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**UNTACKLING THE GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ECOSYSTEM VALUATION: TOWARDS
A MULTIDISCIPLINARY ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS**

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Título

Untackling the global political economy of ecosystem valuation: Towards a multidisciplinary ecological economics

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Resumo

The paper takes a global political economy perspective to the Economic Valuation of Ecosystems Approach (EVES) debate and critically reflects about the current patterns of research and practice related to the concept. Especially, its aims to call attention to the fact that the EVES approach, besides being high on the global diversity agenda, is hardly being used as a political decision making tool in most countries around the world. Reasons for this are poorly understood. This is an important gap, given that the effectiveness of the EVES approach in improving sustainable natural resource use and conservation will be limited as long as the integration of valuation results into political and corporate decision-making across countries and sectors is not achieved. The paper calls for systematic and comparative research studies which go beyond the ecological-economic dimension of EVES, towards an analysis of the political-institutional contexts in which EVES is being promoted and – potentially – used.

Palavras - chave

Economic Valuation, Ecosystem Services, TEEB, Biodiversity Governance, global political economy

1. Introduction

Despite much development towards mainstreaming the economic valuation of ecosystem services (EVES) approach, and an impressive body of theoretical and empirical studies on the topic, policy and regulatory frameworks for energy planning, industrial air emissions, and agricultural development – to name only a few sectors with significant impacts on our global biodiversity – continue to be designed with no or limited consideration for ecosystem services values in most parts of the world.

This paper argues that one under-investigated reason for this failure is the fact that EVES has been developed and implemented in a top-down fashion by Northern and global institutions, while it has been widely ignored that the adoption of EVES as a tool for the orientation of policies requires acceptance and legitimacy by local decision makers, especially in developing and emerging economies.

Since the 1990s, critical work on EVES from both within and outside the economic discipline has called attention to the difficulty of instruments and concepts created at the global scale to improve local conservation. The school of ecological economics has presented a constructive criticism on the mainstream approach to ecosystem valuation and made important steps by factoring biophysical-ecological factors into EVES and by moving the unit of analysis to local scales and to engage with other disciplines – crucial for the complex field of sustainability studies. In addition, it has been recognized that EVES will only meet its potential to improve ecosystem conservation if it is actually used by political decision-makers. This has been confirmed for instance by the decision of the Brazilian Society of Ecological Economics to dedicate its 2013 conference to the question of how to factor the principles, methods, instruments, concepts and proposals of ecological economics into the political and corporate decision-making processes.

However, doing context-specific research will not necessarily improve political uptake of EVES across countries and scales if public and private decision makers on the ground are not familiar with the concept of EVES and/or reject its legitimacy as decision making aid. Important research has been done on deliberative processes in the context of both valuation and decision-making (e.g. Munda 2000) but these are typically focused on traditional communities. Less attention has been dedicated to questions of acceptance and legitimacy of the concept in national-level decision making processes across countries, sectors and stakeholder groups. This paper argues that in order to meet the great potential of EVES to improve biodiversity conservation on a global level, we need to understand how the concept is being perceived by political and corporate decision makers from different countries, and which external and internal factors shape such perceptions.

In order to sustain this argument, the paper takes a global political economy approach to EVES and presents the results of a preliminary (not exhaustive) review of theoretical and research literature on the development of the EVES approach over the past two decades, as well as publications and project proposals aimed at improving its practical use. The review shows how the concept of EVES originated in and continues to be discussed and promoted primarily by institutions and actors based in Western Europe and the USA – the ‘heartlands of neoliberal discursive production’. Efforts to improve the political uptake of EVES are clustered in these regions and focused primarily on improving methods and building capacities in environmental agencies. While the national-level processes of TEEB currently underway in many developing and emerging economies (e.g. Brazil and India) certainly provide a basis for stimulating discussion and action around the EVES concept at the national and local level, there is a lack of systematic analysis of the impacts of such processes on the actual acceptance of the concept by political and corporate decision makers. As a result, it remains largely unknown to what extent the conditions for the use of EVES are established across geographic scales, economic sectors and stakeholder groups.

The findings of the literature review will be presented and discussed in more detail in the remainder of this paper. They serve as a base for the central hypotheses to be constructed in this paper: that there is a direct link between the ideological base on which the EVES approach was developed and currently stands – the neoliberal free market orthodoxy –, and the continuing challenges of the approach to effectively improve conservation practice across scales and sectors. The paper closes with a call for research to test this hypothesis in comparative case studies across developed, emerging and developing countries.

The paper is divided into five sections. Following this introduction, I will briefly introduce the concept of EVES and what is known about its political uptake (2.), followed by a review of how the issue of low political uptake has been approached in academic research (3.). In the fourth section, I show how the development and current implementation of EVES is following typical patterns of environmental governance in the 21st century: a critical eye on the state’s governance

capacities, and increased power to private sector and global governance bodies, all of which undermine democratic decision making, diminish local legitimacy of policy instruments, and increase inequalities between countries and social groups. The fourth section (4.) constructs the link between the low political uptake of EVES and the ideological-institutional context in which it was created and developed. It demonstrates that critical approaches to EVES, including ecological economics, have discussed issues like North-South inequalities and the need for context-specific research, however, comparative and systematic empirical inquiries into the institutional-political dimension of EVES are scarce. The section closes with a call for research. Section 5 wraps up the central arguments of the paper.

2. EVES: economic theory and political reality

According to a widely accepted definition provided by Gretchen Daily in 1997: “ecosystem services are the conditions and processes through which natural ecosystems, and the species that make them up, sustain and fulfill human life.” (DAILY 1997) Awareness for such services dates back to Plato or even earlier (MOONEY AND EHRLICH 1997) but it was only in the mid-1970s, triggered by the growing ecological movement and the oil crisis, that scholars started to frame beneficial ecosystem functions as ecosystem, or environmental, or nature's services (DALY 1977; EHRLICH AND EHRLICH 1981; DE GROOT 1987). The need to value the positive externalities (benefits) of critical ecosystem services in order to improve cost-benefit analysis of private and public decisions involving resource use and pollution became more widely acknowledged in the 1990s. Important events that triggered this recognition was the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska in 1989 and the incorporation of the ecosystem services approach into the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992, among other factors.

Parallel to the increasing development of EVES methods, market-based policy instruments were created to incentivize the conservation of ecosystem services. The World Bank, were the first to adopt Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) schemes as a key strategy to move away from the logic of ‘conservation versus development’

towards ‘conservation for development’ (FOLKE 2006). Based on these expectations, and triggered by increasing evidence for the positive link between economic development and ecosystem services conservation, the EVES approach has made it onto the mainstream agenda on global biodiversity in the last decade (MEA 2005; IISD 2007; WRI 2008; BOVARNICK ET AL. 2010; TEEB 2010). However, the prominent role of EVES at the global governance level overshadows the fact that the values captured in often complex and costly EVES studies are rarely used to inform environmental regulatory frameworks or investment decisions in most parts of the world. The crucial issue of practical use has been recognized, however, solid empirical knowledge on the various factors which hinder or trigger political uptake in different contexts is scarce. So what *is* actually known about the political uptake of EVES?

A number of politically motivated studies have analyzed the effects of PES schemes on local communities in Latin America. However, these studies can be situated in the broader critic on ‘neoliberal conservation’ and do not have the actual use of EVES as their primary focus. The only study conducted explicitly with this aim surveys more than 100 environmental projects of the World Bank and finds that no valuation was employed in the majority of its projects (SILVA & PAGIOLA 2003). Two recent meta-studies provide evidence that scientists conducting EVES studies have widely ignored the question if values of ecosystem goods and services are actually factored into environmental decision making. In an extensive literature search for peer-reviewed articles on ecosystem services until the year 2006, FISHER AT AL. (2008) find only 34 cases with either an explicit or potential reference to policy interaction. In complementary interviews, “several respondents were very frank at the lack of policy traction of their work, and several offered the view that an ecosystem service argument or valuation was only a small input to the decision-making process.” A more recent review of more than 700 references conducted by BILLÉ ET AL. (2012) concludes that there is a “paucity of papers that describe, through a case study, how a specific ecosystem value has played a role in a decision.” Rather, “the common rule is to present an economic valuation, then suggest that it be

used for decision-making, but without this use being either explicated or contextualized, and without concrete examples being provided or analyzed” (ibid). The authors call for systematic investigation into this topic, pointing out that it is still “a strikingly under-investigated issue” (ibid.)

3. The limitations of academic research

It is an under-investigated, but recognized topic. There has always been awareness among proponents of EVES that the concept can only meet its potential when it is actually used by decision makers to design policy instruments and make trade-off decisions¹. As early as 1993, environmental economist David Pearce pointed out that environmental valuation should follow the paradigm of “demonstration and appropriation” (PEARCE ET AL. 1993): values must be demonstrated to decision makers, then appropriated by them. However, empirical work of Pearce and others on the use of environmental CBA by national-level administrators in developed countries shows that although being considered relevant for decision process, there is much concern about using ecosystem services values as criteria, because of methodological issues, lack of resources and time, and lack of expertise and knowledge². Moreover, there is much evidence that CBA is rarely being used in environmental policy making in developing and emerging countries (LIVERMORE and REVESZ 2013).

Over the past two decades, much effort has been made to decrease the methodological and technical weaknesses of valuation methods (CARSON 2008), but the rapid changes in the science of valuation have also led to “increasing scrutiny regarding their validity and reliability” (ATKINSON AND MOURATO 2008). Already in the 1990s guidelines were written to assist policymakers (e.g. PEARCE ET AL. 1994; WINPENNY 1995) but according to David Pearce, “most valuation manuals do not in fact guide policymakers on how to engage in valuation” (PEARCE

¹ See e.g. NAVRUD AND PRUCKNER 1997; LEVIN 1999; HAHN 2000; HEAL 2000; DAILY ET AL. 2000; SALZMAN ET AL. 2001; NRC 2005

² See PEARCE 1991, 2003, 2004, 2006; OECD 1999; HANLEY, 2001, GÖRLACH ET AL. 2007

2000). In order to solve the cost problem and make values comparable across contexts and scales, the possibility of benefit (value) transfer has been investigated, with mixed results³. These efforts mirror a common understanding and belief within the EVES research community that

“ecosystem service research can be designed to have strong policy foresight, broad cooperation between policy agents and scientists, and possibly strong implementation effects. Keys to success are likely to include making an economic argument, delivering results in common language, elucidating tangible benefits to livelihoods in the short term, and multiple points of contact with those involved in the policy process.” (FISHER ET AL. 2008, my emphasis)

In other words, there is a strong recognition for the potential of the EVES approach, paired with strong evidence that its theoretical ideal rarely translates into the practice of environmental management.

The argument forwarded in this paper is that one important prerequisite for the political uptake of the EVES concept as a conservation tool on a global basis is its acceptance across countries, sectors and stakeholder groups. As WALKER ET AL (2009) stress, “[t]he major powers must be willing to enforce agreements, but legitimacy will depend on acceptance by numerous and diverse countries and by nongovernmental actors, such as civil society and business.” These aspects are understudied and only very recently entered the mainstream debate on EVES.

In the context of the institutional critique of the mainstream approach to environmental valuation, scholars have called for a focus on the “right process” rather than “right numbers” (PEARCE ET AL 2000), a careful examination of how and why certain decisions are made, since “knowing who loses and who wins does not tell which decision to make” (BILLÉ ET AL. 2012), and investigations into stakeholder influences because “[w]hatever decision support system is eventually adopted, its value will be judged on how well it aids real policymakers operating iteratively in the nonlinear real world political economy” (TURNER 2007).

Only very recently, triggered by increasing evidence for the risks of climate change (EEA 2013), calls for ‘better and new institutions’ to implement the ideas of

³ See BROUWER 2000; BARTON AND MOURATO 2003; READY ET AL. 2004; NAVRUD AND READY 2007

TEEB and MEA, and increase the acceptance of economic valuation among decision makers have entered the mainstream of the ecosystem services debate (CARPENTER ET AL. 2009). It now is more widely accepted that “we must design effective and enduring institutions to manage, monitor, and provide incentives that reflect the social values of ecosystem services” (DAILY ET AL. 2009). In addition, there is an increased awareness that the complex topic of biodiversity protection and sustainable development can only be tackled successfully by multi stakeholder approaches that cut across policy sectors, academic disciplines and national boundaries. As CARPENTER ET AL. (2009) point out,

“[t]he gaps in knowledge that exist today cannot be addressed through uncoordinated studies of individual components by isolated traditional disciplines [...]. To this end, it is imperative that the policy and science communities establish a capacity to create and implement policies for social-ecological systems, predict consequences, and evaluate outcomes”.

A more active science-policy-sphere, global cooperation and standardization of methods and values, and appropriate legal structures that oblige decision makers to use economic valuation approaches are now seen as the key to mainstream EVES globally (SCARLETT AND BOYD 2011; BILLE ET AL. 2012; KUSHNER ET AL. 2012). In order to put these ideas into practice, some initiatives have been launched. For instance, the central goal of the ‘Natural Capital Project’ is “to explore how a focus on decisions can motivate the integration of ecosystem services into management and policy decisions, and inspire a research agenda to support this change” (DAILY ET AL. 2009). In Europe, networks for policy-science exchange on EVES have been created with the objective to improve, standardize and globalize tools and methods, and enhance communication across academic disciplines and government agencies involved in environmental management on national, regional and global scales⁴.

However, these initiatives are likely to have limited success in improving the approach, because they continue to be let and pushed forward by actors and

⁴ e.g. IPBES EU Biodiversity Strategy; KNEU/Germany; Ecosystem Services Partnership/Holland; OpenNESS/Finland.

institutions from the US and Europe, and focus their efforts on the science-policy interface. As I will show in the following part, these strategies mirror typical patterns of environmental governance in the 21st century: a critical eye on the state and its governance capacities, a greater role for global governance institutions, and increased private sector influence in policy making, all of which undermine democratic decision making, diminish local legitimacy of policy instruments, and increase inequalities between countries and social groups.

4. Tracing the ideological-institutional foundation of EVES

In the following I will review how EVES has been introduced into the global sustainability debate in the context of the neoliberal free market ideology and legitimized by the neoclassical approach to resource use and pollution. An understanding of this theoretical-ideological base, I argue, is crucial to tackle the practical challenges of the EVES approach.

The neoliberal free market economy consolidated itself as the dominant economic ideology (replacing Keynesianism) in the late 1980s (STIGLITZ 2003). At the heart of the neoliberal development model (based on the prescriptions of the Washington Consensus of 1989) is the idea that if the (economic) cake is made larger, everyone can get a larger piece. In order for the cake to grow, market forces need to act freely in both international trade and investment, and the domestic economy. This has led to a number of related phenomena: 1.) An increasing role for global governance institutions which suffer from a governance deficit, a democratic deficit, and an implementation deficit (HASS 2004); 2.) declining state power and increasing governance in networks (RHODES 1997); and 3.) private sector dominance over other stakeholders in these networks (EHRlich AND KENNEDY 2005). All of these favors lack of local legitimacy and a tendency towards “bad governance”, and results in an increase in income inequality, unemployment and decrease in basic living standards (SERRA & STIGLITZ 2008).

However, despite these apparent limits of free markets to solve the ‘classical

problems' of society like poverty, overpopulation, distribution, and unemployment, the market continuous to be promoted as remedy for 'modern day problems', such as debt repayments, crime, and – central to this paper – pollution and natural resource degradation. This fact supports the argument of post-development thinkers that the neoliberal ideology is protected by a power system made up of certain actors and geopolitical knowledge, and closed to others. The third world, in this context, is “categorically objectified” and its needs “externally decided” (ESCOBAR 1996). The transformation of global governance under neoliberal thought has been reflected in the transformation of biodiversity governance over the past decades, and the development of EVES is a prime example.

When concerns about resource degradation and the limits of growth first emerged in late 1960s, political action and state-led economic planning were seen as key pathways to environmental protection. In the 1980s, global financial institutions started to progressively promote market environmentalism and its tools (such as valuation of externalities, market-based policy instruments, and privatization of nature reserves etc.), backed up by the neoclassical claim that “getting the prices right” would be an efficient remedy to pollution and resource degradation. This marked the beginning of a change of the role of the state from being the central regulator, to preserving the institutional framework for the free market, and correct market failure as necessary (SMITH 1995; ANDERSON AND LEAL 2001; MCCARTHY 2004), as well as an increasing influence of transnational corporations, financial institutions and private business in environmental governance (LEVY AND NEWELL 2005). The ideological power of the regime is mirrored by the fact that major NGOs (e.g. Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy) have been constructing partnerships with transnational corporations and financial institutions (LEVIN 2002; CHAPIN 2004).

However, BIERMANN (2011) identifies a severe lack of legitimacy and accountability of the current model of “earth system governance”, while YOUNG (2002) stresses the enormous challenge of designing inclusive institutions which stimulate global cooperation on sustainable use of the “global commons” (see also

OSTROM 2009). The democratic deficit (HAAS 2002) is visible for instance in the practice of North-South partnerships which, in theory, are demand-driven and aimed at fulfilling the needs of developing countries. In practice, most partnerships are not initiated by countries, but by international organizations (29%), large transnational nongovernmental organizations (24%) and OECD countries (22%). Rules and instruments intended to improve the governance of global biodiversity protection suffer from a severe implementation deficit as they are in many cases lacking generalizability (PULLIN & KNIGHT 2009) and applicability (HARROP & PRITCHARD, 2011). This is confirmed by many studies which show how global policy instruments in general do not match the ecological processes they are intended to address (see e.g. LEVIN, 2000; YOUNG, 2002; CUMMING ET AL., 2006; PAAVOLA ET AL, 2009).

However, despite these weaknesses, market environmentalism remains the dominant ideology in global biodiversity governance, and its tools, especially EVES, are fiercely supported and forced by Western Europe and the USA – the ‘heartlands of neoliberal discursive production’. Insights from emerging and developing countries to the debate are rare, and systematic knowledge on how the EVES approach is being perceived and interpreted by political and corporate decision makers in emerging and developing nations is scarce. This is a serious limitation, given that these countries struggle most to align the conservation of their often extraordinary biodiversity with economic growth strategies (PEARCE 2007), and that it is often the poorest people that most rely on natural resources for food, housing, fuel and medicine (UNEP 2010).

There is an urgent need for the governments of these countries to integrate biodiversity protection into their environmental, energy and agricultural policy and regulation frameworks. EVES may make an important contribution, but it is likely to fail if induced in poorly understood contexts in which conservation and development policies are historically separated and self-serving governments pose major barriers to innovative policy making. As long as we do not improve our knowledge on how the concept is interpreted and which role it does – or does not – play on the highest levels

of political decision making in the these contexts, attempts to globalize the approach are likely to fail (OSTROM 2005). According to WALKER ET AL. (2009), “the challenge is not just to declare the principle but to ensure its acceptance and enforcement. Acceptance is needed for legitimacy, and enforcement will depend on whether states are willing to make the necessary sacrifices”.

Following this argument, it is unlikely that static policy templates and standardized valuation techniques designed by US and EU led networks and governance bodies will have the desired effect to successfully integrate ecosystem services into policy practice of these countries. Current mainstream debate and action on EVES do not consider this as an obstacle. Rather, it is implicitly being assumed that decision makers have an interest, the capacities, resources and institutional and organizational prerequisites to modify existing policy frameworks and decision making criteria in order to better manage natural capital. This is evident in the TEEB study which recognizes that “different instruments will suit different situations and there is no single policy solution for all countries. It is therefore very helpful that each country first review the situation on the ground” (TEEB for Policy Makers 2009). The question if “each country” is interested and willing to conduct such a “review” is not being raised. Instead, obstacles to political uptake are assumed to be of methodological and technical nature and the improvement and global mainstreaming of standardized methods and techniques is seen as key strategy to remove such barriers. This has been confirmed by the experience of Peter May, member of the advisory council for TEEB, in the context of the Brazilian TEEB process. In 2013, May, in collaboration with specialists from a number of Brazilian institutions, presented the document “Valoração do Capital Natural TEEB-BRASIL. TEEB para Formuladores de Política Nacional. Proposta de Escopo”. According to the author, the (unpublished) proposal has been largely ignored, except for those parts which are led by corporate actors and the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GIZ). The top-down approach currently adopted to mainstream the EVES approach and its instruments is likely to fall on very un-solid ground, if it continues to ignore the

underlying political-institutional factors that determine the practical use of ecosystem values for improved political decision making across countries and sectors.

5. A call for research on “the politics of EVES”

The issues of private and global dominance in the debate and practice of EVES has not gone unrecognized. However, empirical work is focused on local impacts of PES and MES schemes⁵, which are typically based on the perspective that there is no need for valuation, because the values of the monetary compensation can be defined through (Coasean) negotiation. Many theoretical analyses are characterized by an overly radical tone, dismissing EVES as “neoliberal conservation” (BÜSCHER ET AL. 2012) and “eco imperialism” (DRIESSEN 2010). In light of the prominent role of EVES in mainstream debate, overly ideological rejections of EVES may be a lost opportunity, and may even give strength to conservative arguments about the insignificance of nature’s value and, consequently, environmental valuation. Rather, it is important to recognize the weaknesses of EVES, but also its potential.

Ecological economics has probably provided the most constructive criticism on the reductionist valuation approach of the neoclassical school. Not all ecological economists are in favor of valuation, but those who are (which are the main targets of this paper) claim that the management of the complex economic-ecological systems is not completely controllable via economic instruments that directly influence prices (COMMON AND PERRINGS 1992). Rather, a fair distribution and sustainable scale – crucial for inter-and intragenerational wellbeing – are essentially social decisions which need to be politically imposed before markets are allowed to trade permits and determine prices (ROMEIRO 2010). This requires comprehensive systems analysis which involves multiple dimensions, as well as a shift of the unit of analysis from global to local scales.

Moreover, ecological economics is based on the understanding that

⁵ See e.g. LANDELL-MILLS ET AL. 2002, MARTÍNEZ-ALIER 2002; SALZMAN 2005; WUNDER ET AL 2008

sustainability science must deal with questions of North-South welfare differences and the complex link between poverty and the environment. Ecological economics also recognize the importance of political, legal and institutional conditions for sustainable policy measures, as exemplified in Daly's and Cobb's critical work on the international marketplace at the end of the 1980s, which leads them to the conclusion that

“[t]he emerging global society must develop democratically controlled institutions at all levels: international, national, and local. It also needs to create a decentralizing context for economic activities that returns institutional control to people, roots economic interests in local soil, and reestablishes some sense of human community” (DALY AND COBB 1989).

The recently published book on the “global disgovernance of sustainability” (*A desgovernanca mundial da sustentabilidade*) by José Eli da Veiga of Brazil confirms the recognition of ecological economics for the difficulty of instruments and concepts created at the global scale to improve local conservation (DA VEIGA 2013).

However, despite their declared aim to develop a heterodox and multidisciplinary approach to the economy-environment-society relationship (which necessarily includes the role of the global political economy), the political-institutional dimension of EVES has not been systematically tackled in empirical research. In fact, ecological economics so far has been way more dedicated to improving knowledge on the biophysical-ecological dimension of the economic system, as well as on social-ecological interdependencies, particularly in land and natural-resource use. However, aggregation of knowledge does not automatically translate into policy frameworks which effectively protect biodiversity on spatial and temporal scales, and across different ecosystems and governance settings (OSTROM 2009). Ecological economics dedication to producing context-specific and context-based scientific information on ecosystem values is important, but, as Hahn (2000) stresses, “economists need to do more than simply develop good ideas to influence policy. They need to understand how the political process affects outcomes, and actively market the use of appropriate and feasible economic instruments for promoting more efficient environmental policy” (Hahn 2000). In fact, context-specific values may be as useless as global standards if we do not understand the

political-institutional dimension which is likely to influence the political uptake of such values. In this spirit, the paper calls for research that goes beyond the ecological-economic dimension of EVES, towards comparative analyses of the political-institutional context of EVES across countries, sectors and stakeholder groups.

6. Conclusions

The paper has called attention to the fact that the economic valuation of ecosystem services (EVES) concept, besides being high on the global biodiversity agenda, is hardly used as a political decision making tool in most countries around the world. Reasons for this are poorly understood. This is an important gap, given that the effectiveness of the EVES approach in improving sustainable natural resource use and conservation will be limited as long as the integration of valuation results into political decision-making at the local level is not achieved.

Based on a review of theoretical and research literature on the development of the EVES approach over the past two decades, as well as publications and project proposals aimed at improving its practical use, the paper constructs the hypothesis that the low political uptake of EVES is directly related to the current patterns of research and practice on the concept. The latter are clustered in the Global North, while it is widely unknown to what extent key decision makers from the Global South share the great expectations attached to the idea of valuation ecosystem services for improved conservation.

Ecological economists have recognized the importance of North-South inequalities, the weaknesses of global governance regimes and the importance of attention to the local scale, however, they did not yet effectively include political-institutional analysis into their analytical framework. The analysis of this paper suggests that their promising goal to bring together a plurality of approaches and concepts will not be met unless the discipline goes beyond “*being open*” to other disciplines, towards *actively encouraging* scholars to engage in and contribute to mainstreaming their ideal of strong sustainability. Developed in this spirit, I hope that

the paper will stimulate not only context-specific, but governance-relevant research within the discipline of ecological economics.

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