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# POLICY BRIEF

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## Governments fail to meet the Aichi Biodiversity Targets — do they have a pathway towards “transformative change”?

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# ***Governments fail to meet the Aichi Biodiversity Targets – do they have a pathway towards “transformative change”?***

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Last week I joined people from across the world to participate in a number of special meetings of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), doing so from our homes as opposed to in person at their usual location in Montreal. These were stand-ins for the continuous (and indefinite) postponement of the CBD’s intersessional meetings following the outbreak of COVID-19, and provided an opportunity for the Secretariat to try out virtual alternatives to international meetings.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond providing a testing ground for ways forward while the pandemic remains with us, we were also presented with three major publica-

tions, including the fifth edition of the Global Biodiversity Outlook (GBO5)<sup>2</sup> and the second edition of the Local Biodiversity Outlook (LBO2).<sup>3</sup> The former provides a progress report of the 20 Aichi Biodiversity targets<sup>4</sup> (agreed back in 2010 in Japan), giving a view of how well (or poorly) governments have managed to address and stem the biodiversity crisis which threatens planetary health and wellbeing. The LBO2 focuses on local action and stories of resilience among Indigenous Peoples and local communities, illustrating their significant contributions to implementation of the Convention. Both will set the stage for upcoming negotiations (once they resume) on the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, which will provide a similar Aichi-styled list of targets and goals for States and relevant actors to meet by 2030 and 2050, with the ultimate aim being ‘living in harmony with nature’. The new Framework will be adopted at the next Conference of the Parties (CBD COP15) in Kunming, China. Originally meant to happen in October 2020, when this will happen is complete guesswork.

## **Main findings**

The – sobering – main finding of the GBO5 report was that **none** of the Aichi Biodiversity targets have been met in full. Speakers were, of course, however quick to identify some progress, with six targets being partially met. Key areas of progress identified include the expansion of protected areas in forests, land and sea (with notably limited progress on ensuring that these are effectively and equitably managed); identification of invasive alien species; increase

<sup>1</sup> Notably these were not negotiations given the broad consensus of the difficulties associated with these linked to access, time zones, etc. See for instance Natalie Jones, ‘Ban flying to UN climate talks? That’s a dangerous idea’ *Climate Home News* (29.08.2019) <<https://www.climatechangenews.com/2019/08/29/ban-flying-un-climate-talks-thats-dangerous-idea/>> (last accessed 24 September 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2020) Global Biodiversity Outlook 5 <<https://www.cbd.int/gbo5>> (last accessed 24 September 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Local Biodiversity Outlooks 2: A complement to the fifth edition of the Global Biodiversity Outlook (2020) Published

by Forest Peoples Programme, in collaboration with: Centres of Distinction on Indigenous and Local Knowledge, Indigenous Women’s Biodiversity Network, International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity, and Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity. <<https://lbo2.localbiodiversityoutlooks.net>> (last accessed 24 September 2020).

<sup>4</sup> CBD Webpage, Aichi Biodiversity Targets: Strategic Plan 2011-2020 <<https://www.cbd.int/sp/targets/>> (last accessed 24 September 2020).

in data and citizen science related to biodiversity loss, and the growing international support for biodiversity conservation.

However, these are arguably overshadowed by those showing limited to any progress, with the starkest examples including a failure to reduce incentives for activities that pose a risk to biodiversity. For instance, while governments have increased monetary spending on biodiversity protection to US\$80-90 billion a year, this pales in comparison to the US\$500 billion still used annually in subsidies for activities driving biodiversity loss.<sup>5</sup> On some sub-targets related to States addressing loss of natural habitats, pollution detrimental to ecosystem function and biodiversity, anthropogenic pressures on coral reefs and improving the conservation status of species threatened with extinction, we are literally moving backwards.

The findings are certainly disappointing, but sadly not surprising. The 2014 mid-term assessment (GBO4) forewarned us of this result.<sup>6</sup> More recently, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), back in Montreal in November 2019, told us that the ongoing failure to stem habitat destruction, pollution, overexploitation, climate change and the spread of invasive species will likely push over a million species toward extinction over the coming decades.<sup>7</sup> What's more, environmental, land and human rights defenders are facing escalating violence and threats to their lives for challenging companies and governments making decisions that drive biodiversity loss.<sup>8</sup> That governments are not taking these threats to biodiversity (and those protecting it)

seriously is telling of a much bigger problem in which key actors driving biodiversity loss and climate change continue carrying out their activities with impunity (often in the name of economic growth) while those most impacted by biodiversity loss are left ignored and forgotten, with their basic rights denied. As Joji Cariño, Ibaloi-Igorot from the Cordillera and senior policy advisor for the Forest Peoples Programme pointed out during the GBO5 launch, the report shows 'failures in our political, economic and technological, health and cultural systems'.

## Pathways towards change?

In looking forward, the report drew on a recent study which suggests that it's not too late to curb biodiversity loss. Yet, to do so we need bold conservation and restoration action, **as well as systemic change in areas driving loss, such as agriculture production, trade and consumption patterns.**<sup>9</sup> This points towards something critical activists and practitioners have been saying for years – that you cannot solve biodiversity loss by simply relying on traditional conservation strategies such as designated species protection and the establishment of protected areas (which themselves have a violent history of harming local communities). Governments and international institutes have finally begun listening, increasingly recognising the need for integrated policies and systemic change related to the economy, food, health, education and urban planning.

<sup>5</sup> OECD (2020) 'A Comprehensive Overview of Global Biodiversity Finance', at 3 <<https://www.oecd.org/environment/resources/biodiversity/report-a-comprehensive-overview-of-global-biodiversity-finance.pdf>> (last accessed 24 September 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2014) Global Biodiversity Outlook 4 <<http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/9261/gbo4-en.pdf?sequence=8&isAllowed=y>> (last accessed 24 September 2020).

<sup>7</sup> IPBES (2019) 'Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services: Summary for Policy-makers.' E. S. Brondizio, J.

Settele, S. Díaz, and H. T. Ngo (editors). IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany. <<https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>> (last accessed 24 September 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Global Witness (2020) 'Defending Tomorrow: The climate crisis and threats against land and environmental defenders'. <<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/defending-tomorrow/>> (last accessed 24 September 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Leclère D, Obersteiner M, Barrett M, Butchart SHM, Chaudhary A, De Palma A, DeClerck FAJ, Di Marco M, et al. (2020). Bending the curve of terrestrial biodiversity needs an integrated strategy. Nature <<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2705-y>>

To reflect this, the report lays out eight ‘key transitions’ needed to ensure that we are on a path towards “living in harmony with nature” – covering land and forests; sustainable freshwater; fisheries and oceans; sustainable agriculture; food systems; cities and infrastructure; climate action and biodiversity-inclusive one health. These have in turn been linked to ‘leverage points’ aimed to prompt change from leaders in government, business, civil society and academia, including visions of good quality of life; lowering total consumption and waste, promoting values and social norms; addressing inequality; ensuring justice and inclusion of indigenous peoples and local communities; exposing and internalising hidden externalities and telecoupling; supporting technology, innovation and investment (especially in the agricultural sector) and enabling education, and the generation, access to, and sharing of knowledges.

This is all part of the aim of achieving “transformative change” which from a policy and legal perspective essentially means putting biodiversity at the heart of decisions that shape how we produce, consume, and shape rural and urban spaces. With regards to the current “zero draft” for the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework,<sup>10</sup> set to guide us towards this “transformative change”, there are those already pointing out gaps which, if left unaddressed, risks seriously undermining meaningful change. These include difficulties in getting States to make clear commitments to tackling drivers of biodiversity loss across industry, agriculture and infrastructure, etc. There is no point beating around the bush here – the reality is that capitalist models

of growth currently driving policies across sectors (with biodiversity impacts felt *across entire* supply chains) are simply incompatible with what studies are saying needs to be done, and although hard to achieve, such change is absolutely necessary.

Another criticism levied against the current draft (and the process that led to its elaboration)<sup>11</sup> is that it does not incorporate calls by grassroots activists that the Framework should adopt a human rights based approach. This speaks to two interrelated issues. First, that biodiversity is absolutely fundamental for the safeguarding of basic human rights.<sup>12</sup> What people (and policy-makers) often forget is that biodiversity is so intimately and intricately linked to our lives and wellbeing – healthy ecosystems provide us with clean water, fresh air, fertile soil, medicines, significant mental and physical health benefits, resilience in the face of emerging threats by climate change and so on. In other words, a shift is needed in how we relate to environmental protections and stop seeing these as a competing interest to human and societal welfare (as is often done under a growth-narrative). Once this shift occurs, it’ll be harder for States to defend actions driving biodiversity loss.

Second, when elaborating environmental policies, it is important for these to recognise the rights and concerns of those communities who are disproportionately impacted by environmental harms and policies addressing these. For instance, Indigenous Peoples across the globe have faced escalating encroachment on their ancestral lands from extractive activities as well as traditional conservation and “green” energy and/or development projects.<sup>13</sup> These have led

<sup>10</sup> Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Zero Draft of the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework <<https://www.cbd.int/article/2020-01-10-19-02-38>> (last accessed 24 September 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Mika Schroder ‘Biodiversity Negotiations Should Account for COVID-19 and Ensure Equity’ IISD Knowledge Hub (18.08.2020) <<https://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/guest-articles/biodiversity-negotiations-should-account-for-covid-19-and-ensure-equity/>> (last accessed 24 September 2020). This article was written following discussions with some authors of an Open Letter on the Post-2020 and peer review processes published by the CBD Alliance. This can be found here <<http://cbd-alliance.org/en/2020/open-letter-post-2020-and-peer-review-process>> (last accessed 24 September 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Elisa Morgera, ‘Dawn for a New Day? The Evolving Relationship between the Convention on Biological Diversity and International Human Rights Law’ (2018) 53:4 *Wake Forest Law Review*. See also generally work by Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, who is increasingly looking at links between biodiversity and human rights. <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/environment/SREnvironment/Pages/SREnvironmentIndex.aspx>> (last accessed 24 September 2020).

<sup>13</sup> See for instance Amanda Coulson-Drasner, ‘Land Loss threatens Indigenous communities worldwide’ *Deutsche Welle* (09.08.2020) <<https://www.dw.com/en/land-loss->



to their expulsion from lands, loss of livelihoods, food systems and local economies, harm to community cohesion and loss of Indigenous languages and cultures, not to mention individual and collective violence and trauma. What's more, alongside Indigenous Peoples, rural communities, women and youth are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss. Given the key role these groups will play in biodiversity protection now and in the future, it is crucial that their rights and perspectives play a central role across all levels of decisions-making.

This brings me to a final important consideration in moving forward, namely asking from where we actually see solutions emerging. Governments, large NGOs and industry actors are being placed at the forefront of environmental action, yet their track record in actually enabling positive, just and “transformative” change is seriously lacking. Growing emphasis on local grassroots action has been an important step towards highlighting the key role played by these groups in enabling truly progressive place-based solutions which are sensitive to the cultural and social particularities of a given place. Beyond illustrating local solutions to tackling biodiversity loss, the LBO2 report, which showcases a wide range of such stories, also speaks of additional benefits of these projects such as the revitalisation of Indigenous and local knowledges, diverse worldviews, food systems, local economies, cultural and spiritual practices, and languages. Inclusive governance structures and decision-making processes also enabled strengthening of community cohesion, bridging inter-generational

gaps and helped heal wounds left behind by ongoing colonial and other violent practices mentioned above.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

The findings of GBO5 is disheartening, yet several dominant actors at the CBD insist that they are up to the task of bending the curb on biodiversity loss. Whether they deliver on this is yet to be seen, but it's worth keeping a close eye on the ways that the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework evolves and develops. In the meantime, it's worth questioning the role of governments and other currently dominant actors within the traditional conservation paradigm – are they enabling “transformative change” or inhibiting it? Is the agenda they promote just? Is it socially and culturally sensitive? Does it respect human rights? Is it actually just an assortment of buzzwords and political commitments that they will again fail to meet?

The LBO2 provides clear examples of meaningful and powerful change coming from the bottom up. Although the burden of addressing biodiversity loss cannot fall squarely on the shoulders of these groups and communities, Governments would do well to ensure recognition and tangible support for their practices, as well as ensuring the protection of their rights linked to lands and cultural practices. This needs to happen on the local, national and international levels of decision-making, and should lie at the heart of the

[threatens-indigenous-communities-worldwide/a-44997211](https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/05/26/kenyas-ogiek-win-land-case-against-government/) > ;Virginia Vigliar, 'Kenya's Ogiek win land case against government' *Al Jazeera* (26.05.2017) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/05/26/kenyas-ogiek-win-land-case-against-government/>>; Eva Maria Fjellheim and Florian Carl, "Green' Colonialism is ruining Indigenous lives in Norway' *Al Jazeera* (01.08.2020) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/8/1/green-colonialism-is-ruining-indigenous-lives-in-norway/>> and Alexander Zaitchik, 'How Conservation became Colonialism' *Foreign Policy* (16.07.2020) <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/16/how-conservation-became-colonialism-environment-indigenous-people-ecuador-mining/>> (All last accessed 24 September 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Local Biodiversity Outlooks 2: A complement to the fifth edition of the Global Biodiversity Outlook (2020) Published by Forest Peoples Programme, in collaboration with: Centres of Distinction on Indigenous and Local Knowledge, Indigenous Women's Biodiversity Network, International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity, and Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity. <<https://lbo2.localbiodiversityoutlooks.net>> (last accessed 24 September 2020).

negotiations for the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. What is more, the participation of local representatives and grassroots organisers in international negotiations is crucial, in part to ensure that international policies encapsulate their perspectives and concerns, but also to enable a sharing of knowledges<sup>15</sup> so that policies are *truly* based on the best available knowledges and expertise.

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<sup>15</sup> This needs to happen in culturally sensitive and respectful ways which are empowering and based on self-determination and free prior and informed consent – as understood by the communities themselves – and not extractive. That is a mouthful, but this is absolutely crucial in order to avoid the repetition of past violent practices where Indigenous and local knowledges have been extracted for commercial or select benefits without benefiting the communities themselves, nor safeguarding the self-determination of peoples to whom the knowledge ‘belongs’, or respecting the worldviews and cultures from

whence they arose. For some reading on this see for instance Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Te Kahautu Maxwell, Haupai Puke and Pou Temara, ‘Indigenous Knowledge, Methodology and Mayhem: What is the Role of Methodology in Producing Indigenous Insights? A Discussion from Mātauranga Māori’ (2016) 4:3 *Knowledge Cultures*, at 130; and Åsa Nordin Jonsson ‘Ethical Guidelines for the documentation of *árbediethu*, Sami traditional knowledge’ Diedut 1/2011. Sámi allaskuvla / Sámi University College 2011.



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