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Inventing a geopolitics of effort for biodiversity

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On the road to the 15th Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP 15), whose new date (11-24 October 2021) has just been announced, the development of a new transparency mechanism is a crucial issue to make biodiversity policies more credible and stronger. This is one of the key elements, and a major innovation, expected for COP15. The Covid-19 crisis hit the COP15 preparatory process exactly at the time when the international discussions on this crucial subject were taking shape. As this preparatory work resumes online at the beginning of May, it is important to understand that, far from being confined to a technical subject, this transparency mechanism must be seen as a fundamental element in inventing a new geopolitics of the effort for biodiversity, which will concern both States and other actors in society.

Better transparency for enhanced cooperation on biodiversity

Multilateralism, including in environmental matters, has been marked for some time by a strong trend: in a multipolar world, where the authority of hegemonic blocs is increasingly challenged, and where states are more and more reluctant to accept the legitimacy of international objectives as soon as they are perceived as being imposed and overly binding, there is a growing need to return to the basics of multilateralism and to understand that international instruments must above all help to strengthen cooperation in order to make better collective progress towards common objectives. If what can be perceived as interference in goal-setting is increasingly difficult to tolerate, then the need to strengthen the monitoring of efforts to implement collective decisions becomes all the more necessary. The Paris Climate Agreement, in this sense, can be seen as a reflection of its time: a combination of top-down logic (an agreement on broad outcome targets that commit all its signatories), bottom-up logic (freedom for everyone to determine how they wish to contribute to the efforts) and provisions for organising a regular political cycle aimed at collectively assessing the sum of the efforts required and achieved and, notably through peer pressure effects but also on the part of civil society, encouraging a reassessment of individual states' efforts.

More or less relevant parallels between the Paris Agreement and what could be expected from COP15 have often been drawn in recent years. But it is not only because of a desire to emulate COP 21 that these subjects are also at the heart of the discussions for COP 15 biodiversity. It is also because the governance of biodiversity must also be renewed to rethink its effectiveness in the contemporary context. And it is, above all, because the monitoring of the implementation of the commitments made at the CBD, and the necessary political discussions surrounding it, have been sorely lacking in recent decades.

This is what is at stake in the transparency mechanism currently being developed. The draft Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework refers to transparency and accountability. Responsibility has been preferred to accountability, and it is interesting to explore three possible meanings of responsibility that can help us understand the issues involved.

- First, responsibility can be understood as a collective responsibility: biodiversity governance needs better, more regular collective monitoring to be more credible. It is no longer possible to meet every ten years and, again, acknowledge failure in delivering the required results.
- Responsibility can then be understood as individual responsibility: until now, there have been very few consequences, even in terms of reputational risk, for making or not making the efforts that one has committed to undertake at national level. If it is a question of doing one's part to achieve global goals, then a more regular review of actions taken (or not taken) at national level, and the lessons to be learned from them, should allow for increased peer pressure and pressure from civil society to do better.
- This is where the third dimension of responsibility is fundamental: it can also be understood as a mutual responsibility, a principle of solidarity. The profound societal changes needed to curb the erosion of biodiversity will in any case require the promotion of cooperation: collective learning through the sharing of experiences, better identification of needs in terms of capacities and means, or the creation of strengthened coalitions around certain subjects that will in any case require significant collective dynamics between many States and other actors in order to move forward (think of international trade, for example).

Creating accountability chains and solving the biodiversity responsibility dilemma

It is this geopolitics of the effort for biodiversity, in all its mechanisms of emulation, competition and cooperation, that we must lay the new foundations for this year. There is still a lot of work to be done between now and COP15, but there are already **many elements to work with**. Overall, the first step will be to strengthen national planning

documents (in particular National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans, NBSAPs) that reflect how States translate and contribute at their level to the achievement of the global targets, and the reporting arrangements to facilitate individual and global stocktaking. The periodicity and manner of these reviews remains to be defined, as does the outcome. An ambition mechanism, aimed at raising countries' ambitions regarding their commitments and/or means of implementation, could be envisaged. But it is also technically possible to envisage non-compliance procedures, or even the possibility to investigate. These latter points should be seen in the light of what we mentioned earlier: not as sanctions, but rather as provisions to strengthen cooperation and mutual assistance. From the point of view of collective responsibility, this would already send a strong political signal that it will no longer be possible not to undertake the announced efforts on biodiversity without being held accountable.

On 15 April, IDDRI will publish a study summarising a set of proposals on the operational and legal aspects of such a mechanism. Notwithstanding the technical considerations, three points seem essential to underline, at this stage, on the political effects that one could ideally expect from such a mechanism.

- First of all, it is essential that the transparency mechanism creates a political 'rendez-vous effect': this is a key question of political sequence, rhythm and presentation. These moments of collective accountability must count and have consequences; at the international level first of all, but also to create these agenda effects at the national level.
- Secondly, this mechanism must help resolve the so-called "[responsibility dilemma](#)" of biodiversity. The actors who are accountable for the state of biodiversity, generally the environmental authorities of States (or the departments concerned in companies, for example), are not those who have the most responsibility for the state of biodiversity, in the sense that they do not generally have control over the main drivers of degradation or change, which are to be found in other sectors (agricultural policies, fisheries policies, planning policies, for example). The most responsible actors, on the other hand, are not held accountable. It is therefore necessary to place the dynamics of sectoral transformations, the progress made but also the inertia observed, and therefore also the actors and institutions concerned, much more at the heart of transparency discussions. Otherwise, the measurement of progress made and difficulties encountered will in fact miss a large part of the key issues on which to move forward in order to achieve future biodiversity targets. This touches on a fundamental link between the transparency mechanism and the issue of mainstreaming biodiversity into other sectors.
- This brings us to the last point. It is a set of accountability chains that must be put in place. As mentioned earlier, the international transparency mechanism must encourage national dynamics, but it must also be able to involve non-state actors in this dynamic. Major efforts are underway to develop tools that will enable cities, investors, companies, civil society and even individuals to better measure their footprint, and dependence, on biodiversity. Other developments will soon make it possible to connect actions taken at the level of a country, territory or organisation to the effort to reduce pressures on biodiversity (the STAR metric, for Species Threat Abatement and Restoration, is [a promising example in our view](#)). A key challenge in the coming years will be to connect the measurement of these efforts to the discussion on the achievement of global targets, which is precisely what the new transparency framework for biodiversity should allow. For the year 2021, and at COP15, it is the development of this crucial overall architecture that is at stake.

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