



BLOG POST November 6th 2018

From the Pyramids to the Great Wall of China: the biodiversity convention at the crossroads

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🕒 Reading time: 7 min



While the worldwide erosion of biodiversity continues, States have two years to negotiate the future global framework that will succeed the current United Nations "Strategic Plan" (2011-2020) for biodiversity. This framework should enable the goals of the international community to be renewed and, above all, to lay the foundations for a new functioning of the international governance of biodiversity. The Convention on

Biological Diversity (CBD) is the main arena for these discussions: its COP14, from 17 to 29 November in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, will see the launch of the development process of the post-2020 framework, that will begin two years of intense discussions until the 2020 COP15, which will take place in Beijing, where the new framework will be adopted.

Renewing the global governance framework for biodiversity

Similarly to global warming, scientific evidence on the state of biodiversity is accumulating and showing that the situation is deteriorating. The “afflictions” it suffers from have been well understood for a long time: resource overexploitation, pollution, land use change, invasive species, and climate change. While the causes underlying these impacts largely relate to production and consumption practices: overfishing, agricultural intensification, extension of agricultural and urbanized areas, uncontrolled urban growth, and so on. Measures announced by States to address these issues have not as yet had sufficient scope to transform these modes of production, development and consumption. For this reason, the pursuit of a new post-2020 multilateral framework is underpinned by a general call for “transformative change”, terminology derived from the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Implicitly, this means that the new framework should identify areas of activity where change is most needed, and encourage action on these areas.

Unlike other negotiation arenas, sectoral transformation issues are explicitly recognized at the CBD and are regularly the subjects of discussion (such as the question of environmentally harmful subsidies, even though this topic is highly sensitive politically). Nevertheless, commitments made at the global level have insufficient impact at national and sectoral levels. The CBD is therefore facing a dilemma: how can we renew the way in which international discussions are held to trigger more transformative effects in the field?

The Paris Climate Agreement: a useful reference?

This question, central to the implementation of multilateral environmental treaties, has also been raised for the climate, for which the Paris Agreement and the decisions taken at the 2015 COP 21 were a response. The Paris Agreement is thus in the minds of all actors with an interest in the CBD, and its transposition to biodiversity is the vanishing point, the main current reference of the discussions carried out on governance framework. However, such a transposition in itself would not be a panacea.

For climate, as for biodiversity, governance through top-down goals (i.e. internationally agreed objectives to be developed and translated in each national jurisdiction) has not achieved the desired results. Regarding the climate, the Paris Agreement replaced this method, in part, with a hybrid approach, where global goals effectively apply to all (for example, maintaining warming well below 2°C, but also goals in terms of future emissions peaks, and “carbon neutrality” to be achieved in the second half of the century), but where a so-called bottom-up approach also allows each State to decide how it will/can contribute to the achievement of these global goals.

Ongoing discussions at the CBD indicate that the global Biodiversity Framework is also moving towards a hybrid form, with a call for submitting “voluntary contributions” prior to COP15. But only the “bottom-up” dimension of the Paris Agreement – which has yet to prove its effectiveness – seems to have been maintained. However, there were at least four components to the response designed for the climate:^[1] (1) a top-down rationale with global objectives applying to all; (2) a bottom-up rationale with nationally determined contributions (NDCs); (3) a set of decisions regarding progress measurement and the way in which ambition will have to increase over time; and finally (4) an “action agenda”, which is civil society’s own mobilization, that was launched with sufficient time before COP21 to create a very strong political dynamic, and to take over, amplify and, in some cases, relay governmental action. In

addition, the long-term goals for financing climate action (as well as other areas, such as the global goal for adaptation) played a key role in reaching an agreement.

For the climate, NDCs are only beneficial due to the fact that they are embedded into this overall architecture. For a system of national contributions to be useful for the global governance of biodiversity, mandatory conditions that go beyond the bottom-up rationale must be put on to the agenda and discussed as soon as possible. We note at least four discussion areas that must be urgently extended:

- Defining global goals. What global goals must we have, according to which we can determine whether States (or even non-state actors) are making sufficiently ambitious contributions or not?
- Defining what commitments relate to. Since expected biodiversity outcomes cannot be measured by a single aggregated indicator (such as the level of greenhouse gas emissions for the climate), how should the indicators relevant to these commitments be designed? Could they focus more on the activities that result in biodiversity loss, rather than the transformations to be made?
- Measuring progress and reviewing commitments. What would be the process of reviewing and collectively assessing these commitments, and how would a gradual improvement rather than a regression be noticed?
- Creating a multi-stakeholder dynamic. How significant is the current momentum of commitment from civil society (companies, cities and regions, NGOs), which is likely to amplify and relay national policies, knowing that the “agenda of biodiversity action” has not yet been the subject of formal discussions?

It is therefore the overall coherence of the new framework, its own action rationale, that requires clarification prior to engaging the negotiations further on a “bottom-up” system of voluntary commitments by States. Otherwise, there would be a high risk of a formal and artificial transposition from one framework to another, which could allow for further regression, rather than improvement, of a multilateral framework.

A key governance issue, a tight schedule

The next two years will therefore be crucial for the future of international biodiversity governance, and COP14 will be the starting point for these negotiations. By COP15, at the end of 2020, these discussions should be organized in three phases:

- a first phase, starting in 2019, should include a number of consultations (regional, thematic, international, etc.) to formulate a first draft of the post-2020 framework. This phase is expected to last until the end of summer 2019;
- next, a consensus building phase should run until the end of spring 2020, when a first version of the “final” draft of the post-2020 framework will be negotiated at a CBD interim meeting:[\[2\]](#)
- the third phase, lasting until the end of 2020 and the COP15 in Beijing, is to be a high-level mobilization phase where, hopefully, any outstanding issues will be settled before the Parties gather in Beijing.

In the meantime, the publication of the IPBES Global Assessment of the State of Biodiversity in spring 2019 and the [CBD's Global Biodiversity](#) Outlook 5 in spring 2020 will continue to raise the alarm on biodiversity loss and the lack of progress on the issue. It would be beneficial if these reports also supported the definition of goals and the nature of commitments, which would work towards the clarification of national contributions or those from non-governmental actors. The IUCN World Conservation Congress, in Marseille in June 2020, will also be an important milestone and a focus for mobilization prior to Beijing.

Given the state of the discussions and the number of questions that remain unanswered, the road between Sharm el-Sheikh and Beijing will be long; but time is very short. COP14 will therefore be crucial for providing the best possible framework for the discussions and to delineate its boundaries. Negotiation time is of the essence: it's worth remembering that for the climate, six years passed between the stalemate of Copenhagen COP15 and the Paris COP21. It is therefore essential that the specific points to be included in the Beijing decision are identified, along with the markers of progress to be discussed at a later date, to ensure that the mechanics of the post-2020 framework are kept alive. This is also the way in which COP21 worked and, in this instance, is a valuable lesson from the Paris Agreement.

[1] Cf. Laurans, Y. *et al.* (2018). [Relaunching the international ambition for biodiversity: a three-dimensional vision for the future of the Convention on Biological Diversity](#). IDDRI, *Issue Brief* N°06/18.

[2] Third meeting of the [Subsidiary Body on Implementation](#), or SBI-3

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