



BLOG POST October 6th 2020

The first United Nations Summit on Biodiversity, revealing the challenges on the road to COP 15

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🕒 Reading time: 6 min



The United Nations Summit on Biodiversity held on September 30 was an opportunity for more than a hundred leaders, many of them Heads of State, to express their views on the national and global issues related to the loss of biodiversity and the political responses to it. [As emphasized in a previous IDDRI's blogpost](#), this summit was to serve as a final impetus, but also as an opportunity for the expression of

political convergence and divergence, before the COP 15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which was initially scheduled to take place this October in China and is now expected to take place in 2021. In an [evolving but uncertain calendar](#), the summit remained important, in a context where all media and political attention focused on the Covid-19 crisis and its socio-economic consequences. It was therefore necessary to see it, and now analyze its results, as a moment to put biodiversity issues back on the political agenda and to express the positions that will structure the negotiations for the coming year.

Somewhere between a (new) kick-off and a space for the expression of political positions

As for getting back on the agenda, it is worth noting the large number of heads of state who spoke on stage, and the number of countries brought together in coalitions of high ambition. Two days before the summit, a significant number of heads of state signed the Leaders' Pledge for Nature, and the ministers and leaders of the countries concerned spoke at a dedicated event. [Now comprising 76 countries](#), the coalition, which is intercontinental, is gradually approaching half of the Parties to the CBD, and is making commitments ranging from the integration of biodiversity in the post-Covid-19 reconstruction to various points in the texts to be adopted at COP15. Within this first "club", one can distinguish more than thirty countries committed to the [High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People](#), initiated by Costa Rica and France, and which aim to align themselves with more precise commitments.

This convergence and structuring into coalitions is to be emphasised and welcomed, as the negotiations have so far lacked a driving and coordinated bloc of countries to push together towards the best possible outcome of COP15. But the dissensions are very real, and were expressed during and around the summit. The bottom line is the absence of notable countries in the coalitions: neither of the two COP presidencies, current (Egypt) and future (China), have joined the above-mentioned coalitions, and the BRICS as a whole are also absent. More broadly, most of the ['Like-minded Megadiverse Countries'](#) are still standing on the reserve. And Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi has highlighted the "divide" between developed and developing countries, calling on the former to make more financial resources available to the latter, according to the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. The same language can be found in Chinese leader Xi Jinping and, unsurprisingly, and in a much more vehement tone, in Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. The declaration of the [Group of 77 \(G77\)](#), the historic coalition of developing countries in the UN arena, which now has 135 members, was also very explicit: the group called for a powerful mechanism for the mobilisation of financial resources (understand: from developed countries and/or the private sector).

The tone is set, and it is crystal clear. As with most international negotiations on the environment, notably the Paris Climate Agreement, the collective ambition displayed in the final decisions of COP15 will be conditioned by the pledges that will be provided, notably by developed countries, on the availability of funds to support the implementation of the necessary transitions in the poorest countries. It is a well-known, complex subject with multiple ramifications that can be found even in the negotiations on access to genetic resources and the sharing of benefits related to their exploitation (the Nagoya Protocol of the CBD is entirely dedicated to this single point), and a panel of experts has, for example, just submitted three reports on the subject to the CBD Secretariat. It is also a cleavage on which the least ambitious governments can easily rely to tighten up the negotiations, especially by narrowing other negotiation items down to this issue.

On the road to COP15, and particularly in the current context, it will be necessary to reinvent international solidarity on these issues, avoiding as much as possible posture games and being wary of announcements. It will be

necessary to look for solutions that can serve both as a sufficient political guarantee and as a concrete tool to truly help in the fair implementation of the decisions of COP15. This is a very delicate ridgeline, but a major challenge to be met in the coming year.

Biodiversity as a cross-cutting issue requiring deep transformations

The summit was also an opportunity to observe that the links between biodiversity and other aspects of sustainable development are becoming increasingly present on the high-level political agenda. In terms of the articulation of the different environmental issues between them, many speakers stressed that the Covid-19 pandemic reminded us of the interconnections between environmental, veterinary and human health, and called for a more integrated approach to these subjects, [still in its infancy](#) at the international level so far. The importance of the links between action for biodiversity and climate action was mentioned by almost all leaders. Among other examples, the Chinese President recalled China's recent commitments on climate (notably carbon neutrality by 2060, an objective that [implies better preservation of ecosystems](#)), Boris Johnson reaffirmed the British ambition to keep nature at the top of the agenda at COP26 on climate, and Emmanuel Macron proposed to take advantage of the possible holding of the three COPs of the Rio conventions (climate convention, biodiversity convention, convention to combat desertification) at the end of 2021 to organise a dedicated cross-cutting event. Almost all the leaders mentioned the Sustainable Development Goals, to affirm their importance and the place that biodiversity occupies within this framework of objectives. In addition, about fifty countries called for a better handling of ocean issues in the CBD negotiations.

More strikingly, there have also been strong assertions about the profound changes needed to halt the erosion of biodiversity. For example, the French President made a lasting impression when he opened his speech with the rejection of the EU-Mercosur trade agreement for reasons of coherence, since current production, trade and consumption models are "destructive of life, health and prosperity". The Japanese Environment Minister made it clear that supply chains must be reorganised to change socio-economic systems, putting local production and small producers more at the center. The President of Malawi, Lazarus Chakwera, on behalf of the group of least developed countries, stressed that intensive land use has reduced their productivity. And Chilean President Sebastián Piñera stressed that lifestyles had to change.

Apart from being a member of this or that coalition, and from the stances of opposition between historical blocs, and with rare exceptions, the observation on the seriousness of the situation is widely shared. In a more interesting trend, which seems to be growing stronger month by month, the causes of biodiversity loss, and in particular the deeper causes linked to what may be referred to as the all-encompassing term "productivism",² are more and more directly spelled out. In the sequence that opens, it will now be necessary to clarify how the States, especially the most ambitious, intend to tackle them concretely. What has been raised for [business coalitions](#) is true for state coalitions: commitments have to increase in quantitative terms, but they also need to be precise and credible commitments and, above all, accountability mechanisms that are sorely lacking in biodiversity governance will have to be defined and implemented.

² Productivism can be defined as "an economic system in which production, productivity are given as the essential objective".