

An Action Agenda for biodiversity: Expectations and issues in the short and medium terms

Aleksandar Rankovic (IDDRI), Sandrine Maljean-Dubois (CERIC CNRS-Aix-Marseille Université), Matthieu Wemaere, Yann Laurans (IDDRI)

The “Sharm El-Sheikh to Beijing Action Agenda for Nature and People”¹ was launched in November 2018 during the COP14 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The announcement came in response to calls from some States and many non-state actors, to support the adoption of an ambitious biodiversity framework at COP15 (which will actually take place in Kunming, rather than Beijing). A dedicated web platform went online in March 2019,² but a lot remains to be done to operationalise this Action Agenda. In this perspective, it is now necessary to consider how it could fulfil its role, and more specifically help mobilise actors from all sectors as effectively as possible on the road to Kunming. It is, also, in the medium term, necessary to reflect on how to ground the Action Agenda within the CBD, so that it can facilitate non-state actors’ mobilisation for implementing the post-2020 framework.

Here, we firstly examine the expectations placed on this Action Agenda, drawing lessons from other experiences, particularly from the climate action agenda (Part 1). We then focus on the challenges ahead for the Action Agenda, both short-term (prior to COP15) and medium-term (after COP15), that must be overcome so that it can contribute to a strong mobilisation and support the implementation of the post-2020 framework, particularly by linking it to the formal framework of the CBD (Part 2). Finally, we highlight some initial ideas for enhancing the credibility and monitoring of the implementation of commitments after COP15 (Part 3).

¹ UN Biodiversity Conference 2018, Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt Announcement: Sharm El-Sheikh to Beijing Action Agenda for Nature and People, <https://www.cbd.int/cop/cop-14/announcement/nature-action-agenda-egypt-to-china-en.pdf>

² <https://www.cbd.int/action-agenda/>

KEY MESSAGES

The Action Agenda is by no means anecdotal. It fulfils fundamental strategic functions to stimulate a positive political momentum *prior* to COP15, and to help achieve an ambitious agreement in Kunming in 2020. There is therefore an urgent need to energise the Action Agenda as soon as possible.

In the short term (from 2019), efforts are required to provide impetus, to structure and coordinate. As many initiatives as possible must be mobilised, which may be organised according to the Aichi Targets or activity sectors for example, and a decision should be made regarding who could play the coordinator role, alongside Egypt, China, and the Secretariat.

At COP15, the decision could be made to anchor the Action Agenda within the CBD, to support the implementation of the post-2020 global framework. It will be important to consider how commitments that are credible and measurable could be valorised, while linking them to the intergovernmental framework.

After 2020, the Biodiversity Action Agenda should support the implementation of the CBD and the post-2020 global framework towards its future global goals, in synergy with similar initiatives such as the Global Climate Action Agenda or the Ocean Commitments.

1. WHY DO WE NEED A BIODIVERSITY ACTION AGENDA?

The idea of a biodiversity *action agenda* is part of a longer-term trend to strengthen the mobilisation of non-state actors in and around international environmental policies. Action agendas have thus been created for the Global Compact (2000), the Johannesburg Summit Type II Partnerships (2002), the Rio+20 Global Registry of Voluntary Commitments (2012) and, more recently, the Global Climate Action Agenda (2014), the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015), and the Ocean Commitment Registry for the implementation of SDG 14 (2017).

These initiatives have an important strategic dimension: they exist to create, reinforce and maintain the ambition of multilateral discussions, but also to complement them, to accompany their implementation, and even to act as a relay. In practice, an action agenda can fulfil at least four functions, before or after major international negotiations, all of which apply in the case of biodiversity:³

- **Aligning imaginaries towards change:** The aim here is to align expectations, by making signals converge through mobilising all types of actors and from all sectors, and by staging/enhancing their commitments. This is notably important for actors who do not usually make commitments on biodiversity (and this feature of the Action Agenda thus also serves as an attraction function). The aim prior to COP15 would be to signal that change is happening, and that the course of history is that of a change towards protecting biodiversity in policies and in socio-economic sectors; and to disseminate the message that there is much to gain by being involved in this transition, and much to lose by not part of it.
- **Putting pressure on Parties:** Such a mobilisation can provide positive pressure to the negotiating process, signalling to political leaders that large numbers of actors are ready to take action for biodiversity and are calling for an ambitious international framework, that would facilitate their actions.
- **Enabling difficult discussions and initiatives:** An action agenda can also be used to organise and structure discussions and coalitions on issues that are difficult to tackle head-on in the constrained framework of multilateralism, while providing these initiatives visibility and proximity to negotiations.
- **Catalysing and channelling energies:** An action agenda can have a catalytic effect that facilitates the strengthening of existing coalitions⁴ and/or the launch of new ones.

³ Kok, M., Rankovic, A. et al. (2018). *From Paris to Beijing. Insights gained from the UNFCCC Paris Agreement for the post-2020 global biodiversity framework*. PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, The Hague.

⁴ Many biodiversity initiatives and coalitions already exist, such as the International Coral Reef Initiative, the Coalition of the Willing on Pollinators, or the

At the same time, a close proximity to the negotiating arena avoids the loss of energy and ensures that such initiatives fulfil their potential in terms of helping to achieve the global objectives determined within multilateral frameworks.

The Global Climate Action Agenda, provides a suitable reference in this regard. Launched in Lima in 2014 by the Peruvian and French Presidencies of COP20 and COP21, the Lima-Paris Action Agenda (LPAA) was primarily intended to demonstrate that the commitments of non-state actors could contribute to the achievement of goals to limit global warming, particularly by helping to bridge the "ambition gap" by 2020. Due to the considerable involvement of the presidencies, along with effective support from the UN Secretary-General and the UNFCCC Secretariat, the LPAA helped raise awareness and mobilise different groups of actors (scientists, business and finance sectors, communities, NGOs) through a series of events focused on sectoral themes, which have enabled the formalisation of practical initiatives, the profiles of which have been raised through the registration of voluntary commitments on an online platform known as NAZCA (Non-State Actor Zone for Climate Action), set up by the UNFCCC Secretariat (which now has the participation of 12,396 stakeholders). Actors directly involved in the organisation of COP21 have acknowledged that the LPAA constituted a driving force in the negotiations leading to Paris, having enabled the "development of alliances and multi-partner coalitions which act, move forward, energise and influence States and vice versa."⁵

2. TOWARDS 2020 AND BEYOND: HOW CAN WE ORGANISE THE ACTION AGENDA AND LINK IT TO THE POST-2020 FRAMEWORK?

The "Sharm El-Sheikh to Beijing Action Agenda for Nature and People", as defined at COP14, currently has three objectives:

- Raise public awareness about the urgent need to stem biodiversity loss and restore biodiversity health for the sake of humanity and the global ecosystem;
- Inspire and help implement nature-based solutions to meet key global challenges;
- Catalyse cooperative initiatives across sectors and stakeholders in support of the global biodiversity goals.

The establishment of this Agenda is also an opportunity to look for concrete points of collaboration, beyond the rigid framework of the conventions, in the implementation of international regimes for the protection of the environment, on biodiversity, climate, and the oceans.

various coalitions and initiatives in support of forests, to name a few.

⁵ Ourbak, T. (2017). *Analyse rétrospective de la COP 21 et de l'Accord de Paris : un exemple de diplomatie multilatérale exportable*, Expert report, MAEDI, p. 14.

At present, the “Sharm El-Sheikh to Beijing” Action Agenda is limited, as the name suggests, to supporting COP15 preparations. Decision XIV/34 encourages non-state actors to contribute to the Action Agenda, notably by developing “biodiversity commitments”. To operationalise this agenda, it is necessary in the sequence which opens to distinguish the short-term issues, by COP 15, and the stakes in the medium term, during and especially after COP 15.

Short-term challenges: providing the impetus, structuration and coordination. For the *impetus*, we must be able to attract the myriad of existing biodiversity initiatives to convince them to participate in and compile the Action Agenda. There is a lack of understanding about the purpose of an action agenda, and the Biodiversity Action Agenda lacks visibility, which for the moment is not particularly encouraging for actors (large NGOs, private sector, hybrid coalitions, etc.) that have already launched their own activity programmes in anticipation of COP15. For these organisations, the added value of the Action Agenda may not be immediately obvious and efforts must be made to convince them of the importance of coming together and building a critical mass.

Regarding *structuration*, it is vital that events and discussions that contribute to the Action Agenda are organised to raise the visibility of the various actions and to better link them to the challenges of developing the post-2020 framework. In this perspective, a good starting point could be the three objectives already contained within the Sino-Egyptian declaration, and a series of corresponding events could be envisaged. Another approach could be to organise mobilisation around the Aichi objectives, or to focus on different sectoral discussions, as was the case for the climate, by using for instance the sectors for which “mainstreaming” discussions have already taken place at the CBD. There are many possible options, and a path to follow should be quickly identified.

All this relates to the challenges of *coordination*. For the moment, Egypt and China have not demonstrated a strong will to coordinate this process. By definition, the CBD Secretariat could play a key role in operating the Action Agenda. It could be assigned the task of orchestrating the various initiatives within this framework, which would be similar to the role assumed by the UNFCCC Secretariat in support of the Peruvian and French Presidencies between COP20 and COP21. Since Sino-Egyptian steering is currently lacking, it could be imagined that the open-ended intersessional working group to support the preparation of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, which will work under the control of the COP Bureau, could take on the strategy and organisation of the action agenda in the run up to COP15, with a strong implication of the CBD Secretariat to make proposals and to organise the process. This would imply that the Secretariat, in agreement with other actors, begins work immediately on structuring the Action Agenda so that this aspect has been completed in time for the first meeting of the intersessional group, which will take place towards the end of summer 2019.

Medium-term challenges. Looking beyond COP15, the legal, political and institutional basis of the Action Agenda within

the CBD must be considered. A decision could be made at COP15 to help define this basis. The COP, as a plenary political body, could also monitor the process implementation from one COP to the next. But which bodies should be involved in the piloting? Inspiration can be drawn from the way similar processes are operated, which allows several configurations to be envisaged that involve either single bodies or several working together:

- The Secretariat, whose key role in organisation and coordination has been discussed above;
- Contributing to the implementation of the Action Agenda could be an objective for the Clearing-House Mechanism (CHM), whose role could be expanded in Beijing, particularly the missions of its informal advisory committee.
- The operation is also fully within the mandate of the Subsidiary Body on Implementation (SBI).⁶

Assigning the implementation of the Action Agenda to the Secretariat, the CHM and/or the SBI makes it possible to rely on existing bodies and established expertise, avoiding the need to create new bodies. A decision that could also be worth considering in Kunming is the nomination of ambassadors or biodiversity champions, along the lines of UNFCCC’s “high-level champions”, to promote the political basis of the process and to organise or accompany various events.

3. ENSURING THE VISIBILITY AND CREDIBILITY OF COMMITMENTS MADE BY NON-STATE AND SUB-STATE ACTORS

The monitoring of commitments is not always effectively carried out in the various platforms and registries. Indeed, these tools are often based on the self-assessment of results obtained, which is often unverified and carried out with varying degrees of transparency, while sanctions for non-compliance are rare or non-existent. This can lead to damaging consequences, such as the double counting of emissions reductions, or giving the impression of greenwashing. It is necessary to define transparency criteria and implement verification.

3.1. Ensuring transparency:

Commitment registration. While freedom can be given to the actors engaged (as is the case in the NAZCA framework), it is nevertheless possible for a framework to be defined, with which the actors must comply: in the case of CBD’s online platform, the submission of commitments currently requires the specification of a geographical area and subject matter from a list of themes corresponding to the CBD’s working areas, and the identification of the Aichi target(s) and SDGs that would be

⁶ See decision COP XII/26, Annex.

supported by the submitted initiative. The platform also asks for information on how a commitment will be monitored. In the future, we could envisage that a commitment could be quantified as much as possible, to ensure its measurable progress. There could also be a requirement for the specification of indicators, an implementation timetable, etc., in line with the "SMART" approach (Specific, Measurable, Ambitious, Realistic and Timely), which is envisaged for future global targets, and which could be a way to strengthen the credibility and monitoring of non-state commitments.⁷ Registration could also facilitate the expression of financing needs for actions, and thus become a meeting place between the supply and demand for public and private financing.

Commitment updating. Such a platform only makes sense if it is updated, ideally annually (either on a fixed date or on the anniversary date of the commitment). This would enable the periodic deletion of non-updated commitments from the register, to reinforce the requirements regarding the monitoring of submitted actions.

Self-assessment of commitment compliance. Updates can be coupled with a transparent (annual) public self-assessment in the form of a progress report or review of commitments. The actions carried out can then be specified, and the level of achievement measured in relation to the objectives and chosen indicators, or at least to qualitatively and quantitatively measure results (for example, see the UN Global Compact's Communication of Progress (CoP)). Since this would be transparent and accessible to the public through the online registry, this allows naming and shaming, and could lead to third parties (the market, peers, NGOs, etc.) drawing their own conclusions. It would also enable records to be kept, in different forms, regarding the specific contribution of commitments to a particular quantified objective. Different levels can, however, be envisaged (see the active or advanced statutes of the Global Compact, for example).

3.2. Verification

Verification is another step in the process that gives greater credibility to an Action Agenda. The large number of potential commitments (more than 12,000 in NAZCA) does not, however, facilitate verification, and raises the question of the institutional and financial means available for this purpose. The verification process also depends on the comparability of data and commitments, the presentation of which can be standardised to varying degrees, and which by definition represent very variable efforts. This limitation was highlighted by the 2018 Emissions Gap Report for the climate. Verification should also be considered in relation to the National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) preparation and review process, or even with a regular global review that could be implemented for potential national biodiversity commitments that States are currently invited to submit before COP15.

Verification could be outsourced and based on certain NGOs, following either a single mechanism or, more likely, several mechanisms chosen by the actors involved. Examples include the Carbon Disclosure Project models defined to verify carbon compensation projects (to which a large proportion of the actors involved in NAZCA report), the Global Aggregation Report of the Global Covenant of Mayors, the We Mean Business progress reports, and the WWF Gold Standard.

At the CBD level, the annual publication of a Yearbook of Biodiversity Action (comparable to the Yearbook of Global Climate Action) could be considered. This type of report would enable a stocktake of the outcomes of the Action Agenda. Without providing an exhaustive review of all commitments, the Yearbook of Global Climate Action focuses on a selection of events, initiatives, successes and good practices. It concludes with key messages to parties and non-parties.

⁷ Abbott, K.W. (2017). *Orchestrating experimentation in non-state environmental commitments*, *Environmental Politics*, 26:4, pp. 738-763.

Citation : Rankovic, A., Maljean-Dubois, S., Wemaere, M., Laurans, Y. (2019). An Action Agenda for biodiversity: Expectations and issues in the short and medium terms, IDDRI, *Issue Brief* N°04/19.

This work received funding from the Agence française pour la biodiversité (AFB) and from the French National Research Agency under the Investissements d'avenir programme [ANR-10-LABX-14-01].

CONTACT

aleksandar.rankovic@iddri.org

Institut du développement durable
et des relations internationales
41, rue du Four - 75006 Paris - France

WWW.IDDRI.ORG

[@IDDRI_THINKTANK](https://twitter.com/IDDRI_THINKTANK)