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The global biodiversity framework needs a robust action agenda

Bending the curve of biodiversity loss is a key priority for humanity and requires urgent action[1]. The rapid loss of biological diversity threatens human lives, livelihoods and well-being globally, and is reinforcing and being reinforced by climate breakdown[2]. In December 2022, the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) will be held in Montreal. It is essential that an ambitious, specific and measurable global biodiversity framework is agreed at COP15. However, governments alone are unlikely to reverse negative trends in biodiversity. We suggest that a biodiversity action agenda that mobilizes nature recovery actions from across society — including businesses, investors, civil society groups and local communities — should be included as a complement to governmental efforts.

If governments can agree on a strong framework, an action agenda can create productive links between multilateral and transnational actions: for example, by leveraging capacities from multiple actors, implementing goals, demonstrating solutions and spurring national governments towards greater ambition[3,4]. However, if governments fail to agree on an ambitious framework — or the subsequent implementation of the agreement suffers from political backlash or a dismantling of national biodiversity policies — the action agenda can help to sustain action and build momentum. To some extent, this scenario played out when the US government rolled back climate policies and announced its exit from the Paris Agreement in 2017. US states, cities and businesses responded through a range of efforts as part of the 'America's Pledge', which would substantially lower greenhouse gas emissions even without federal action[5].

A first step to the creation of a biodiversity action agenda was taken in 2018 through the 'Sharm El-Sheikh to Kunming Action Agenda for Nature and People', which has to date generated over 400 commitments but is due to end with COP15. We argue that this action agenda should continue beyond COP15, and should be enhanced to better integrate both positive and negative lessons learned from past experiences with other UN action agendas (such as from the 'Global Climate Action Agenda', which records commitments by more than 30,000 actors[6,7], or UN partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[8], which involve more than 6,700 multi-stakeholder partnerships[9]).

Past experiences have shown that short-lived action agendas are unlikely to generate catalytic effects, such as growing participation in biodiversity action or stimulating the wider application of successful approaches. Moreover, a successful action agenda that spurs societal actors to contribute to biodiversity goals needs to perform several functions over time, including facilitating the organization of events and interfaces between public and private actors; recording and evaluating actions to track collective progress; and defining strategic priorities for subsequent mobilization efforts. In the past, action agendas related to sustainable development or climate action (including partnerships for sustainable development, partnerships for the SDGs and the 'Lima–Paris Action Agenda') have been administered by single UN secretariats or conference organizers that often have lacked capacities and resources to successfully perform all such functions. Action agendas also often have narrowly targeted audiences, which has led to an overwhelming focus on large businesses and investors in the Global North and a failure to include vulnerable communities or actors based in the Global South. Finally, without well-defined accountability and transparency mechanisms, action agendas can provide a stage for commitments that are unsubstantiated or simply represent business as usual. Such greenwashing not only risks undermining the action agenda, but also can erode societal engagement with environmental challenges.

We therefore call on parties to the CBD to include in the framework at COP15 an action agenda that follows the following principles:

- 'Complementary': the agenda should work alongside governments to accelerate the implementation of internationally agreed biodiversity, sustainability and climate goals.
- 'Catalytic': the agenda should inspire societal (nonstate and subnational) actors to take action, and facilitate interfaces between them and governments to reach higher ambition through long-term mobilization and engagement.
- 'Collaborative': the agenda should involve other UN conventions, scientists and existing initiatives that engage societal actors in the design and implementation of the agenda, including the sharing of mobilization, recording and evaluative functions.
- 'Comprehensive': the agenda should mobilize actions from a diversity of actors, including nongovernmental organizations, and marginalized and Indigenous peoples (particularly in the Global South), while facilitating learning across governance levels and regions.
- 'Credible': the agenda should facilitate and require regular reporting to track and evaluate actions to ensure individual and collective progress, and to exclude underperformers.

These '5Cs' should characterize an action agenda that generates enthusiasm for a diverse array of actors to take biodiversity action. By working alongside other UN action agendas, such a biodiversity action agenda could stimulate synergies and co-benefits with climate and human health, while avoiding potential trade-offs (such as large-scale bioenergy and afforestation projects that could provide climate benefits but risk negative effects on biodiversity)[10].

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.