Biodiversity conservation

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SDG 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

Key messages:

1. **Adopt a human and community rights based approach.** SDG 15 policies should fully respect the rights of Indigenous Peoples, women, local communities and other rightsholder groups (e.g. land tenure, territorial rights).

2. **Recognize and support local conservation.** SDG 15 policies and indicators should promote effective, efficient and equitable approaches to conserving biodiversity by respecting and supporting community conservation initiatives and related traditional knowledge, including through non-economic incentives like the appropriate recognition of Indigenous and community conserved territories and areas (ICCAs).

3. **Ensure global policy coherence.** The High-Level Political Forum should help ensure improved policy coherence in biodiversity policy and law, e.g. through promoting coherence between the three Rio Conventions.

4. **Redefine forests.** Reaching the target of halting deforestation by 2020 and promoting reforestation can help address the global biodiversity crisis, provided an adequate ecosystem-based definition of forests is adopted.

5. **Avoid the financialization of nature.** Halting deforestation and biodiversity loss requires both qualitative and quantitative measures to address unsustainable commodity chains. Market-oriented approaches, including the financialization of nature and partnerships with profit-oriented companies, can hamper the adoption of effective quantitative measures, like phasing out perverse incentives in line with Aichi target 3.

Mainstreaming biodiversity protection in development policies

Global biodiversity loss is a key threat to food security, human health, and the sustainable development agenda in general. Biodiversity loss reduces the biosphere's resilience as biotic components or assemblages of life forms lose components and therefore lose production and cycling capacity, including water and carbon cycling. The effective mainstreaming of biodiversity in sustainable development policy, and the full and effective implementation of SDGs 14 and 15 and the Aichi targets of the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) is essential in this respect. Mainstreaming should be a two-way process: policy efforts should not only focus on mainstreaming biodiversity into broader sustainable development policies, but also on mainstreaming socially, economically and environmentally sound and rights-based sustainable development approaches into biodiversity policy.

Adopting a rights based approach

The emphasis of Agenda 2030 on rights-based approaches provides a strong mandate to ensure sustainable development policies, including biodiversity conservation and restoration policies, fully respect the rights of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women and other rightsholder groups, including land tenure and territorial rights. Conventional exclusionary approaches like top-down protected area management should be phased out and replaced by bottom-up policies and approaches that fully respect and support endogenous community conservation initiatives and related traditional knowledge. Women and Indigenous Peoples play a key role in such community conservation initiatives, including as holders of traditional knowledge, yet due to their economically and politically marginal position and contextual inequities in general they will lose out in market-based approaches that trigger the commodification, privatization and financialization of the commons. Non-market based approaches like the appropriate

recognition of Indigenous and community conserved territories and areas (ICCAs) have proven to be more supportive of sustainable livelihoods and in promoting effective and efficient biodiversity conservation. This importance of ICCAs should also be recognized in the proposed SDG indicator framework.

Address incidental and intentional incoherence

The three Rio Conventions – the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) – form the pillars of global biodiversity and land governance. However, there is a persistent lack of coherence between especially the UNFCCC regime and the CBD regime considering that the policy guidance of the Parties to the CBD on the need for climate change mitigation and adaptation policies that do not harm biodiversity has not been adopted by the Parties to the UNFCCC. The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) can play an instrumental role in ensuring enhanced dialogue and collaboration between the three Rio Conventions, and ensuring that climate change, biodiversity, and desertification policies are fully coherent and mutually supportive. This can be done through promoting active collaboration between the two secretariats on this issue.

Adopt an ecosystem-based definition of forests

The adoption of a sound ecosystem-based definition of forests is a pre-condition for policy coherence. Without such a definition the expansion of forest cover can be detrimental to biodiversity, as it would include the replacement of biodiversity-rich ecosystems with monoculture tree plantations, including plantations of alien invasive species. Ecosystem conversion and invasive species are the two most important causes of biodiversity loss and land degradation. Forest restoration initiatives are important, but should be based on free prior and informed consent of relevant rightsholders and the active participation and collaboration of Indigenous Peoples, local communities and women. The HLPF should mandate the FAO to coordinate the elaboration of a system-wide definition of forests that qualifies forests as tree-dominated ecosystems and thus facilitates policy actions that address both deforestation and forest degradation.

Prevent financialization of forests

Reaching Target 15.2 on halting deforestation by 2020 is a litmus test for the relevance of the SDGs for sustainable development policy. There is an urgent need to restore trust in global governance as the Millennium Development Goals were only partially met due to the failure to pursue transformational change that addresses the root causes of interrelated environmental, social and economic crises. While the success of over 100 countries in halting forest cover loss so far shows that the target of zero deforestation in 2020 is achievable, halting deforestation globally will require both qualitative and quantitative measures to address unsustainable commodity chains and other drivers of forest loss like large infrastructure and mining projects.

While the efforts of business and industry to support zero deforestation by 2020 targets are laudable, for-profit actors are inherently unable to support the necessary qualitative measures, such as phasing out subsidies and other perverse incentives that stimulate mega-projects and the demand for harmful commodities like meat, soy and palm oil, in line with Aichi target 3 of the CBD. Public private partnerships and other forms of business engagement have so far failed to address implementation, legitimacy and participation gaps in sustainable development policy making and can compromise objective public governance. The HLPF should engage in an open, objective discussion about the risks of partnerships triggering undue corporate control over public policy making in the field of biodiversity and sustainable development in general.

Acknowledgements

Further reading

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