

Business Standard

Explained: Can global biodiversity framework actually protect, promote it

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Since its adoption following the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the Convention on Biological Diversity has been pushing countries to protect biodiversity, and slow and halt the rapid decline of species and habitats. But these targets mostly remain unmet.

"The critique of the 1992 convention on biological diversity has been that while this is a multilateral environmental agreement, without an international-level dispute settlement forum, it isn't enforceable, where you can actually take on countries for non-compliance," said Shalini Bhutani, a legal researcher and policy analyst who tracks agriculture and biodiversity issues in the Asian region. In 2010, 196 member countries adopted the Aichi biodiversity targets, which included 20 line items, such as increasing awareness about the importance of biodiversity, removal of incentives and subsidies which are harmful to biodiversity, sustainable production and consumption.

But, claimed a UN Global Biodiversity Outlook report released in 2020, countries have failed to meet several of the Aichi biodiversity targets between 2011-20. Despite progress in some areas, vast numbers of species remain threatened by extinction, and environmentally damaging subsidies provided by governments, that account for more than \$500 billion, have not been ended, the report noted.

It is in this context that the post-2020 targets are being proposed, and we report on what it must have, as the world marks the International Day for Biological Diversity today, May 22. The 2020 framework sets 21 targets and 10 milestones for governments to meet by the end of this decade. These include protecting a minimum of 30% of the world's oceans and land, reducing pesticide use by at least two-thirds, eliminating plastic waste, and increasing financial resources dedicated to biodiversity to at least \$200 billion annually.

"While I agree there must be a 'Global Biodiversity Framework'-like global vision in the form of a framework, the question of how achievable this framework is depends on the corresponding national laws and policies that countries like India initiated once they became members of the CBD, how far they've been able to comply with them, and why they have not been able to fully comply," said Bhutani.

Scientists worldwide have been calling for an immediate paradigm shift in the way we produce our food, consume goods etc. Such a shift is not only necessary to tackle climate change, but critical in mitigating the threat of biodiversity extinction, as increasing numbers of species of animals and plants face the threat of losing their habitat and their life.

However, in December 2021, India's environment ministry proposed a draft amendment to the Biological Diversity Act, 2002. The amendment, if ratified, will dilute the 2002 Act which aims for sustainable, fair and equitable sharing of benefits between those who are using biological resources, such as companies, and the providers of resources, such as local communities, who have the associated traditional knowledge, we reported in February 2022.

What is the Global biodiversity framework?

The post-2020 global biodiversity framework builds on Aichi targets and sets out four broad goals, including slowing species extinction, and 21 mostly quantitative targets, such as protecting at least 30% of the world's land and seas.

Reports have shown that the world is on course for a biodiversity collapse. For instance, a report by the United Nations published on April 27, found that more than 70% of the Earth's land has already been altered by human activity, primarily because of expanding agriculture. Another report, by the World Resource Institute published in 2021, found that the world lost 3.8 million hectares of tropical forests in 2021--the equivalent of 10 soccer fields per minute.

"The framework's text, as it exists today, mentions that we cannot achieve the targets if we continue the business-as-usual scenario," Bhutani said. "So we really need a transformative shift in everything

we do. This includes involving indigenous communities and their ideas of diversity, conservation and sustainable use in such a framework."

Several other biodiversity-related initiatives have been launched that will positively reinforce the framework. For example, in March 2022, 175 countries decided to sign a treaty pledging to eliminate plastic waste. The Global Ocean Alliance, an alliance of 72 countries, has also advocated that at least 30% of the world's oceans be designated as marine protected areas by 2030.

At the COP26 to the UN held in 2021, the European Union and 11 countries, including Canada, Belgium and Japan, committed \$12 billion over the next five years as part of the Global Forest Finance Pledge to reverse forest loss and land degradation.

Further, leaders of 137 countries, which collectively account for 90% of the world's forests, also signed the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use that seeks to halt deforestation.

India, which has 1.75% of the world's forests, has however not signed this pledge, we reported in November 2021.

Disagreements on several issues

The Covid-19 pandemic had slowed the discussion on the post-2020 framework that was supposed to be adopted last year. Over the last two years, discussions took place virtually. The framework is still being negotiated, and some countries have not agreed to certain points--most notably the ones regarding how to monitor the progress and finance for developing countries.

Finance: Disagreements over funding of biodiversity conservation has been one of the main hold-ups to the negotiations, as claimed by reports. Studies (here and here) have shown that consumption habits of wealthy nations are among the key drivers of biodiversity loss, and poor nations that are home to rich biodiversity have fewer means to conserve it.

The draft deal therefore proposed that \$10 billion of funding should be allocated by developed nations to low- and middle-income countries that will help them implement the biodiversity framework.

"The big elephant in the room, when it comes to finance and equitable responsibility, is that developed countries like the USA have not yet ratified the CBD," Bhutani points out. "So they are outside the 196 member nations." What this means is that the rich nations have not committed to contributing to the proposed \$10 billion worth of funding, putting the proposal in financial jeopardy. One group of conservation organisations meanwhile says that even the proposed level of funding is inadequate, and has called for at least \$60 billion per year to flow to the poorer nations--six times what has been proposed. Another study, by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), said that total investment in nature will need to triple by 2030, and nearly quadruple by 2050, to \$8.1 trillion.

Digital Sequence Information: The debate over who will get access to digital sequence information (DSI), which is genetic data stored on computers, is one of the long-standing points of contention.

Developing nations that are rich in biodiversity have argued that the more developed nations have exploited their traditional resources for commercial gain, without sharing any of the revenue or benefits.

Biopiracy occurs when organisations or researchers use indigenous biological resources for commercial purposes, often based on people's traditional knowledge, without permission or official sanction. This leads to exploitation of the cultures the bioresources are drawn from. Examples are attempts by foreign firms to obtain patents on products long in use in India, such as neem, Basmati rice, turmeric and Darjeeling tea.

A report by Mongabay, based on anonymous sources, claimed that several of the protocols set under the digital sequence information are subject to a variety of interpretations that can undermine access and benefit-sharing, and lead to biopiracy.

Monitoring: Countries are also yet to decide on the monitoring framework that will track progress in meeting the global biodiversity framework targets.

Several non-governmental organisations have warned that without a robust monitoring framework, we will see a repeat of the Aichi accord, several of whose targets remained unmet.

"While the convention is legally binding, which means sovereign countries have to come up with laws and policies in accordance with the convention, to what extent these laws are implemented is

outside the scope of the convention," said Neema Pathak Broome, coordinator of the Conservation and Livelihoods programme at the Pune-based Kalpavriksh Environment Action Group.

"That kind of monitoring can only be done by civil society organisations," Broome said. "And unfortunately, there are very few organisations who engage with international conventions in India and hold the government to account for the commitments that it has made under the convention."

Demand to include gender in the biodiversity framework: There is growing evidence about the roles and contributions of women in sustainable resource governance and conservation outcomes. However, there are limited mechanisms in place to systematically map, collect and analyse their roles and activities regarding biodiversity conservation, use and access, and benefit-sharing.

Of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, Target 14 was the only one to address gender issues overtly, calling for the needs of women, indigenous peoples, local communities, and the poor and vulnerable to be taken into account in the restoration and safeguarding of ecosystems. No other provisions are contained within the Strategic Plan on how gender should be mainstreamed.

The Convention on Biological Diversity's 2015-2020 Gender Plan of Action also included mainstreaming gender into national biodiversity strategies and action plans (NBSAPs) as one of the possible actions for integrating a gender perspective.

During the Geneva session of March 2022, thirteen parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, including Costa Rica, Chile, Guatemala, Tanzania, along with several non-governmental organisations around the world, have supported the call for a standalone gender equality target in the post 2020 global biodiversity framework. What, if anything, comes of the demand is yet unknown.

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