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Is nature an ally of climate policy?

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A critical reading of the importance given to “nature-based solutions” in countries’ Intended Nationally Determined Contributions.

Reminder: Ahead of COP21, and in the context of preparations for a new international climate agreement aimed at keeping global warming below the 2°C limit by 2100, every state has been required to submit its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution, or INDC. In addition to commitments on climate mitigation, these contributions may also contain intended action on adaptation to climate change.

Although ecosystems are often presented essentially as suffering the impacts of climate change, they are also increasingly seen as part of the solution, in terms of both adaptation and mitigation. At this stage of the process, the format of INDCs is relatively flexible, and therefore differs considerably from one country to another in terms of precision and implementation. However, despite this haziness and the large degree of freedom given to the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, or Climate Convention) when specifying their commitments, some have spontaneously given a prominent role to nature-based solutions (NBS) in their INDCs. What exactly is the role given to ecosystems, nature and biodiversity in the INDCs that mention them? What synergies are planned between nature protection and restoration policies and climate policies? In what way is “nature” harnessed, and by the same token, how are climate policies utilised as a means of increasing the protection of natural resources? How are the different countries positioned in relation to this question, and which approaches have been adopted?

This analysis concerns 131 INDCs (including a single INDC for the EU) representing 159 country contributions, which are read and analysed individually.

It can be summarised by five observations.

1. Ecosystems, whether in terms of mitigation or adaptation, are an important element in 40 INDCs.

On the one hand, this is a small number (40 out of 159, or a quarter). But on the other hand, it could have been far smaller, given that these issues have only recently been given serious consideration at these levels of policy making. At least 30 countries specify in their contributions climate adaptation and mitigation measures that make use, in different ways, of the potential represented by better management of forests, wetlands, coastal ecosystems and even the marine environment. Most often, these are measures concerning the conservation of natural areas. The specific way in which these measures should contribute to *mitigation* is not explicitly defined in the INDCs. Implicitly, we can imagine that the goal is first to reverse current trends in land use change, which produce additional emissions: deforestation, agricultural intensification (and fertiliser use), the drying and oxidation of carbon contained in peatlands, etc. At the same time, the extension of protected areas is most often justified by the role forests play as carbon sinks. The role of natural and wooded areas in *adaptation* is more evident, through the preserved resilience of these areas to droughts and floods, and to climate variability in general. Some of these measures consist in simply preserving areas already protected, but in some cases, the contributions provide for the extension of protected areas. Some INDCs even include ecological restoration measures aimed at rebuilding carbon stocks and ensuring a more sustainable use of natural resources for development and social well-being. Another 11 countries have also set out specific measures to control land use change, by limiting the tendency towards intensification and changes that generate additional risks (with adaptation and mitigation in synergy). **In total, some 40 countries have placed “nature-based solutions” in a prominent position in their INDCs.**

2. Nature-based solutions for climate policies are mentioned mostly in developing or emerging countries' INDCs.

China and Mexico in particular emerge as the “champions” of nature-based solutions. At this stage of the process, the INDCs of the countries of the North primarily commit to targets in terms of emissions, providing few details about the programmes and measures that will be undertaken. The European Union, for example, specifies only the results to be achieved, and not the programmes and measures to be implemented, which remain at the discretion of the member states. Consequently, there is a sort of North-South divide in the drafting of the INDCs where NBS are concerned. But this divide relates to goals and expected outcomes, and not necessarily to implementation. It is the programmes and measures actually applied by the different countries that will give NBS their true political importance.

Africa and Latin America are the continents whose INDCs contain the most detailed nature-based solutions. The most specific developed countries are Japan and New Zealand, which detail a programme aimed at controlling land use change to combat climate change, which is more common in the concerns of the UNFCCC, even if this was not included in the Kyoto Protocol obligations.

In any case, this “relative polarisation” of some INDCs around this issue is again raising the question of the opportunity of organising the negotiation and implementation of policies proposed through “clubs” of countries that are leading the way for certain types of initiatives. Here, a “club of countries that use their natural capital” could foster a broader and more in-depth dynamic in this field. It is also hoped that the Paris Agreement will help to draw on the experience of these countries to launch a learning process on this subject at the level of the whole international community.

3. The most frequent and detailed measures concern forests

Around 20 of the 30 most thorough countries in terms of NBS predominantly specify forest measures. These concern the conservation and also the restoration of forests. Conservation is thus recorded as a means of avoiding deforestation relative to a baseline scenario, from a perspective that is relatively common for the UNFCCC (REDD+ mechanism). Restoration, on the other hand, is generally planned in the form of the reforestation of continental forests, which is sometimes supported by the REDD+ mechanism, and more rarely by projects aimed at extending protected areas. In some cases, in the chapter on synergies between mitigation and adaptation, the restoration of mangroves is also mentioned.

In addition to forest measures, the ten remaining countries provide for action on aquatic ecosystems (rivers and lakes, wetlands in general), at least by means of “integrated” watershed and wetland management, and in some cases as quantified wetland restoration actions. Some countries (Mexico, Côte d'Ivoire, Morocco, and Comoros) also set out measures to protect and restore coastal and marine ecosystems.

Finally, it is worth noting that contrary to what might have been expected, the vast majority of actions announced do not involve intensive management measures, or poorly thought out environmental engineering (such as plantations of high-yield trees, etc.). These are not explicitly ruled out, but the most prominent NBS are typically conservation and restoration measures that are compatible with a biodiversity preservation policy.

4. Synergies between the implementation of the climate, biodiversity and desertification conventions are on the agenda, but are barely off the ground

Synergies between the conventions and their associated environmental policies (which are moreover encouraged in the guidelines provided for the drafting of INDCs) are mentioned in several INDCs that make use of ecosystems, especially those of Morocco, which identifies them explicitly, and Ethiopia, which also identifies synergies with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These elements reflect an interest in stronger linkages within the global climate regime. However, at this stage, given the synthetic nature of the exercise, these linkages are simply outlined, but not yet specified in terms of either implementation or governance. The level of detail about the funding proposed or required varies considerably.

5. Towards a historic shift in the approach to nature-based solutions?

One of the salient points of the contributions of these 40 countries is that they generally associate climate mitigation and adaptation through these NBS. These are not presented as a means of focusing the actions of these countries on adaptation, but are designed as synergies between mitigation and adaptation, raising the prospect of a “reconciliation” between climate policies and policies concerning land, agriculture, forests, coastal areas and the

marine environment. It is of course too early at this stage to determine the reality of this synergy: it will depend on implementation. But it is encouraging that many countries have identified it in their contributions, despite the non-exhaustive guidelines on this matter. Regrettably, however, these issues are almost entirely absent from the INDCs of the countries of the North. But it is hoped that the emergence of a group of countries that are on the leading edge—at least in their expressed intentions—of these subjects, will foster growing recognition of the importance of such options.

NB. List of the 30 most specific INDCs in terms of NBS: China, Mexico, Morocco, Bolivia, Colombia, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Uganda, Guinea, Lesotho, Bhutan, Belize, Georgia, Niger, Argentina, Algeria, Chile, Tunisia, Cape Verde, Gabon, Japan, Benin, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, Kenya, New Zealand, Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada.

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IDDRI didactic explanatory video on the linkages between biodiversity and climate change

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