

Decolonising conservation

Why the new global biodiversity targets should embrace rights-based conservation

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From October 11 to 15, 2021 and from April 25 to May 8, 2022, the 15th Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) will be held in Kunming, China. The conference will bring together countries worldwide to agree on the global post-2020 biodiversity Framework (GBF), a new set of biodiversity targets for the following decade. These targets will be the milestones for further outcome-oriented goals for 2050. The GBF's twenty-one targets for 2030 propose to, among others, designate 30% of land areas and sea areas globally as protected areas. They intend to manage invasive alien species and considerably reduce nutrient, pesticides and plastic pollution and implement nature-based solutions to address climate change mitigation and adaptation. Moreover, they propose to reduce and redirect incentives harming biodiversity and increase international financial flows (\$200 billion yearly) to biodiversity-friendly activities in the global south.

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In the run-up to this crucial meeting, the first draft of the GBF, however, does not do justice to Indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) as there is no associated target capturing the importance of legally recognising IPLCs rights to land and other resources for conservation.

In this first draft of the GBF, Target 3 aims to protect at least 30% of the world's lands and oceans by 2030 (also known as the 30*30 target) through their designation as protected areas. However, there are no guarantees at global or local level that the rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities will be fully respected and promoted. Today, 52% of the world's protected areas are managed under the strict premise that humans need to be excluded from nature for it to thrive. This strict premise has its origins in colonialism, where colonial powers, under the justification of better religion, race or knowledge, claimed exclusionary control over ancestral lands. Today like in the past, exclusionary conservation (or fortress conservation) has dire consequences for IPLCs: being evicted from their homes and ancestral lands, criminalising their traditional livelihoods, and infringing on their human rights to life, health, water, food, a decent standard of living, and cultural rights. In other words, IPLCs will not only pay the price

for an ecological problem for which they share little responsibility but their contribution to biodiversity will also be overlooked.

Globally, 1.87 billion Indigenous people and members of local communities reside in key biodiversity hotspots, spanning 47% of the world's surface, with 363 million living in existing protected areas. Yet legal recognition of IPLCs ownership is limited to just around 10% of these areas. IPLCs have demonstrated maintaining forests, ecosystems, and biodiversity effectively through collective ownership, governance mechanisms, and traditional ecological knowledge. The Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) shows that IPLC-led territories with formally recognised collective land rights have substantially better conservation outcomes than adjacent private or state-managed protected areas, such as stopping deforestation, even under growing violent harassment.

As a result, conservation efforts worldwide must shift away from fortress conservation and toward rights-based conservation. Rights-based conservation ensures that IPLCs' rights to lands, inland waters, and resources are recognised, formalised and secured. They receive appropriate support, protection, including funding, to maintain their chief contribution to conservation. If the global biodiversity goals were to anchor rights-based approaches into conservation, this would be an important contribution to decolonising conservation. In this way, local communities would be better equipped to defend their territories against agribusiness, legal and illegal resource extraction, corrupt politicians, land speculators, and green grabbing.

In this regard, the GBF should prioritise the empowerment of Indigenous peoples and local communities, substantive participation at the local level and beyond, plus the legal recognition of their human, land, and tenure rights as the core approach driving the conservation in the GBF. Finally, the importance of advancing in the legal recognition of IPLCs rights to land and other resources for the protection of nature needs to be codified into the post-2020 global area-based objectives with a particular target attached. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations suggests including the following target (as a new Target 3 or an addition to Target 21), which should receive strong support: "By 2030, ensure the legal recognition and security of IPLCs' tenure rights over all lands, waters, and other natural resources that they customarily or otherwise own, manage, or use, with particular attention to communal rights and the tenure rights of women and youth within these groups."