation of Land Systems Scholars

Paulina G. Karim¹, Pradeep K. Dubey²

5 ¹@ScapesLab Integrated Landscape and Seascape Approaches Living Lab, College of Environmental Studies and Oceanography, National Dong Hwa University, Hualien, Taiwan 97401

² Department of Agronomy, Institute of Agricultural Sciences, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India 221005

Correspondence to: Paulina G. Karim (scapeslab@gms.ndhu.edu.tw)

10 **Abstract.** Land systems scholars increasingly work across disciplines, sectors, knowledge systems, and the science–policy–practice interface, creating both opportunities and challenges for those at early stages of their careers. Drawing on our experiences as Fellows in the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Nexus Assessment, we reflect on four dimensions that helped us grow: finding professional grounding, understanding the science–
15 policy–practice interface, learning the relational side of science, and belonging to a continuing community of learning. Our experience highlights the importance of mentorship, peer learning, meaningful participation, and relationships in helping early-career scholars navigate complex sustainability challenges. We conclude with reflections for young scholars, senior researchers, and institutions on how supportive spaces can help cultivate the next generation of land systems
20 scholars.

Hello, dear reader,

We are **Paulina G. Karim**, an Assistant Professor at National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan, working on integrated landscape and seascape approaches, protected and conserved areas,
25 community participation, and science–policy engagement, and **Pradeep K. Dubey**, an environmental scientist from Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India working on agroecosystem management, agrobiodiversity conservation, land degradation, restoration, and Indigenous and local knowledge systems. We are active GLP members, former Fellows in the Nexus Assessment of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)
30 (2022–2024), good friends, and sustainability scientists and practitioners who know the



opportunities—and uncertainties—of early-career journeys firsthand. If you are finding your way too, this letter is for you.

1 Why do we write this letter?

Land systems sit at the intersection of food, livelihoods, biodiversity, climate, restoration, and human well-being, and are increasingly strained by land degradation, biodiversity loss, climate change, and growing social inequalities that now affect nearly all inhabited regions of the world (UNCCD, 2022; Coppus, 2023; FAO, 2025; Ziadat et al., 2025). Navigating this complexity is difficult for experienced professionals; for those just beginning their careers, it can be especially daunting.

Young scholars are increasingly expected to become interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and policy-relevant—often before they have found their own professional grounding. Four challenges particularly resonate with our own journeys:

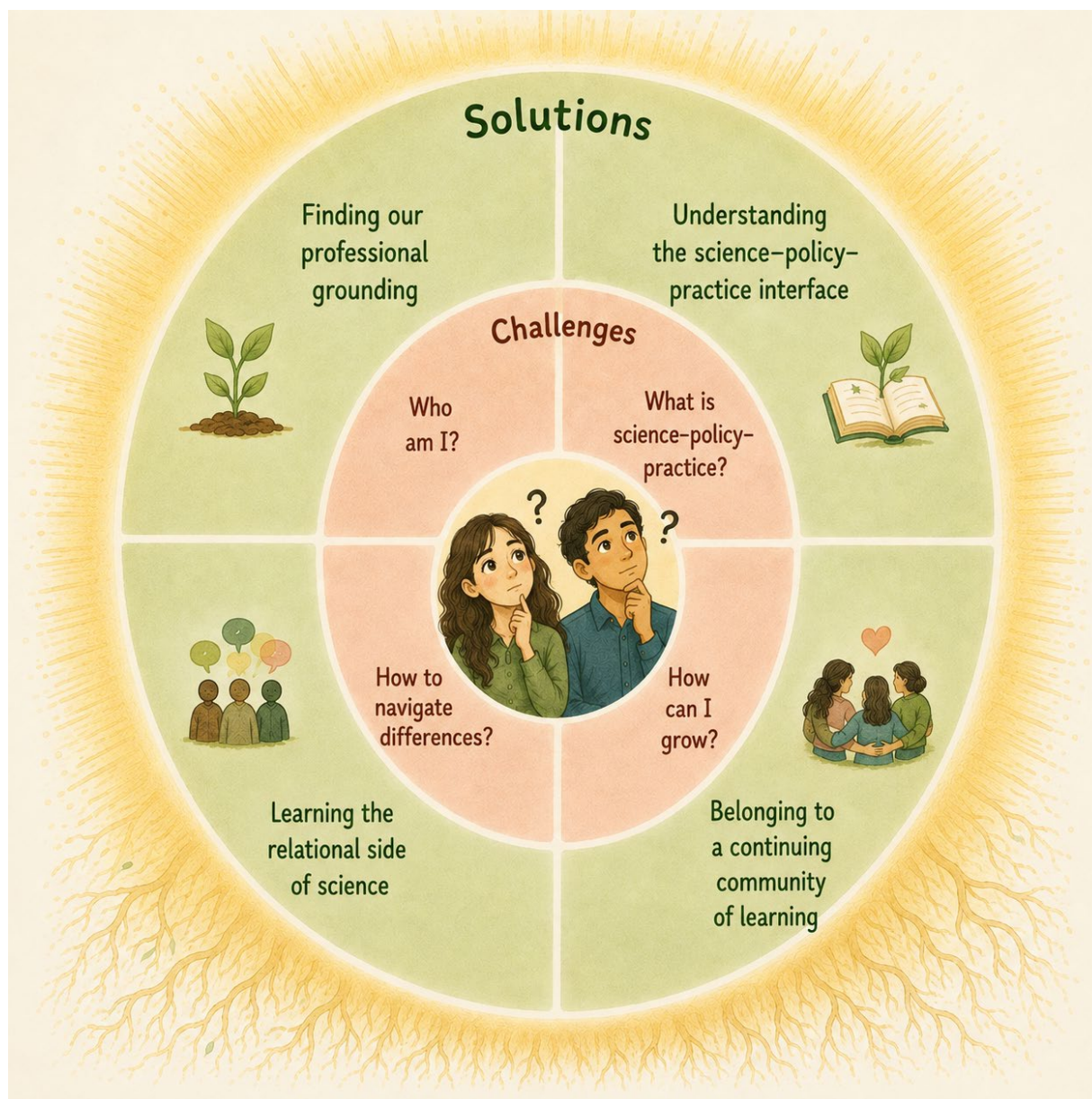
- **Finding professional grounding in an interdisciplinary field.** Working across disciplines can sometimes feel like “knowing everything and nothing at the same time.” Where does our expertise—and professional identity—actually lie?
- **Navigating the science-policy-practice interface.** Sustainability careers increasingly span academia, government, civil society, international organisations, and practice, without a single pathway for finding where we belong.
- **Learning to work across differences.** Collaboration requires not only expertise, but also listening, communication, humility, and the ability to work across disciplines, cultures, sectors, and knowledge systems.
- **Finding supportive spaces to keep growing.** A PhD does not make us “finished scholars.” We still long for opportunities to learn, experiment, receive mentorship, build relationships, and gain confidence.

These challenges led us to reflect on our experience as IPBES Nexus Assessment Fellows¹. Despite our different backgrounds, the Fellowship gave us something neither of us fully expected: a

¹ The IPBES Fellowship Programme was established to strengthen the engagement and capacity of early-career experts in global biodiversity and ecosystem assessments through direct participation in assessment processes, mentorship, training, and peer learning (IPBES, n.d.).



structured yet deeply human space for mentorship, peer learning, capacity building, meaningful participation, and finding our own place at the science–policy–practice interface (Figure 1).



60 **Figure 1: Finding our ground: Challenges and pathways for growth as young land systems scholars.** Source: Authors' conceptualization, with AI-assisted visual generation using ChatGPT (OpenAI), 2026.



2 What helped us grow? Lessons from the IPBES Fellowship

There is so much we could say about our Fellowship experience in the Nexus Assessment. For the
65 benefit of our readers, we organise our reflections around four dimensions of growth: finding our
professional grounding, understanding the science–policy–practice interface, learning the relational
side of science, and belonging to a continuing community of learning.

2.1 Finding our professional grounding in complexity

We believe this is a challenge many young scholars face, although perhaps do not always feel
70 comfortable admitting: being interdisciplinary can sometimes feel like “knowing everything and
nothing at the same time.” Even the popular “elevator pitch” used to train students to explain their
expertise may require quite a few more floors to capture the complexity of our work.

Becoming involved in IPBES helped us better understand what kind of professionals we actually
were. We were particularly fortunate to join the thematically diverse Nexus Assessment, exploring
75 interlinkages among biodiversity, water, food, health, and climate change. Unsurprisingly, this also
pushed us to think beyond the more usual, anthropocentric water-energy-food (WEF) nexus
(Albrecht et al. 2018)— a shift worth acknowledging itself. It helped us position our respective
backgrounds in agroecology, agrobiodiversity, and landscape conservation within the much wider
complexity of the social–ecological systems that comprise our planet. We gradually realised that no
80 single discipline could adequately explain these interconnected challenges—and that our own
strength lay precisely in the intersections.

Just as the nexus is about interlinkages among its elements, we began to recognise our ability to
identify and connect relationships across biodiversity, food, water, health, climate change,
governance, and other sustainability concerns as a strength rather than a lack of disciplinary
85 identity.

Finding our grounding also meant learning across different knowledge systems. The assessment
brought together 165 experts, including natural and social scientists and holders of Indigenous and
local knowledge (ILK). Our engagement with the assessment's ILK liaison group was particularly
transformative, exposing us to different worldviews and ways of knowing, and teaching us what it
90 means to respect, listen, and co-create across knowledge systems.

Perhaps our greatest learning was therefore that future land systems scholars need the ability to
think across systems, scales, disciplines, and knowledge domains—not to know everything, but to
make connections while recognising and respecting different forms of expertise.



2.2 Learning what the science–policy–practice interface actually means

95 A second important learning was understanding what the science–policy–practice interface actually means—and seeing it at work. Through the efforts of platforms such as IPBES and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), “science–policy” has become a widely used term. Yet, particularly as young researchers, it can be difficult to understand what this interface looks like in practice.

100 The Nexus Assessment allowed us not simply to “learn about policy,” but to experience how knowledge is assessed, debated, translated, and eventually made relevant to decision-making. We came to understand that assessments are not simply compilations of scientific evidence. They are spaces where researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and Indigenous Peoples and local communities bring different evidence, priorities, experiences, wisdom, and understandings into
105 conversation. Witnessing this process challenged some of our assumptions about expertise and reinforced the importance of humility, listening, and collaboration.

The *practice* side of this relationship became equally vivid. One of our most important realisations was how easily local realities can remain invisible in global narratives unless someone actively brings them forward. Before joining IPBES, both of us had worked with communities on adaptive
110 agricultural practices, traditional cultivation systems, and community-led restoration and conservation. Through the assessment, we came to see these not as isolated local experiences, but as essential sources of knowledge about how nexus governance and pathways towards sustainability actually work on the ground.

For us, this is also where land systems science holds immense potential: connecting local realities
115 and knowledge with science and policy across scales, while bringing global sustainability ambitions back to the places where change ultimately happens.

2.3 Learning to work with people—not only with knowledge

A third lesson was the importance of relationships. Scientific expertise matters, but so do trust, empathy, communication, and a willingness to learn from others. Some of our most valuable
120 lessons emerged not during formal meetings, but through conversations with fellows, authors, mentors, and knowledge holders from different parts of the world.

The Fellowship helped us develop what we now understand as the **relational side of science**: learning to work in large and culturally diverse teams; listen and disagree constructively; write collectively; give and receive feedback; communicate across languages and cultures; and find the
125 confidence to speak among colleagues with decades more experience than ourselves. It also



taught us that friendship, trust, humour, and informal conversations are not peripheral to collaborative science—they can be part of what makes it possible.

Mentorship was fundamental. Guided by senior scientists serving as assessment co-chairs, coordinating lead authors, and informal mentors, we had people to turn to for advice, encouragement, and professional coaching. At the same time, the Fellowship community itself became an important source of peer-to-peer learning. Capacity-building workshops, online training, chapter work, peer cross-chapter exchanges, and informal conversations created multiple spaces in which we could learn together.

As early-career scholars, we often feel pressure to demonstrate competence and certainty. The Fellowship taught us something different: growth also requires spaces where we can ask questions, acknowledge what we do not know, try, make mistakes, and learn from one another.

2.4 Growing through a community that continues beyond the Fellowship

Perhaps the Fellowship's greatest gift was that it did not end when the assessment did. It did not provide us with ready-made answers; instead, it gave us something more enduring—a community of practice in which we could continue asking better questions and growing together.

Much of what we do today as researchers, teachers, community facilitators, and science-policy collaborators carries lessons from our Fellowship years. We find ourselves “copying” our mentors—in the best possible sense—by adapting the leadership, generosity, and mentoring practices we experienced to our own work, now that we increasingly find ourselves mentoring others.

Our Nexus family also continues to be part of our professional lives. We write papers together, develop joint initiatives, and create new spaces for collaboration—including the GLP Policy Tailoring for Sustainable Land Systems Transformation Working Group established with former Nexus colleagues. The Fellowship also deepened our commitment to IPBES and its mission, leading us towards continued engagement in its task forces, assessments, stakeholder processes, and other activities.

This continuity matters. “Once a Fellow, always a Fellow” is more than a comforting sentiment: it reflects the value of investing in young scholars not through one-off training, but through relationships, networks, mentorship, and opportunities that continue to grow with them.

Together, these experiences have reinforced our belief that the future of land systems science needs scholars who can move across scales, sectors, disciplines, and knowledge systems—and communities willing to support them as they learn how.



3 What can we learn from this? A message to young scholars—and those who support them

Reflecting on our experiences, we see several lessons for strengthening future science–policy engagement within land systems research.

For early-career scholars, we encourage you to be courageous, seek opportunities to learn and contribute, and voice the support you need to grow. Invest not only in technical expertise, but also in relational skills. The ability to listen, communicate across differences, facilitate dialogue, and collaborate respectfully may be just as important as disciplinary knowledge. Science–policy–practice work is ultimately about people as much as it is about evidence.

For senior scholars, mentorship matters enormously. Many opportunities that shaped our journeys emerged because experienced colleagues were willing to share their time, knowledge, networks, trust, and encouragement. Beyond formal supervision, inviting early-career scholars into collaborations, publications, assessments, and decision-making processes—and giving them space to contribute and gradually lead—can have lasting impacts on their confidence and professional growth.

For institutions and platforms, stronger and more deliberate support mechanisms are needed. The IPBES Fellowship Programme provides one valuable model: combining meaningful participation in real science–policy processes with mentorship, peer learning, capacity building, and a community that continues beyond the programme itself. Similar approaches can be adapted by organisations and initiatives at international, national, and local levels. Universities and research institutions should also recognise science–policy engagement as an important scholarly contribution and provide appropriate support for those involved.

For both of us, the IPBES Fellowship became far more than a training programme. It became a space of dialogue, navigating uncertainty, learning, friendship, and transformation. We learned that addressing complex land systems challenges requires not only better evidence, but scholars who can listen across differences, work across boundaries, value multiple forms of knowledge, and remain open to learning.

The future of land systems science may depend as much on relationships as it does on research. Young scholars do not need to enter the science–policy–practice interface already knowing exactly who they are or where they belong. They need opportunities to enter, people willing to walk alongside them, and spaces in which they can learn, contribute, gradually find their own voice—and one day create such spaces for others.



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190 PGK: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. PKD: Writing – original
draft, Writing – review & editing. Both authors contributed equally to the development and
refinement of the manuscript and approved the final version.

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None.

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