

30x30 – The Good, The Bad and What Needs to Happen Next

After years of intense international negotiations and delays, the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) was finally adopted at the Biodiversity COP15 in Montreal in December, including a contentious plan to “protect” 30% of lands and seas by 2030. While the final agreement contains some hard-fought guarantees for Indigenous Peoples and other local communities, ultimately governments have missed a huge opportunity for a radical shift towards rights-based conservation.

RFUK, together with many other human rights and environmental NGOs, as well as Indigenous groups across the world, have repeatedly warned of the dangers of “30x30” for people and the planet. Dangers for tens of millions of people who live in biodiversity hotspots because a planned near doubling of the area under “protected” status without sufficient protections could lead to widespread human rights abuses, displacement, and further marginalisation of those least responsible for climate change and biodiversity loss.¹ And dangers for the planet because the target is not backed by science, and risks distracting attention away from the real drivers of the planetary crisis.

Nonetheless, 30x30 made it into the deal under Target 3.² However, thanks to the tireless efforts of Indigenous and human rights activists, some positive language on recognising and respecting their lands and internationally-protected human rights made it into the text of the target and the wider GBF.³

That said, the deal still fell short of explicitly recognising these lands as counting towards conservation targets, thereby moving at cross-purposes with the great weight of evidence that biodiversity conservation is best achieved by protecting the lands and rights of those who depend on it.⁴

Efforts now need to focus on implementation and monitoring of the target and wider framework at the country and global levels, to ensure that new “strict” protected areas become the exception, and rights-based, community-led approaches the rule.

Below is our analysis of 30x30 and related targets:

THE BAD

1. The target is unscientific, arbitrary and is itself **unlikely to reduce biodiversity loss**. There are no studies establishing that 30% specifically is what it takes to halt and reverse biodiversity loss (as opposed to the 1.5°C Paris Agreement goal for example). Worse still, there is also very little evidence that existing protected areas on the whole are effectively protecting ecosystems, and should therefore be expanded.
2. In the context where most of the targets in the GBF concerning underlying drivers of biodiversity loss are very weak, an **expansion of protected areas will likely serve a continuation of harmful practices and overconsumption elsewhere**. In addition, the inclusion of the highly opaque “nature-based solutions” in the GBF opens up the prospect of yet more biodiversity destruction and the commodification of nature in the name of offsetting.
3. **The target is also unrealistic**. It took 60 years to formally protect 17% of the planet, a period that saw a damaging focus on the quantity of protected areas rather than their quality/effective management (and which coincided with the worse period of biodiversity decline the world has ever seen). The planned doubling of this area in just seven years, especially in the absence of devoted institutional, funding and implementation mechanisms, risks a proliferation of poorly designed protected areas that could lead to further conflict and poor conservation outcomes.

4. **It remains to be clarified whether the target is to be applied globally or at the national level.** If the former, there is little indication as to how this would work (i.e. how the most important areas would be chosen and designated). If the latter, this fails to take into account how biodiversity is unevenly distributed across the world. Protecting 30% of lands in a highly industrialised country would not achieve much for biodiversity, while leaving 70% of the Amazon “unprotected” would be disastrous. The heaviest burden of effectively protecting biodiversity would undoubtedly fall on a small number of countries, almost all in the Global South.
5. It is regrettable that governments **failed to heed [Indigenous Peoples’ demand](#) for their lands and territories to be recognised as a category of conserved area in their own right**, especially given the fact that these areas are proven to be more effective and equitable than State-managed protected areas (in fact, if the CBD was simply including the contribution already made by Indigenous Peoples’ lands, the target of 30% would already be achieved and therefore be redundant).

THE GOOD

6. While there is no explicit recognition of Indigenous territories as counting toward the 30% target, **there could be scope for interpretations of the wording** that might eventually lead to that – though there would likely have to be some new guidelines and processes to clarify this, which could be a lengthy and complicated process.
7. The GBF **contains important safeguards related to the rights of Indigenous Peoples and other local communities**, including the respect of their Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), in line with all major international human rights instruments. These made it back into the heart of the text (Section C), [after having been dangerously watered down](#) and relegated to an unenforceable sub-section. If applied to the letter, it would mean that future protected areas established or managed in violation of internationally-recognised human rights would be non-compliant with the GBF.
8. **The removal from Target 3 of “strictly protected” areas** – a by-word for the militarised enforcement of conservation, responsible for the most egregious impacts on human rights and food security – is a welcome step.

...AND THE NOT SO GOOD

9. While the target includes “other effective area-based conservation measures” (OECMs) outside of traditional State-owned protected areas, which could entail community-based approaches such as Indigenous and community conserved areas (ICCAs), [the concept is still incipient and has many shortcomings](#). The inclusion of the concept in the previous Aichi targets has achieved very little, and top-down, exclusionary protected areas remain the default option in much of the Global South.
10. Overall, in the absence of bold commitments to the contrary, there is every reason to fear that **the bulk of the 30% target will be met with creating new, “business as usual” protected areas** (as opposed to genuinely rights-based, community-led approaches). These risks are amplified by the lack of time and resources devoted to meeting the target.
11. Many questions remain as to **how conservation programmes’ compliance with internationally-recognised human rights will be monitored**, by whom, and what will happen in case of non-adherence to these obligations.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

With the GBF now in force, momentum must be built around ensuring there are sufficient protections for local and indigenous communities living in and around existing and future protected areas that will form part of the 30x30 target, including via the following recommendations:

- At the global level, develop guidance for how Indigenous and other community lands can contribute towards the spatial target.
- Establish and integrate clear human rights indicators into the Implementation Mechanism and Monitoring Framework of the GBF, to further expand and reinforce the safeguards included in Section C of the Framework. Any new protected areas should only be allowed to count towards the target if they meet a set of *minimum criteria* including that:
 - the FPIC of Indigenous Peoples and other land-dependent communities has been obtained and maintained
 - all neighbouring subsistence land-users' existing land claims have been [mapped](#) and resolved and that they have adequate access to land and livelihoods, are protected from forced evictions, and are consulted in all decisions affecting them
 - appropriate management arrangements exist that ensure the meaningful participation of local communities and do not negatively impact on their livelihoods
 - effective grievance and accountability mechanisms are established to enable potentially affected communities to raise concerns and seek remedy for harms.
- Condition increased funding for protected areas on the fulfilment of these criteria and establish robust institutions to enhance donor coordination, incentivise best practice and monitor implementation whilst promoting the role of civil society in this effort.
- Carry out a thorough and transparent assessment of the human rights and social impacts of existing protected areas – and where necessary reclassify these areas to take into account the social-cultural realities in which they exist.
- At the country level, National Biodiversity Strategies and Plans of Action (NBSAPs) must also integrate all international human rights aspects. As much as possible, governments must commit to prioritising rights-based and community-led conservation approaches such as ICCAs. In this sense, [we welcome the DRC government's recent commitment to achieve the target via community forests and other rights-based models](#) (although these should not be used to justify extractive industry development elsewhere).
- Do not allow 30x30 be used as a pretext for continuing biodiversity destruction elsewhere.

Notes

¹ In much of the Global South, and especially so in the Congo Basin, western-sponsored protected areas programmes have largely followed a strict, exclusionary, “fortress conservation” approach. These protected areas are based on the removal of local people and the criminalisation of their traditional livelihoods, often by force. This has led to the widespread displacement, impoverishment and marginalisation of millions of people across the world. Heavy-handed enforcement of conservation rules is also linked to egregious human rights abuses including murder, rape and torture.

² Target 3 reads: “Ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and

services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, recognizing indigenous and traditional territories, where applicable, and integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and the ocean, while ensuring that any sustainable use, where appropriate in such areas, is fully consistent with conservation outcomes, recognizing and respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, including over their traditional territories.”

³ See section C, Paragraph 8 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, CBD/COP/15/L.25, 18 December 2022: <https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/e6d3/cd1d/daf663719a03902a9b116c34/cop-15-l-25-en.pdf>

⁴ IPBES, “Summary for policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services”, <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>; RRI, *Rights-Based Conservation: The path to preserving Earth’s biological and cultural diversity?*, November 2020: <https://rightsandresources.org/publication/rights-based-conservation/>