

Biodiversity targets will not be met without justice

An assessment of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
from a Southern perspective

Lim Li Ching and Lim Li Lin

The recently adopted Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) sets out the international community's priorities for action in addressing biodiversity loss, to 2030. The biodiversity crisis is acute and interlinked with multiple other crises such as climate change, food insecurity and health. It must be understood in the structural and systemic contexts that persistently drive biodiversity loss, such as trade, investment and financial regulation (or lack thereof), the global economic pressures that push biodiverse countries into increasing debt, and inequality, which is rooted in racist, sexist, class and colonial structures.¹

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. At that Conference, the central principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" was adopted at the highest political level. The principle recognizes that developed countries should take the lead in taking action on sustainable development, "in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command".² The CBD makes operational this principle through differentiated obligations of developed and developing country Parties. There are clear legal obligations on developed countries to provide financial resources and transfer technology to developing countries.

However, developed countries have not yet fulfilled these obligations. During the negotiations of the KMGBF, a group of more than 70 developing countries called for developed countries to mobilize and provide at least US\$100 billion annually to developing countries. The group also proposed a new, dedicated Global Biodiversity Fund under the auspices of CBD Parties, to be the financing vehicle. These demands were not met. The KMGBF target on financial resources only aims at increasing financial resources from developed to developing countries, to at least US\$20 billion per year by 2025, and to at least US\$30 billion per year by 2030, far short of developing country demands. A Global Biodiversity Framework Fund will be set up under the Global Environment Facility (GEF), even though there are ongoing developing country challenges in accessing GEF funds.

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Shifted responsibilities

Instead of fulfilling their obligations, developed countries have shifted their responsibilities. On one hand, they rely on private sector commitments and finance. By allowing private, blended and “innovative” finance, without any social and environmental safeguards, the door is opened wide for profit interests setting priorities for biodiversity action. At the same time, the KMGBF regulation of the corporate business and finance sectors is miserably weak without mandatory requirements, accountability measures or legal responsibility for any damage done by them.

On the other hand, developed countries have shifted their responsibilities by calling for domestic resource mobilization by developing countries themselves. At the same time, requirements for biodiversity actions and to meet the goals and targets of the KMGBF fall mostly on developing countries that hold most of the world’s biodiversity. They will also be held accountable for these actions through the monitoring framework for the KMGBF, and through the new and much-enhanced mechanisms for planning, monitoring, reporting and review.

These developments are a reversal of the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. Without equitably sharing the burden of actions and providing financial resources, those most responsible for biodiversity loss continue to benefit without due accountability, and those who have less and who are least responsible for the crisis are instead bearing the burdens.

One step forward, two steps back?

There were major gains in the KMGBF targets with language on the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs), on gender equality, on participation, and on the protection of environmental human rights defenders. However, there are concerns that the KMGBF will face the same problem of poor implementation as the CBD itself, which would undermine the impact of these gains. Moreover, these positive developments should not distract from the fact that the KMGBF follows a worrying trend towards the financialization of nature, which is actually unlikely to generate substantial amounts of funding.

This trend is reflected, inter alia, through the endorsement of offsetting approaches such as “nature-based solutions” (NbS), which are included in the KMGBF. Linked to the 30x30 target which aims to protect 30% of lands and waters by 2030, NbS may be used to justify dispossession through land grabbing.³ Land-based carbon offsets, biodiversity offsets, and “fortress conservation”-style “protected areas” are all NbS strategies of corporations and other powerful actors that appropriate land and ecosystems particularly in developing countries. The fact that many NbS approaches, such as carbon offsets, are not technically feasible on a large scale is ignored. Instead, they detract from the urgent need for deep and sustained emissions reductions as corporations and developed countries use these concepts to greenwash their activities, including through “net zero” pledges.

The price is paid by the current owners and stewards of targeted lands – in particular IPLCs – while powerful actors effectively decide that the world’s forests and natural systems are used to offset *their* emissions. This is “carbon colonialism”.

Equity and fair shares between North and South

In truth, the crux of the issue remains unaddressed. Resource extraction from developing countries that began since the colonial era and which continues today, is driven by corporations, rich countries and global elites. A recent fair-shares assessment of resource use demonstrates that high-income nations with 16% of the world population are responsible for 74% of global excess material use.⁴ As such, they bear the overwhelming responsibility for biodiversity loss and need to urgently reduce their resource use to fair and sustainable levels. Furthermore, the majority of the ecological pressure from excess consumption in rich nations is outsourced to poorer nations, causing ecological damage in the latter.

There is actually an ecological debt owed to the developing world, and to the IPLCs who safeguard biodiversity. In fact, developing countries and their peoples have been subsidizing the developed world over centuries, from colonialism. This continues to today, with another study showing that the cumulative net “drain” of resources flowing from the developing to developed countries between 1990-2015 was valued at US\$242 trillion.⁵

Acknowledging and acting on these fundamental issues of justice and equitable fair shares are the first and necessary steps in fairly and effectively addressing the biodiversity and planetary crises that we are facing.

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Endnotes

- 1 Biodiversity Capital Research Collective (2021): *Beyond the Gap: Placing Biodiversity Finance in the Global Economy*. Third World Network, Penang and University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
- 2 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_CONF.151_26_Vol.I_Declaration.pdf
- 3 For a thorough discussion on NbS, see Stabinsky, D. (2021): “*Nature-based Solutions*” and the Biodiversity and Climate Crises. TWN Environment and Development Series No. 21. Third World Network, Penang.
- 4 Hickel, J. et al. (2022): National responsibility for ecological breakdown: a fair-shares assessment of resource use, 1970-2017. *Lancet Planet Health* 6: e342-49.
- 5 Hickel, J. et al. (2022): Imperialist appropriation in the world economy: Drain from the global South through unequal exchange, 1990-2015. *Global Environmental Change* 73: 102467.