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BLOG POST November 3rd 2026

COP17 on biodiversity: the political challenges of transformation are becoming clearer

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Reading time: 11 min



COP17 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), held in Yerevan, Armenia, was tasked with addressing a key question: how can the implementation of the 2030 targets be accelerated, given that progress remains insufficient? Despite a geopolitical context marked by significant tensions, COP17 did conclude a very large part of its work. Rather than a COP marked by major breakthroughs, Yerevan appears to have been a COP of clarification: it brought the transformations needed to halt biodiversity loss back to the centre of discussions, whilst highlighting more clearly the political dividing lines, particularly regarding the sharing of responsibilities, efforts and benefits. It thus raises a fundamental question for the coming years: how should international cooperation be organized to make these transformations possible?

The Yerevan Pathway: the structural causes of biodiversity loss at the heart of priorities

For the first time, the Parties to the CBD were called upon to review progress towards the global biodiversity targets. The aim of this review was (1) to identify the obstacles to achieving these targets and (2) to direct efforts towards those areas where progress is slowest or most urgently needed. The 'Yerevan Pathway' is therefore a political agreement on the priorities to focus on between now and 2030, and how to achieve them.

The findings of the first global report on the implementation of the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) must be examined objectively. Whilst the GBF has helped to mobilize governments and numerous stakeholders around common objectives, progress remains insufficient (see p. 12): less than half of the national targets linked to the 23 global targets are considered to be on track.

Accelerating implementation cannot rely solely on 'traditional' nature conservation and restoration projects and policies. The more science documents the structural causes of biodiversity loss, the more the COPs will need to address them. These challenges relate primarily to the resources and means required to implement the GBF, but also to the transformation of production and consumption systems, economic incentives, and the integration of biodiversity into public and sectoral policies and the strategies of private companies.

It was precisely in translating these findings into policy directions that the negotiations proved difficult. Several entry points for these complex issues were on the COP agenda: aligning economic activities and financial flows with biodiversity objectives, and reforming incentives–particularly subsidies–that are harmful to biodiversity. Ultimately, the Yerevan Pathway addresses these aspects, but not head-on. For a long time, the argument put forward by a number of countries was that an environmental treaty should not deal with these issues, but this argument carried less weight at this COP, with the defence of the status quo focusing instead on managing priorities such as food or energy security. Those most keen to initiate these transformations, on the other hand, emphasized the role that biodiversity plays in improving the resilience of societies. This shift in the debate is telling, as it is no longer simply a question of whether biodiversity should be taken into account in economic and sectoral policies, but of determining how to balance different priorities, and how to make these transformations politically and socially possible.

These issues are by no means new, and form part of a set of GBF targets known as 'implementation tools and solutions'. However, the fact that they have been highlighted at this COP is politically significant. Beyond the decisions formally adopted by COP17, a movement supported by a range of stakeholders–including countries–and driven by the Presidency, shows that initiatives are taking shape: the Yerevan Call on Positive Incentives for Biodiversity was launched alongside the Friends of Target 18 group–dedicated to identifying, reforming and removing incentives and subsidies harmful to biodiversity–and the Yerevan Biodiversity Finance Challenge, which aims to support developing economies in this endeavour. A few days before the COP, more than 130 companies and financial institutions had called on countries to move in this direction.

Equity and shared responsibility: the dividing lines in cooperation

The three other key issues at the COP (IDDRI, 2026a) were resource mobilization, the Cali Fund on digital sequence information, and the Subsidiary Body for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities. What they have in common is that they all concern the distribution of responsibilities, resources, benefits and decision-making power, both within a multilateral framework and at national level. This is one of the central tensions: the objectives are global, and pressures on nature transcend borders and value chains, yet contributions and capacities remain profoundly different and can change rapidly due to other factors (debt, conflicts, the impacts of climate change, political instability, etc.). Reaching agreements that are perceived as fair is an essential condition for cooperation, but the intergovernmental format and the COP's procedures, which prioritize consensus, are ill-suited to addressing these sensitive issues.

The mobilization of financial resources was one of the main points of contention between several groups of countries. Beyond the figures themselves, discussions on the respective responsibilities of states to contribute to the financing of global biodiversity protection and on the list of potential new contributors were on the agenda. The compromise finally reached reflects a delicate balance, recognizing that new contributors would make it possible to mobilize more resources, without imposing new obligations or altering those of developed countries. COP17 was a stepping stone in this process: it is COP18 that will be called upon to address certain aspects of the thorny financial issue (IDDRI, 2025), including deciding whether it is necessary to create a new fund to supplement the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the CBD's main multilateral mechanism to date.

The financial announcements made in Yerevan have helped to strengthen the 9th replenishment of the GEF, as well as the GBF, and also demonstrate a commitment to diversifying the instruments, investments and stakeholders involved, through multilateral funds, private initiatives, philanthropic commitments and long-term investment strategies. However, they must not obscure another key issue that needs to be examined in the coming years: to what extent do these resources–which are sometimes conditional or multi-annual–actually meet the needs of the countries and stakeholders responsible for implementing the GBF (IDDRI, 2026b).

The COP's work on the other two issues (the Cali Fund and the subsidiary body on the knowledge of indigenous peoples and local communities) proved arduous, highlighting the complexity of making new 'initiatives' operational within a multilateral framework. Whilst mobilizing private-sector funding can take many forms and still has significant potential for growth, the multilateral mechanism for sharing the benefits arising from the use of digital sequence information (DSI) on genetic resources–and its Cali Fund–holds companies in sectors using such DSI accountable for sharing the economic benefits derived from the use of this information with developing countries and communities, in order to protect biodiversity. COP17 finally enabled several milestones to be reached in the operationalization of the Fund. In particular, countries agreed on the procedures for issuing 'certificates' to contributing companies and on the possibility of initial disbursements, subject to certain conditions, prior to the adoption of a definitive method for distribution amongst countries at COP18.

For the subsidiary body responsible for the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples and local communities, the Yerevan negotiations came very close to failing. Disagreements centred in particular on the representation of these populations in the body's co-chairmanship and the 'Friends of the Bureau' (a group tasked with supporting the conduct of its work), as well as the procedures for appointing their representatives. Underlying these issues are questions of state autonomy and sovereignty. A compromise was eventually reached, preserving a co-

presidency shared between States and organizations representing indigenous peoples and local communities, in accordance with their own procedures, without, however, fully specifying the arrangements for rotation (for example, by socio-cultural region, as requested by the Scandinavian countries or Canada, or through appointment by States, as desired by Russia or Indonesia). These issues remain to be resolved at COP18.

The CBD COP: a reflection of developments in multilateralism

COP17 may well mark a new phase in international cooperation on biodiversity. Having built a consensus around shared global objectives–including some that aim to integrate biodiversity beyond environmental frameworks–countries and stakeholders are now grappling more directly with the economic, political and distributional implications of implementing them. These issues, which are sensitive by their very nature, are all the more acute in the current international context, characterized by geopolitical and economic tensions, which further complicate the search for multilateral compromises. The role played by scientific foundations within the CBD, and the relationship between the CBD and other international agreements or bodies, have been the victims of these tensions. Deadlocks on these issues have been used to prevent certain topics from being placed on the agenda, or simply as ‘bargaining chips’ to secure compromises on other decisions.

Science plays a central role in the decisions taken at the CBD, but is also sometimes contested. The work of IPBES, intended to serve as the authoritative source on biodiversity, has been called into question, officially on procedural grounds. In other words, it is not so much the science itself that is being contested as the implications it entails, even though the science documents the structural causes of biodiversity loss, which not all countries are prepared to tackle.

Beyond the substantive issues, decisions addressing the IPBES findings–as well as others, such as that on the protection of marine biodiversity–have been subject to political manipulation. They may even have been used to justify positions vis-à-vis other international processes, as Russia demonstrated by systematically calling for the removal of references to the agreement on the protection of biodiversity in the high seas (IDDRI, 2026c).

This COP also highlighted new opportunities for cooperation on biodiversity, based on different motivations and in different formats to those established by the 1992 treaty, which emphasized solidarity in relation to the right to development. As highlighted in a recent report by the UK Department for Environment and the intelligence services, the threats to biodiversity–particularly to major global biomes–pose major risks to national security. Addressing these risks involves, for example, restoring ecosystems at local and national levels to ensure agricultural production and climate change mitigation services, as well as more structural changes such as a shift in dietary patterns towards less meat-heavy diets. But it also involves strengthened international cooperation to support the transformation of productive sectors in third countries, in order to ensure the sustainability of production on which global supply chains depend. Cooperation is therefore a matter of great interest, and the debate is shifting towards areas of tension between biodiversity objectives and international trade rules. How can we transform these value chains, reform harmful subsidies or introduce environmental requirements for imported products, without transferring the costs of these reforms onto the most vulnerable?

Faced with the Convention’s rigid frameworks, international governance for biodiversity is becoming fragmented and increasingly diverse. The initiatives led by associations representing various types of

stakeholders were mentioned earlier. We might also highlight the Tropical Forest Conservation Fund (TFFF), which was the subject of a highly publicized high-level event at COP17. Launched by Brazil during its presidency of the Climate Convention in 2025, this fund–designed by the Global South for the Global South, involving countries from the Global North and mobilizing private investment funds–operates within the framework of the CBD and could drive progress on several of the GBF's targets, including indigenous peoples' access to funding for forest conservation.

These developments in the scope and nature of negotiations raise questions about the functioning of the CBD, but do not mean it is doomed to remain a mechanism of the past; they should also encourage the search for new forms of cooperation within the Convention.

After Yerevan, what forms of cooperation lie ahead?

Despite difficulties, COP17 demonstrated that cooperation on biodiversity continues to evolve. Armenia sought to put the objective of accelerating implementation into practice through a number of concrete initiatives and partnerships launched on the sidelines of the negotiations. These initiatives add to an already dense landscape of partnerships bringing together states, international organizations, local authorities, businesses, financial institutions, civil society organizations and other major groups. Some may facilitate cooperation between countries facing similar challenges (whether regional or thematic), mobilize specific funding, or experiment approaches that would be difficult to negotiate within a universal framework involving more than 190 countries. They build bridges between issues and between stakeholders in ways that inter-state negotiations cannot, and thereby contribute to progress towards the GBF targets. The Global Review and its Yerevan Pathway contribute to this development: by identifying gaps and barriers to implementation, they provide a basis for better guiding all these initiatives and the funding allocated to them.

These initiatives nevertheless raise questions of consistency and accountability: how can we ensure that they do not supplant or replace the collective commitments made under the CBD? Whilst they may spur collective progress on certain issues, they may also lead to a cherry-picking selection of GBF targets, which are, however, intended to work in tandem. It is also a question of ensuring these initiatives remain viable outside the COP, by maintaining global momentum through the initiatives' pioneers and embedding them in national policies to ensure their effective implementation.

In the longer term, COP17 also prompts reflection on the future of cooperation beyond 2030. How should the sharing of efforts be organized? How can global objectives be better aligned with the contributions of countries and all stakeholders? How can we address economic interdependencies and the implications for biodiversity in a changing world? How can we involve the relevant stakeholders more closely whilst preserving the legitimacy and principles underpinning the Convention? COP17 did not, on its own, provide answers to all these questions, but it did help to make them harder to sidestep.