EDITORIAL

The Global Biodiversity Framework and the North-South Divide

https://doi.org/10.25003/RAS.12.02.0015

The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) adopted at the second session of the 15th Conference of Parties (COP15) of the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), held at Montreal, on November 18, 2022, has attracted favourable comment from wide sections of the media. The European Union's press release hailing the decisions of COP15 as a "historic deal for nature and people," set the euphoric tone of much of the commentary.

The vision of the GBF is to ensure that, by 2050, "biodiversity is valued, conserved, restored, and wisely used, maintaining ecosystem services, sustaining a healthy planet, and delivering benefits essential for all people." More immediately, the mission of the framework for the period up to 2030, directed towards achieving the 2050 goal is to

> take urgent action to halt and reverse biodiversity loss to put nature on a path to recovery for the benefit of people and the planet by conserving and sustainably using biodiversity and ensuring the fair and equitable sharing of benefits from the use of genetic resources, while providing the necessary means of implementation.

The Kunming-Montreal GBF has four sweeping goals, with a 2050 target date, and a demanding 2030 deadline for another 23 targets. The latter adds to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 and the 20 Aichi biodiversity targets adopted by the CBD in 2010. The first two goals concern key elements of the vision and mission relating to the conservation, protection, and sustainable use, and management of biodiversity, with special emphasis on the expansion of natural ecosystems and halting the loss of species due to anthropogenic causes. The other two goals concern the equitable sharing of benefits from the use of genetic resources, especially from digital sequence information and the provision of financial resources for the implementation of the vision and mission of the GBF.

The 23 targets specify quantitative benchmarks to be achieved by 2030. These include, for example, placing at least 30 per cent of degraded ecosystems under restoration, declaring 30 per cent of area across all ecosystems to be protected areas, reducing overall risk from pesticides and hazardous chemicals by 50 per cent, and eliminating and phasing out of reform incentives, including subsidies, that are "harmful for biodiversity" and "progressively reducing them by at least 500 billion United States dollars [USD] per year by 2030." The other, qualitative, targets call on parties to ensure specific policy objectives that cover diverse aspects of biodiversity in the economy, society, and governance to help progress towards the goals for 2050.

The GBF goals and targets are directed, wholly asymmetrically, at developing countries and what they need to do, especially regarding the conservation and protection of biodiversity. For example, the reduction in agricultural input use that is incorporated in the GBF will affect developing countries the most, both by restricting the extension of inputs to new areas and crops, and by curbing any increase in current levels of use. Past experience shows that anti-subsidy targets are likely to be implemented first in developing countries, which is where they will have the most regressive impact. Whereas the original text of the Convention on Biodiversity adopted in 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit, emphasised the "first and overriding priorities" of poverty eradication and social and economic development for developing countries, the GBF seeks to reverse the emphasis, calling for biodiversity conservation to be integrated into poverty eradication, with the implicit and facile assumption that there are no barriers and negative consequences to be overcome in such integration, nor substantial costs to be borne.

The Kunming-Montreal GBF involves five other decisions dealing with its implementation. Of these, the decisions taken on the question of resource mobilisation for the implementation of the GBF, especially financial resources, and two relating to monitoring, reporting, and verification, are the most significant. The last two lead to reporting obligations on biodiversity, which will be a particularly onerous burden for developing countries. Fulfilling these reporting obligations will place a significant demand on their scientific, technical, and financial resources while opening opportunities for Northern experts and consultants. Such a demand on resources will divert from the larger development effort of the Global South as well as their practical efforts in the arena of biodiversity.

The GBF does not make any reference to historical responsibility for the loss of biodiversity, species extinction, and the transmission of species across the globe. A significant part of such responsibility lies with developed countries as a consequence of their industrial development. Their responsibility in relation to the developing world goes further, on account of colonialism and neo-colonialism, the depredations of transnational corporations in exploiting Southern natural resources, unequal terms of trade and the global financial architecture, and the pattern of the global circulation of goods and services since the onset of capitalism.

The GBF does not recognise that developing countries have been the custodians of global biodiversity. Unlike the case of the global atmospheric commons, where the contribution of developing countries is by virtue of omission, in *not* having emitted greenhouse gases, the preservation of biodiversity must be recognised as a positive contribution. Typically, this elementary truth is obscured by focusing only on current changes in the ecosystems, which tend to exaggerate the role of developing countries in biodiversity loss, a loss that is partly inevitable on account of their effort to meet essential development needs. At the same time, the continuing contribution of the enormous historically accumulated stock of biodiversity and carbon present in the ecosystems of developing countries, a contribution that is significantly greater than their loss, is consistently ignored. In contrast, such stocks of biodiversity and carbon have suffered massive depletion in most of the developed world, a matter on which there is a studied silence.

The courageous refusal of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to be gaveled into silent acceptance of the outcome cannot be set aside as a lone dissenting voice. The forests of the Congo Basin sequester more carbon than the Amazon. The part of the forests that fall in the DRC alone, according to the World Bank, which eloquently refers to forests as the "lungs of Africa and the beating heart of the world," sequesters a massive 1.5 per cent of the world's annual carbon emissions. Consequently, even at a very low price of 10 USD per metric tonne of carbon, the DRC is owed at least six billion USD per annum, a far cry from the fraction of this amount that is on offer as support for the entire world in the GBF.

The GBF has, regrettably, emerged as an overwhelmingly conservation-oriented manifesto, ignoring the issues of equity, the development needs of four-fifths of the global population, and matters of historical responsibility. Scientifically, its vision is circumscribed by its neglect, or only token acknowledgement of, the need for the growth of productivity in all spheres related to biodiversity, especially in agriculture. The GBF is in line with the current developed country emphasis on indigeneity, with the catch-phrase "indigenous peoples and local communities" occurring no less than twenty times, while production-based social strata such as farmers are not referred to even once.

On climate change, the reality is that ecosystems and biodiversity will be heavily affected by current and future global warming. By contrast, the GBF seeks to put the burden of climate change-mitigation on carbon sequestration by the biosphere reserves of the Global South with the rhetoric of "nature-based solutions," while downplaying the urgency of reducing the industrial emissions of the Global North.

Developing countries should not accept the Global Biodiversity Framework in its current form as a *fait accompli*. As the experience of the loss and damage agenda under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Paris Agreement has shown, the implementation process of the

Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) offers opportunities for restoring equity and a balanced scientific approach to the genuine challenge of biodiversity. The price of biodiversity and sustainability cannot be that the Global South loses out on the material basis of its future well-being while a global minority enjoys the fruits of scientific, technological, and economic advances.