



GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY FRAMEWORK STUCK IN A PARADIGM OF CATASTROPHIC GROWTH

What future for Africa?

A series on the GBF by Linzi Lewis and Mariam Mayet • OCTOBER 2022

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At the crossroads ahead of two major international environmental Conferences of the Parties (COPs) – the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United National Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)¹ – we focus on the contradictory nature of the sustainability discourse in response to multiple and converging social and ecological crises, including the climate crisis, and discuss how sustainable development, in particular, is being misused to promote unecological and unjust outcomes.

1. COP 27 of the UNFCCC will be held from 6-18 November 2022

The global community is coming together under the auspices of the CBD, after delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, to address the “silent catastrophe” of biodiversity decline (CBD, 2018). It is anticipated that the COP 15 to the CBD will meet in Montreal, Canada from 7-19 December 2022 to finalise and adopt a new global biodiversity deal – the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF).

See this [blog](#) for more.

BRIEF BACKGROUND TO THE GBF AND CBD

It was not until 2010 in Kyoto, Japan, almost two decades after the CBD was opened for signature in 1992, that Parties to the CBD drafted several quantifiable measures – the Aichi targets – to address the indirect and direct drivers of biodiversity loss. These consist of five goals and 20 targets. In the intervening years, and under the auspices of the CBD, attempts were spearheaded to support and encourage Contracting Parties to the CBD to develop national biodiversity strategies (NBSAPs) to implement the Aichi Targets. Alarming, by 2020 only six sub-targets were achieved and none of the 20 targets had been met (GB05, 2020), with little being achieved in terms of halting biodiversity loss. The GBF intends to replace the Aichi targets and set a new vision for ‘living in harmony with nature’, by 2050.

The CBD has come under widespread criticism for its vague and heavily qualified text, being fraught with loopholes, and lacking in effective priority-setting (Morgera & Tsioumani, 2011). Despite multilateral efforts, the CBD has failed to ensure political responsibility on the part of its Contracting Parties and lacks public visibility for the management of global biodiversity, compared to the UNFCCC. Currently, the GBF is far from leading the global community towards ‘transformative changes across economic, social, political, and technological factors’ that are urgently required and called for by, especially the Intergovernmental Science-

Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)² (2019) (Cléménçon, 2021).

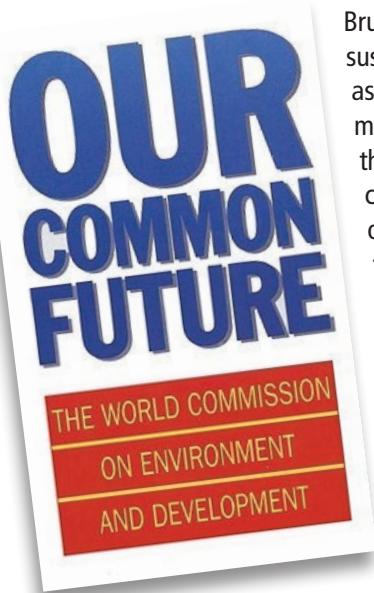
Productivity and Growth – overarching and basic premises for sustainable development?

Twenty years after the term “sustainable development” was originally coined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),³ the World Commission on Environment and Development published its report *Our Common Future*, also known as the

Brundtland Report. The Brundtland Report defined sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). Sustainable development emerged with an increasing understanding of the global nature of environmental issues. This definition

was adopted at the Rio Conference in 1992, along with the CBD, the UNFCCC, and the Convention to Combat Desertification. Integrating environmental concerns into the broader international development debate was, at the time, seen as a historic step toward elevating environmental impacts and concerns into the political domain. Unfortunately, since its inception, sustainable development has failed to go beyond rhetoric, owing to the trade-offs between protecting the planet, its people, and economic growth, that began to shape its orientation (Redcliff, 2005).

Radical concepts of ecological sustainability that crystallised in social movements of the 1970s were based on a critique of capitalism’s expansionist logic. However, this radical sustainability discourse was effectively neutralised and neoliberalism has become essential for the survival of the capitalist project (Tulloch & Neilson, 2014). Hence, sustainable development has been systematically consumed and subsumed by the neoliberal economic hegemony wielded by developed countries, under the directive of the World Trade Organisation and global financial institutions including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These constantly work towards shifting environmental and social justice imperatives to the periphery.



2. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) is an independent intergovernmental body established by States to strengthen the science-policy interface for biodiversity and ecosystem services for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, long-term human well-being and sustainable development. It was established in Panama City on 21 April, 2012 by 94 Governments. While it is not a United Nations body, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) provides secretariat services to IPBES. See further at <https://ipbes.net/>
3. The OECD is an intergovernmental organization with 38 high-income developed nations, founded in 1961 to stimulate economic progress and world trade.



Photo Credit: 22 April, 1970. Earth Day. TommyJapan1

Cost and profit, centred around Gross Domestic Product (GDP), are the most influential factors shaping the underpinnings of sustainable development, heavily dictated by capitalist global supply chains and free trade (Cléménçon, 2012; Paterson, 2000). This has led to decision-making on the African continent typically being short-term and opportunistic, inherently political, and made under conditions of extreme structural constraints (Schnaiberg & Gould, 2000). These tend towards vested economic interests and elite capture and the economic imperatives of global supply chains linked to an international capitalist and imperialist global economic order (Cléménçon, 2021).

The dominating contemporary practice of using GDP to measure economic performance is based on a faulty application of economics. (Dasgupta, 2021; Fleurbaey & Blanchet, 2013). GDP does not include the depreciation of assets, such as the degradation of the natural environment, and is a wholly inappropriate yardstick on a limited planet. Despite overwhelming evidence of the fundamental flaws of our current economic matrices, and calls for new metrics to measure sustainable development/economies, there is no light at the end of this dark tunnel.



Photo credit: UN DRR

Embedded in neo-liberal market rationality, sustainable development has thus always been biased toward economic development (Bernstein, 2013; Machin, 2019; Paterson, 2000). Consequently, this dominant paradigm has prevented the fundamental search for systemic alternatives to our prevailing, utterly unsustainable production and consumption patterns and their structural determinants (Cléménçon, 2021). Sustainable development in international policy discourse is little more than traditional economic development, used to serve various vested political and economic interests.

Regrettably, but expectedly, the Rio+ 20 Conference that took place in 2012 did not bring clarity to the economy-environment dichotomy. Some argue that the Rio+20 Conference may even have weakened environmental multilateralism, in favour of national interests and against binding global agreements (TWN, 2012). Countries did, however, initiate a process that would lead to the adoption of the Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations General Assembly on September 25, 2015.

THE SDGS – TRADE-OFFS AND CONTRADICTIONS

The SDGs are heralded as a combined universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030 (UNDP, 2020). They comprise 17 broad goals and 169 specific targets – mostly focused on human development – symbolising an attempt toward the revival of sustainable development in international political discourses. The SDGs are celebrated as being more comprehensive and holistic than their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals, by recognising the inextricable bond between poverty and unequal development and environmental concerns. However, the SDGs are situated within a bundle of systemic, paradigmatic drawbacks as there are inherent contradictions and incompatibilities between the goals. This is particularly evident between the sustainability goals of the SDGs – i.e. those goals that deal directly with environmental sustainability, namely Goals 6, 12, 13, 14, 15⁴ – and those goals that deal with increasing economic growth and industrialisation, i.e. Goals 8 and 9⁵ (Hickel, 2018).

In the case of the SDGs, the tension between growth and ecological sustainability is assumed to be reconciled and resolved through market and technological efficiency improvements. This is also the case under the UNFCCC, whereby 90% of the climate change scenarios⁶ are shockingly reliant on non-existent technologies to obtain their goals (Hickel, 2018). Hickel argues that the only way to achieve the SDGs will require the absolute decoupling of GDP from material footprints, which is simply not possible in the context of our current economic trajectory and scale. As Hickel explains, the SDGs offer no quantified target for resource efficiency and do not specify what a sustainable level of material footprint might look like.

Essentially, the SDGs, while recognising the interlinkages between human and planetary well-being, are also made up of isolated targets lacking coherency and integration (Naeem et al., 2016).

4. Goal 6: “Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.” Goal 12: “Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns,” with Target 12.2 being particularly important: “By 2030, achieve sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources.” Goal 13: “Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.” Goal 14: “Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.” Goal 15: “Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and biodiversity loss.”
5. Target 8.1: “Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7% gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries,” as measured by “annual growth rate of real GDP per capita.” Target 8.2: “Achieve higher levels of economic productivity,” as measured by “annual growth rate of real GDP per employed person.” Target 9.2 indicates that this growth should be primarily industrial: “Promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and, by 2030, significantly raise industry’s share of employment and gross domestic product in line with national circumstances, and double its share in least developed countries.”
6. 101 out of 116 rely on negative emissions, specifically a technology known as bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS), although others are included as well (for a review see Minx et al., 2018).¹⁰ BECCS requires growing large tree plantations to sequester CO₂ from the atmosphere, harvesting the biomass and burning it for energy, while capturing the CO₂ emissions from the power stations and storing the waste underground. BECCS are highly controversial and speculative.



“In fact, Goals 13, 14, and 15 are necessary preconditions for all the other Goals”

Criticisms of the SDGs are so caustic that some economists describe them as amounting to a betrayal of the world’s poorest people (The Economist, 2015). Others point to their non-binding nature; inconsistencies; difficulties to quantify, implement and monitor; and

ambiguities concerning financial resourcing (Swain, 2017). Yet the SDGs are a guiding light for development policies globally, and firmly aligned with the African Union’s (AU) Agenda 2063, comprising much of Africa’s development priorities.

THE GBF – A BALANCING ACT FOR AFRICA AND GLOBAL SOUTH

Considering the discussion above, it is no surprise that the CBD objectives of conservation, sustainable use, and equitable benefit sharing are embedded within an extractive and exploitative development relationship with the Earth. This has perpetuated and even facilitated the unsustainable use of biodiversity as a result. It does not take rocket science to understand that biodiversity decline would be an inevitable consequence from development embedded within a catastrophe paradigm and that halting biodiversity decline will not be possible within this paradigm. Unsurprisingly, current negotiations on the GBF continue to water down proposed targets to stave off biodiversity loss.

The GBF is underpinned by:

- Colonial conservation bias;
- Emphasis on the economic benefits of biodiversity;
- Deep divides and inequities between developed countries and developing countries;
- Inadequate protection of human rights, especially the rights of Indigenous Peoples, local communities (IPLCs), smallholder farmers, and producers – especially women, who are the custodians of biodiversity; and
- inadequate resourcing and teeth to enforce legal obligations.

Multilateral deliberations within the CBD continue to be on a collision course with nature and the planet. This is directing humanity towards a highly managed and techno-driven future, separating humans further from their ecological interconnectedness (Cléménçon, 2021). This is particularly worrying, considering extreme weather events being experienced across the globe,⁷ including droughts of monumental proportions.⁸ Nevertheless, we are witnessing further entrenching and lock-ins of false market-based techno-fixes.

What is needed is a radical reorienting of human activities within natural boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009), preventing further land conversion and reversing degradation.

The underlying ethos underpinning the negotiations is neo-liberal economic growth and industrialisation as the sole end goal. This is evident across the GBF's goals and targets. An example is Target 10 on agricultural production, which continues to centre on productivity. This has no place in an international Convention dealing with the sustainable use of biodiversity.

Text that has been proposed to refer to agroecology, agricultural biodiversity, and the rights of smallholder

7. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220908-2022-europe-s-hottest-summer-on-record-eu-monitor>

8. <https://multimedia.scmp.com/infographics/news/china/article/3190803/china-drought/index.html>

“We are deeply concerned that the Post-2020 GBF that will emanate from the final negotiations in Montreal in December 2022, will be weak and embedded within the same neo-liberal economic paradigm. This is already evident in the second paragraph of the draft GBF, which emphasises the value of biodiversity to GDP. The GBF will thus not only be unable to put us on a path towards ‘Living in harmony with Nature’ but may even represent a more ominous danger: restricting and foreclosing alternative possibilities.”

farmers – the stewards of agricultural biodiversity – has been met by vehement opposition and is currently bracketed, to denote that it has not been agreed to by the Parties. Additionally, and in retaliation, text has been proposed to increase agricultural intensification by scaling up biotechnology applications for agricultural productivity. This threatens to entrench an agriculture model that is the leading source of pollution and driver of biodiversity loss. The use of pesticides and inorganic fertilisers and other toxic farm chemicals are poisoning fresh water and marine ecosystems, air, and soil and remain in the environment for many generations.

The state of these negotiations clearly indicates the unlikelihood that we will depart from the current development/growth model that overwhelmingly serves local elites and international corporations, maintaining capital’s exploitation of workers, dispossession of land, and violation of human rights, along with unmitigated environmental destruction (ACB, 2020a).

Extractivism has historically and remains the dominant feature of most African economies. Despite post-colonial rhetoric, primary commodity exportation remains the main economic driver across the continent. While the African Free Trade Areas (AfCFTA) agreement, as part of the AU’s Agenda 2063: *The Africa We Want*, aims to look inwards to bolster intracontinental trade, it does so within the same industrialisation agenda driving our planetary disease and demise (ACB, 2020b). Increased foreign investments in the extractive sectors, including agricultural extractives and debt configurations, have created new mosaics of neo-colonial extractivism (Veltmeyer & Petras, 2014). Attempts to transform these sectors are less ambitious than in the post-colonial era

and are rather geared toward regulating national and regional markets to advantage extractive industries (Greco, 2020).

Reliance on extractive industries within a time of multiple and converging crises, will have massive detrimental impacts on African countries and push many Africans further into extreme poverty, considering also that Africa's debt levels have soared in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (IMF, 2020). An estimated 71 million more people are reported to have been pushed into extreme poverty in the wake of dire spill-overs of soaring food and energy prices worldwide due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (UNDP, 2022). Consequently, Africa is unable to absorb the multiple shocks it is up against nor provide the necessary social protection to its people. The pandemic, along with other diseases, highlights the state's weakening role in public health service provision due to the increased privatisation of health systems across the continent.⁹ This is also occurring in many other sectors including agriculture, inter alia agricultural extension and national research institutions are increasingly becoming privatised or under the influence of the private sector on whom funding is dependent.

Sustained interest in colonial and neo-colonial conservation projects, as well as conflict over resources to feed extractive industries, including agricultural extractivism, are mushrooming across the continent. Poor and vulnerable communities are being further marginalised for whatever profit can be squeezed out of diminishing natural and human resources. We are deeply

concerned that the GBF runs the risk of encouraging and mandating the continuation of the systemic drivers of biodiversity loss, thereby facilitating the erosion of the Earth's processes and resiliency, and entrenching human rights violations.

"The most we can aim for in the course of the final GBF negotiations is to ensure that human rights, and especially the rights of IPLCs and small-scale food producers, are safeguarded and push back against the suite of false solutions on offer."

Given the scarcity of financial resources, Africa is a taker of funds wherever they may come from, including more loans and in this regard, we are concerned that financing for biodiversity conservation and sustainable use will mean more debt for Africa. The IMF and World Bank continue to largely operate by offering emergency loans instead of meaningful debt cancellation and long overdue reparations for decades of austerity measures that has left people poorer, replacing colonialism with economic imperialism, while private lending skyrockets with impunity.

9. See https://www.acbio.org.za/sites/default/files/documents/202012/multiple-shocks-and-ebola-and-covid-pandemics-west-and-central-africa-extraction-profiteering-and_3.pdf



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Development funds are mostly directed at project-based interventions, with little long-term benefit for local people and biodiversity. It must be noted that to date, investment in biodiversity globally has almost exclusively been for conservation. Current investments in biodiversity conservation are estimated at around US\$52 billion per year, mostly coming from domestic sources, and are spent in developed countries (Van den Heuvel, 2018), converse to what is being argued at the international level, where developed countries continue

to renege on their financial responsibilities to deal with global crises. Only US\$6.2 billion comes from official development assistance – bilaterally or multilaterally. Yet, funding for the implementation of the GBF will likely dictate the trajectory of natural resource management in developing countries. Essentially, we demand that any new and/or additional funding does not create further debt, should not come from the private sector, and must be based on the principle of common but differentiated responsibility.

IMAGINING ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

The failure to find ways to incorporate the multiple values of nature and fully internalise the costs of unsustainable and inequitable resource use, production, trade, and consumption patterns into our international agreements is a massive failure that perpetuates the underlying logic driving our ecological collapse. The imbalance of the sustainability discourse, prioritising economic objectives over all else, demands escalating destruction of the planet that is already ecologically over-reached (Tulloch and Neilson, 2013).

There is a need to have broad integrated public debates on human rights, ethical and cultural dimensions of biodiversity, and sustainability. The discourse on justice and equity need greater consideration and resourcing (Leach et al., 2018). Cléménçon calls for a precautionary approach, built on ethical rather than exclusively economic considerations, as the only viable alternative to counter the dramatic decline in biodiversity (2021, p. 4). However, even this may not be enough.

Civil society and many Parties, in particular from developing countries, are deeply concerned about the state of these negotiations. Currently, there is only room to stave off the incredibly dangerous language, terminologies and false solutions that have entered the negotiations. This is highlighted by the recent informal meeting that took place behind closed doors.¹⁰ There is a desperate need for new articulations on how to sustain life on Earth for both people and the planet, which must

go beyond the current corrosive state of multilateralism permeating international environmental treaties.

Essentially, the only way around this paradox is to radically reduce resource use and therefore fundamentally alter our economic paradigm towards one based on: internalising social and ecological costs; degrowth of economies of the Global North; reparations, debt cancellations, decolonisation; and human and planetary well-being, grounded in *Ubuntu*, *Bien Vivre*, justice and equity. Yet still, these alternative notions of sustainability are being marginalised from mainstream discourse and subordinated to neoliberal ideology (Tulloch & Neilson, 2013).

As things stand, taking into account the abject failure of the past 26 COPs of the UNFCCC to bring about real solutions to accelerating climate change crises, the CBD, as a centrepiece for environmental/biodiversity multilateralism, will not be able to lead the world into a future where humans can live in harmony with the planet, as part of nature. We therefore ask, how will the CBD be able to shift focus from conserving and sustainably using biodiversity, embedded in this flawed paradigm, to supporting, guiding, and accelerating transitions to change the way we provide food, water, shelter, mobility, and other essential social services, as called for by Loorbach (2017), in an ecologically sound and socially just way now and into the future?

10. See letter from Bolivian Government https://www.vicepresidencia.gob.bo/IMG/pdf/open_letter_to_the_governments_and_peoples_of_the_world.pdf



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