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Biodiversity COP17: how can action be accelerated in a fragmented world?

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COP17 on biodiversity opens in Yerevan, Armenia, in a few days' time (19-30 October), marking the halfway point of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), which was adopted in 2022 and sets targets for 2030. The conference will provide an opportunity to share and learn from the findings of the first Global Review under the GBF, an exercise designed to take stock of progress in implementing commitments. How can this diagnosis be turned into action when countries are divided over how to share the financial burden, and when the long-term reforms required run up against entrenched economic interests? The challenge will be to set a common direction and send clear political signals, while mobilizing and supporting those able and willing to act. Four issues in particular will test whether the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) can orchestrate this acceleration.

A constructive forum for cooperation worth strengthening

In a fragmented world, cooperation on biodiversity can still forge compromises, thanks in particular to support from across the political spectrum. Commitment to this form of multilateralism sometimes cuts across North-South divides, as shown by the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, led by Costa Rica and France and bringing together more than 120 member countries. COP16 had already shown that this forum could deliver compromise, with countries adopting a mechanism for sharing the benefits derived from genetic data and creating a permanent body dedicated to Indigenous Peoples and local communities, before going on to agree on a finance roadmap in Rome designed to bridge deep divisions.

These achievements provide COP17 with a platform from which it will need to show how the CBD can better organize collective action. With the GBF now at its midpoint, the meeting will be framed by two issues: the first Global Review of collective progress and the question of finance. Two others will show how firmly COP16's innovations have taken root: benefit-sharing through the Cali Fund and the operation of the new body on traditional knowledge, which gives Indigenous Peoples and local communities a greater role.

Issue 1 – Global Review: sending signals and organizing follow-up

The first Global Review should provide the basis for deciding where and how to accelerate action. Drawing on 129 national reports and other sources, its report assesses the progress made and the obstacles encountered. Early analysis points to strong mobilization but uneven implementation, along with persistent difficulties in tackling the socio-economic dimension. Data gaps call for better monitoring but cannot justify delaying a policy response.

A decision on the Global Review will only be useful if it is unambiguous, sending clear political signals and setting out a follow-up process beyond COP17 to ensure the change is properly carried through. A decision that merely invites countries to "step up their efforts" would leave the key choices open: which priorities, what support and above all what kind of cooperation? The review should offer guidance precise enough to steer action, not only on what to do (such as mainstreaming biodiversity more effectively into sectoral policies, reforming harmful incentives or speeding up ecosystem conservation and restoration) but most importantly on how to do it. It should do so without presuming to impose a one-size-fits-all response on differing national circumstances. This guidance could lead to exchanges between countries facing similar obstacles and to targeted support for reform.

Any resulting acceleration must also lay the groundwork for the transformations needed by 2050. Drawing on scenario analysis, the PBL (Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency)-IDDRI *Policy Brief* (forthcoming) shows that meeting national targets would enable significant progress compared with a business-as-usual scenario. However, this progress would not be sufficient to meet the GBF's long-term ambitions: it will therefore be necessary to step up ambition and action beyond 2030. The more environmentally ambitious scenarios highlight the need to tackle the root causes of biodiversity loss, particularly within food and energy systems, as well as in production and consumption patterns. These transformations take time but must begin now. Transformation pathways will need to translate these changes into concrete and equitable steps. Reforming financial incentives in agriculture, reducing the impacts of infrastructure or overhauling production practices all involve socio-economic trade-offs. The *Policy Brief* raises the question of how efforts should be shared among

countries according to their capacities and their impacts on biodiversity, an issue that has so far received very little attention within the CBD.

Coalitions bringing together countries and implementing actors such as businesses and local authorities could take these pathways forward. They would help reduce and share the economic and political costs of reform, organize peer learning and mobilize targeted support. In June, IDDRI suggested how the multilateral framework could be linked to such cooperative initiatives (IDDRI, 2026a). A follow-up process envisaged under the Yerevan Pathway1 should allow for a review of the results achieved by initiatives to accelerate GBF implementation.

Finally, the review must become an ongoing process of collective accountability. Last April, IDDRI and PBL stressed the need for follow-up after COP17 and for a cycle that can steer action over time (IDDRI-PBL, 2026). The second Global Review in 2029-2030 should be able to assess how the first has been acted upon and inform the next steps. For that to happen, continuity must be built in from Yerevan onwards.

Issue 2 – Finance: clarifying who contributes, through which instruments and for which needs

The finance debate is as much about the scale of resources to be mobilized as about how responsibilities are shared among countries. Broadening the “contributor base” raises a question that is not confined to biodiversity: which countries should financially support developing countries? The same question arises in the climate debate (). It is bound up with existing obligations and with countries’ changing economic capacities. Progress will depend on clarifying what additional contributions are possible without suggesting that they would replace existing contributors’ commitments.

COP17 must also define the criteria for the CBD’s permanent financial mechanism, which has so far been operated by the Global Environment Facility (GEF). The roadmap adopted in Rome provides for a decision at COP18 (2028) on which entity or entities will operate the mechanism. The ground for this institutional choice will need to be prepared in Yerevan. The mechanism’s effectiveness will depend on its accessibility and on the functions assigned to it. In 2024, IDDRI research proposed assessing funds against four functions: (1) mobilizing resources, (2) building capacity, (3) supporting policy coherence and (4) fostering partnerships (IDDRI, 2024). The effectiveness of funds also rests on principles of equity, transparency and inclusive governance, as well as on simplified access to finance and support for priorities set by recipient countries.

Taking countries’ needs as the starting point would ground the debate in practical realities (IDDRI, 2026c). What obstacles stand in the way of financing a national strategy? Which expenditures call for public grants, and which for loans or private investment? So far, these questions have rarely been explored beyond national processes. They would benefit from a more prominent place in international discussions on how much finance is needed and how it should be channelled.

Finally, reforming subsidies that harm biodiversity is another lever for cooperation. Reform can meet resistance, fuelled by fears of lost competitiveness. It also requires rethinking support mechanisms that countries originally designed to help particular sectors, not to harm biodiversity. IISD notes that coordinated action among countries

can ease these difficulties. Exchanges on reform combined with support for those affected would help connect CBD commitments with fiscal and trade policies, especially at a time when public funds are scarce.

Issue 3 – Cali Fund: making benefit-sharing a reality

The multilateral benefit-sharing mechanism now needs to persuade large commercial users of genetic resources (such as pharmaceutical, cosmetics and biotechnology companies) to contribute. To date, its Cali Fund has received only two contributions, totalling $6,000. Yet the mechanism remains a major innovation, organizing the sharing of benefits from the use of digital sequence information (DSI) on genetic resources while keeping that information openly accessible. Beyond funding, it also provides for scientific cooperation and capacity-building.

COP17 will need to make contributing more attractive and predictable. The draft decision proposes reaffirming indicative rates[2] and could call on States to introduce incentives. Above all, it opens up discussion on the legal status of the certificates issued to contributing companies. Recognizing these certificates should help clarify how a contribution meets expectations for monetary benefit-sharing. The issue therefore goes beyond the rates themselves: how can contributing become the norm rather than the isolated effort of a few companies?

Funds must also start flowing to beneficiaries and be distributed equitably. COP17 will consider an allocation methodology for recipient countries and for Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs). Under the Cali decision, at least half of the resources are to support the needs of IPLCs, on the terms it sets out. This access will need to be made operational, with evidence that the money disbursed is actually being put to use.

Coherence between the different regimes will be key to building mutual trust. Companies want to avoid overlapping obligations arising from national legislation and international instruments. On the recipient side, countries and communities expect guarantees that their rights will be respected and that benefits will be shared. Clarifying how these regimes interact should make contributing easier without compromising the mechanism’s fairness.

Issue 4 – Participation: giving real weight to the new body on traditional knowledge

The new body dedicated to Indigenous Peoples and local communities is meant to strengthen their influence over decision-making. Established at COP16, it held its first meeting in Panama in 2025. COP17 will need to consolidate both how it operates and how it ties in with the CBD’s other workstreams and bodies.

How participation is organized will determine how far this innovation goes. Appropriate resources and rules will be needed to secure the role of IPLC representatives as co-chairs of the body, their access to meetings, their input into setting priorities and the recognition of different knowledge systems. IDDRI emphasizes that institutional recognition must come with resources and allow recommendations to be co-designed, while the final say remains with the COP (and therefore the Parties) (IDDRI, 2026d).

Beyond the CBD: building links for more coherent cooperation on biodiversity

Strengthening the CBD also requires aligning its functions more closely with those of other institutions. Synergy-building processes such as the Bern Process provide a framework for streamlining reporting and for reusing relevant data across several environmental conventions. Other initiatives could link environmental commitments to sectoral transitions. One example is the deforestation roadmap led by Brazil's COP30 Presidency, which could connect goals under the GBF and the Paris Agreement with joint action on agricultural policy, supply chains and forest finance. At the national level, better aligning biodiversity, climate and adaptation strategies around development plans would help coordinate priorities, funding and investment while also identifying potential trade-offs. These ideas give real substance to the debate on the international architecture, which discussions on reforming the United Nations system (UN80) have also opened up.

This cooperation must also extend to economic forums. Debt, for instance, squeezes public budgets and increases the pressure to exploit natural resources. The CBD can document these constraints and their consequences. But addressing them requires responses from finance ministries, development banks and other actors. The CBD's effectiveness will therefore depend on its ability to connect a shared diagnosis with the forums where these choices can be discussed and reshaped. One such forum is the 16th Ministerial Meeting of the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action, which will take place in Bangkok a few days before COP17 on the sidelines of the Annual Fall Meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. It will examine macroeconomic stability and the role of finance ministries in protecting nature.

Conclusion

COP17's success will therefore be measured by what it sets in motion, within the CBD and beyond. A bare-minimum outcome could ensure the continuity of existing processes without overcoming the obstacles identified. A more substantive outcome could tie priorities, support and cooperation together, with follow-up through to 2030. Governments, businesses, local authorities and civil society all expect COP17 to send the same signal: a common direction and commitments whose results can be reviewed.

1

The name given to the pathway that follows from the global review, on which countries will reach agreement at COP17.

2

1% of profits or 0.1% of revenue for companies that use DSI directly or indirectly in their commercial activities and exceed at least two of the following three thresholds, averaged over the previous three years: $20 million in total assets, $50 million in sales and $5 million in profits.

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