Social justice and inclusive conservation must guide GBF implementation

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Abstract

The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework marked a renewed commitment to address the biodiversity crisis. This framework, consisting of four goals and 23 targets which are intended to guide conservation efforts for the next thirty years, displays an enhanced level of ambition compared to its predecessor. However, the pursuit of multilateral agreements is dependent upon national pledges, and national pledges are of little worth without subsequent sub-national action. We assess the currently submitted National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans of member countries to determine the extent to which they align with the bold ambition of the GBF. We find a lack of consistency between the GBF and country submissions across many targets, with the notable exception being target 3 – to increase protected area coverage to 30% by 2030. Reflecting on the current submissions, we draw on recent developments and our own experience to outline key considerations that could help guide GBF implementation efforts. We caution against cherry-picking of specific targets to suit political-economic agendas, highlight that an overemphasis on Target 3 alone will not lead to the desired state of living in harmony with nature, and that to do so actually requires a more holistic and inclusive approach to conservation.

Introduction

With the text of the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) decided, countries are now expected to submit their (revised) National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) before the UNFCCC COP 16 in Colombia and embark on the tricky journey of implementation. To date, only nineteen countries, along with the EU (who in addition to member countries' own submissions submit a region-wide commitment), have submitted their updated NBSAPs, leaving 174 still to do so. With COP 16 fast approaching, now is an opportune time to assess the submitted NBSAPs, reflect on the objectives of the GBF, consider the alignment between them and their obligations to people and nature.

The adoption of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework by member states of the UN CBD in December 2022 marked a renewed commitment to address the biodiversity crisis. This new framework, consisting of four goals and 23 targets, which are intended to guide conservation efforts for the next thirty years, displays an enhanced level of ambition compared to its predecessor, the Aichi 2020 targets. The increased ambition is welcome and necessary; but previous agreements show that words and signatures mean nothing unless matched by effective implementation. Globally agreed targets, whether towards social or environmental ends, typically have grand ambitions and headline goals. However, recent experience suggests that global frameworks are more successful at raising

awareness and attracting investment than for generating political will or putting policy into practice. The Aichi targets and SDGs were extremely ambitious, yet none of the Aichi targets were achieved, and progress towards the SDGs is underwhelming, with those towards climate and environment performing notably poorly (Malekpour et al., 2023) Here, we draw on recent developments and our own experience to outline key considerations that could help GBF implementation efforts to succeed where the majority of other attempts to realize multilateral environmental agreements have been found wanting.

Country commitments must recognise plurality and avoid cherry picking of targets

A key reason for the failure to achieve the Aichi targets was parties' failure to set appropriate national targets that adhere to the global framework (Xu et al., 2021). Beneath the headline goals, the GBF has a broad range of targets that address the spectrum of drivers of environmental change and the concerted efforts required for system-level transformation (IPBES, 2019). Significant effort was made to reduce the ambiguity and complexity which undermined the Aichi targets, and GBF targets were designed around the SMART principles of specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time bound (Hughes & Grumbine, 2023). Despite these efforts many targets retain vague language such as 'significantly', 'substantially', 'increase', 'reduce' etc. Furthermore, countries face context-specific challenges requiring tailored solutions. While the breadth of the GBF accounts for this, it also allows countries to 'cherry pick' easier to achieve or politically palatable targets and overlook others with the potential for more meaningful progress. Such a selective approach could result in a fragmented response that ultimately fails to work towards the CBD long-term ambition of 'humanity living in harmony with nature'.

The headline mission of the GBF is to 'halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030', and the currently submitted NBSAPs offer an insight to current trends in this direction. Only one country makes specific reference to this mission, with COP 15 presidency China pledging to effectively mitigate biodiversity loss within its territory by 2030 (but not referencing its impacts in offshore territories). The EU commits to reversing pollinator loss, which is of course notable, but a significantly lesser goal itself possibly more associated with the services to food production than biodiversity conservation per se. Italy, Austria, Luxembourg and Ireland follow suit, emphasizing their commitments to reducing pollinator loss. Others such as COP 15 host Canada, Malaysia, and Spain simply acknowledge that halting biodiversity loss is a requirement but provide no mechanism or indicators to explain how this will be pursued or measured; although Canada does state that by 2030 "the bare minimum is no net loss of biodiversity".

Specific targets on gender equality (target 23 on gender equality in implementation) and consistent reference to Indigenous people's rights are welcome updates. However, there is similarly poor consistency when it comes to issues related to Indigenous People and equity, with most submitted NBSAPs failing to make any reference to Indigenous issues at all (either within their territories or through financial support for nature-dependent people) and more concerning Uganda's submission fails to provide any updated targets and maintains text referring to 2020 targets, i.e. 'by 2020'. Canada, Ireland, Suriname and Malaysia are the only countries to provide specific text, for example "strengthening the role or capacity of Indigenous peoples", but the language of strengthen, support, etc, is vague and not SMART.

On the issue of financing (i.e., GBF target 19), only Austria makes a specific commitment, that being to increase biodiversity-relevant international development financing by 100%. While this is significant given that in 2020/21 Austria committed 37.6% of its total bilateral allocable aid (USD 189.4 million) in support of the environment and the Rio Conventions (although only 7% was directly for biodiversity) (OECD), it is a relative drop in the ocean towards the targeted $20 billion per year goal of the GBF from developed nations (by 2025…). Far greater consensus is found across country submissions towards target 3, the well-known and widely circulating 30 x 30 commitment, with

sixteen of the nineteen NBSAPs not only referring to, but committing to specific targets to annex more areas of land or sea.

Target 3 is not a panacea for halting biodiversity loss

Target 3 is the GBF 'stand out' target which has received significant media and scientific attention and is seemingly generating political support as evidenced by countries' willingness to include specific targets for it within their NBSAPs. This target aims to increase the global coverage of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) to at least 30 per cent by 2030 (often referred to as 30x30). We can recognise it as the headline target due to it featuring in the opening statement of the CBD press release which states: "By 2030: Protect 30% of Earth's lands, oceans, coastal areas, inland waters". Headline goals are attractive because they offer a highly relatable and often simple target that generates broad interest and can help to mobilize collective action and financing towards a common concern. As such, there was considerable enthusiasm for a headline goal for nature within the GBF, particularly due to the success in generating media and private sector attention for the headline goal of the Paris agreement, i.e., limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Target 3 certainly achieves this with just one headline indicator: coverage of protected areas and OECMs.

However, there are key distinctions between these headline goals. The climate goal is unambiguous, and we can be reasonably confident that actions in pursuit of the goal (i.e., reducing emissions and building climate resilience) are very likely to contribute towards the achievement of the overall goal and fairly likely to also deliver at least some positive social and environmental co-benefits. There is much less certainty that the biodiversity target of protecting 30% of the planet will lead to a reduction in biodiversity loss, let alone generate social co-benefits. Protecting 30% of the planet requires a near-doubling of current globally protected areas. Yet, biodiversity loss has significantly increased during the most recent doubling of protected areas, which occurred over the last three decades. While the losses may have been much greater without PA establishment, this shows that PAs alone are not sufficient to resolve biodiversity loss at the global scale, and may not always be effective within park boundaries (Geldmann et al., 2019). Furthermore, the establishment of strictly protected areas has often been associated with a range of social harms, including the displacement and dispossession of local and Indigenous people along with loss of access to resources that are important for food security and livelihoods. Indeed, it has been argued that many strict PAs are failing to work for people (Benjaminsen & Bryceson, 2012), nature (Craigie et al., 2010; Curran et al., 2004), or both (Pyhälä et al., 2016). Meanwhile, poor regulation and low levels of protection mean that over 80% of EU marine protected areas are ineffective (Aminian-Biquet et al., 2024). We cannot reasonably expect improved conservation effectiveness from application of the same flawed approaches and therefore countries (and sub-national implementers) must give careful attention to the types of interventions they are planning to reach the 30x30 target. Misinterpreting target 3 as a call for more strict protected areas risks falling into the panacea trap of designing interventions based on formulaic prescriptions that are misaligned with the characteristics of the problem (Kalfagianni & Young, 2022). Rather, efforts to extend PA coverage should consider the range of options and be supplemented with increased efforts to enhance the effectiveness and equity of existing PAs (Li et al., 2024). In doing so, the actions required to equitably reduce and reverse biodiversity loss have great potential for a range of co-benefits, not least to the climate (Shin et al., 2022).

Clarity on what protection means

Of particular concern is the fact that the GBF fails to specify the type or level of protection countries should pursue in their effort to conserve 30% of land (or water). While the headline indicator is SMART, it fails to specify whether the area protected is important for biodiversity, if it is effective in reducing biodiversity loss, whether it addresses anthropogenic degradation, or if it contributes to connectivity (Pillay et al., 2024). Again, this ambiguity allows for potentially meaningful and

contextualized strategies to be developed, but it also leaves the target open to interpretation. It is particularly risky if the target is interpreted as being a call for strict protection of land, which has long been associated with social injustices and has not always been as effective at conserving nature as proponents would like to believe. Moreover, the active separation of people and nature through 'fortress' protectionist style approaches is clearly misaligned with, and will fail to achieve, the CBD mission of humanity living in harmony with nature, and risks disrupting the connections of those people now maintaining the most proximate and tangible relationships with nature (ref Garnett, Sze etc). It could also hasten rural depopulation and undermine essential land stewardship (Marini et al. 2024).

Living in harmony with nature requires a holistic approach to conservation

Despite the SDGs emphasizing holistic application that seeks synergies between the goals, their sectoral framing (i.e., goal 1 poverty, 2 hunger etc.) allows countries, organisations, and implementers to pursue specific goals that best align with their socio-political and economic interests, thereby defying the "integrated and indivisible" nature of the SDGs (Forestier & Kim, 2020; Heras-saizarbitoria & Boiral, 2022). One undesirable outcome of this can be seen in submitted NBSAPs that clearly overlook—or intentionally exclude—certain targets. This follows a familiar path of treating the global concerns of biodiversity loss, poverty, inequity, lack of healthcare, food and nutrition security, climate change, and pollution as separate issues, (Pettorelli et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2023). Furthermore, while there is an increasing acknowledgement of the need for urgent action (i.e., GBF), experience shows that globally agreed goals are rarely achieved and we therefore caution that strategic thinking and design should not be constrained by short, unrealistic time horizons (i.e., 2030). Some realism is required -- it took a four-year consultation process to agree on the 23 GBF targets, it is hardly conceivable that they will be achieved in the next five!

A primary reason for the failure to achieve global goals is the weak implementation at national and sub-national level (Cardona Santos et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2021). This is in part because the strategies are often externally designed, based on western worldviews and technocratic approaches (Dawson et al., 2023) and fail to recognise local communities and their place-based knowledge and values (Carmenta et al., 2023; Milner-Gulland, 2024). Countries and implementers should rather develop and commit to more long-term integrated, systems-approaches that better consider synergies (and trade-offs) across GBF targets and with broader landscape-scale objectives (climate, food security) and ensure that social justice dimensions are at the core (Milner-Gulland, 2024). Protected areas encompass a spectrum of approaches and there is evidence that multi-use strategies can more effectively respond to social *and* environmental challenges than strict protection (Adams et al., 2023; Nelson & Chomitz, 2011; Rico-Strafford et al., 2023). Furthermore, it is increasingly acknowledged that governance that includes or is led by Indigenous peoples and local communities can generate more effective conservation (Dawson et al., 2023; Sze et al., 2022). Such evidence strongly suggests that simply "recognizing and respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities" (GBF) is insufficient but rather that implementation should ensure that local people co-design and lead conservation and restoration efforts.

Conclusion

The pursuit of multilateral agreements is dependent upon national pledges, and national pledges are of little worth without subsequent sub-national action. Multilateral environmental agreements can be effective, but sadly the Montreal protocol of 1987—that was focused on a single issue—remains largely the exception to the rule (Whitesides, 2020). More recently, the SDG framework has been criticized for legitimizing unsustainable models of development that deliver short-term socio-economic advances at the cost of environmental integrity (Weitz et al., 2023). Implementation

strategies for the GBF must avoid a situation whereby environmental protection and recovery exacerbates inequalities or further increases pressure on those already vulnerable and in fact often already delivering to conservations aims, whilst failing to address the wealth-related drivers of biodiversity decline (Lenzen et al., 2012) including the impacts of 'developed' countries environmental footprint on distant regions (Dasgupta & Levin, 2023). A world where humanity lives in harmony with nature requires systemic transformations in the way much of humanity perceives our role in, with, or as nature (Mace, 2014), and cannot be achieved by a narrow focus on *Target 3*. Instead, attention to social justice and multi-sectoral inclusion must underpin GBF implementation efforts to have any chance of humanity living in harmony with nature. Learning from those communities already doing so and amplifying the positive human-biodiversity dynamics that often emanate from biocultural centres is a logical starting point (Carmenta et al., 2023). Meanwhile, applying systems thinking and good environmental governance principles can enable implementers to avoid siloed responses and inform the development of options for future ecologically and socially resilient landscapes that respond to both global environmental challenges and local realities.

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