

A transition perspective on the Convention on Biological Diversity:

Towards transformation?

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I. Introduction

1. Biodiversity and ecosystem diversity are the foundation of human welfare, well-being, and health. If it is not preserved and valued there is no perspective of future development at all. Up to now, global development has been achieved mainly at the expense of biodiversity and ecosystem health and diversity. Our economic growth has been made possible by the depletion of ecological and natural capital and by producing waste and emissions. Since the 1970's society has become aware of the negative effects of prioritizing economic growth at the expense of the environment, leading to the development of environmental policies and sciences, and the introduction of Sustainable Development at the global scale. It is in this context that the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) developed as a global effort to commit governments to take action to conserve and preserve nature and biodiversity and to address the negative effects of economic, population, and consumption growth.

2. The CBD, and its associated Protocols and conservation approaches, have been generally successful in generating discussions and leading new actions committing to conserve and protect ecosystems across the globe. This has included putting biodiversity and ecosystem services in political agendas through intermediaries, like the alliance of local authorities and city networks and national government focal points to stimulate environmental awareness, and policies countering environmental degradation and resource depletion. Despite these positive effects the global state of biodiversity has continued to deteriorate with pockets of successful practices in restoring ecosystems, in natural systems, as well as in urban environments emerging across the globe. Most positive effects of the CBD and related efforts seem to have been offset by growing consumption of land and natural resources and use of (fossil) resources.

3. As we are now approaching a new ten-year strategic plan for the CBD, it is time to, more fundamentally, reflect on the effectiveness and approaches followed over the past decades and explore future pathways. This short note takes a transitions research perspective to explore strategies to help accelerate and guide sustainability transitions in economic sectors to complement the work on sustainable use, conservation, benefit sharing and mainstreaming of biodiversity under the Convention.

4. Over the past decades, a strong institutional and scientific regime has been built up around biodiversity and ecosystems. A similar parallel could be seen with the policy process dealing with climate change. This means a regime with its own administrative structures, scientific processes and understanding, a shared discourse, and shared practices. The essence of this biodiversity regime has been to signal, understand, and fight against, the negative symptoms of unsustainable development.

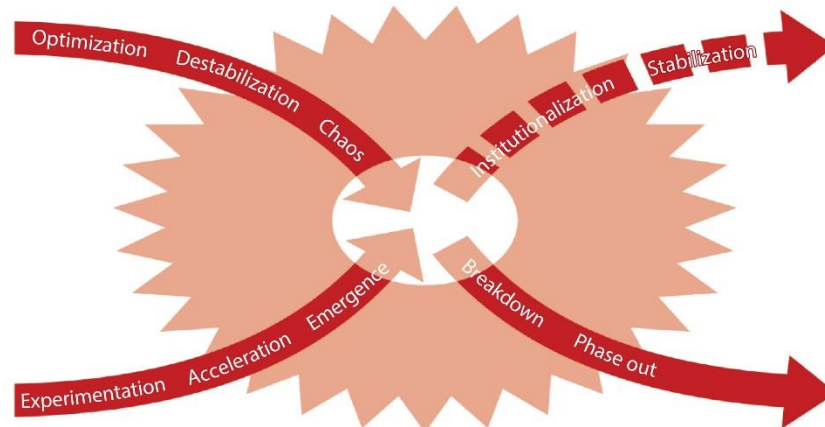
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The regime is scientifically supported by quantitative and qualitative environmental sciences that model, map, and explore ecosystem dynamics, seek understanding of ecological impacts, and developing policy recommendations and supporting national strategies. The primary focus of governance efforts based upon these are institutional work and consensus building.

5. The science is clear. Systemic changes are necessary and policy ambitions agreed upon so far, let alone concrete commitments and actions, are not enough. Ecological and resilience research shows that there is a risk of ecological boundaries being crossed potentially resulting in tipping points in climate and ecosystems that might lead to an acceleration of environmental disruption. Unmitigated economic and societal pressures on our environment make such tipping points more likely to occur. These pressures are deeply embedded in societal structures mainly in consumption and production patterns in developed societies as well as socio-economic and cultural dynamics in developing countries. The interlinkages and interdependencies that are interwoven with economic and governance complexities make biodiversity conservation and sustainable use a persistent and complex global challenge. Along these lines, research suggests that efforts to merely remediate and soften the negative impacts are insufficient to fundamentally reduce those risks, let alone to improve the state of the environment and also create opportunities for societal wellbeing in the long-term.

6. To do this requires addressing the root causes that have led to the ‘symptoms of unsustainability’: shift to new ways of production and consumption and reorient (economic) development pathways towards an economy within ecological boundaries while meeting social and ecological development goals. Sustainability transitions research has emerged over the past fifteen years as a new hybrid field of inter- and transdisciplinary research that studies the dynamics of non-linear change in complex societal systems.

7. According to this view it is critical to approach biodiversity and environmental protection indirectly by focusing on sustainability transitions in biodiversity relevant economic sectors. The argument is that we need to achieve such transitions in the societal systems that determine how natural resources are used and how the use impacts biodiversity and ecosystems, for example in fisheries, forestry, energy, food, mobility, health, and textile industry including clothing.



8. Such transitions are complex, uncertain and cannot be managed or predicted in a traditional way.

As transitions imply breakdown and destabilization while, at the same time, future pathways and outcomes are still unclear, there is a lot of resistance and uncertainty involved. Especially since transitions do not automatically lead to desired outcomes. **They thus require new forms of governance to help guide and accelerate such emerging transitions towards desired future states.** We can, however, argue that the conditions for transitions are favorable in the coming decade:

- **Global societal pressures for change are higher than ever**, including global institutional pressures and commitments, awareness, ecological crises and geopolitical concerns.
- **Industry and sector structures associated with fossil and linear economies are showing internal tensions and crises**, such as, for example, the energy sector, mobility sector and agriculture.
- There is a **global diffusion of alternative social and technological innovations**, such as new practices and lifestyles, renewable technologies, platform economies, visions of sustainable futures, and cooperative models.

9. Transition governance is the approach developed to influence the speed and direction of emerging transitions. It acknowledges that regular policies and incumbent procedures and actors are, first and foremost, seeking incremental improvement rather than structural systemic change. **Transition governance is therefore about developing transformative coalitions through selective participation of change agents in such a way that these are empowered to more strategically guide and accelerate desired sustainability transitions.** To this end transition governance processes focus on developing shared narratives about radical systemic change including future images, goals and transition pathways as a starting point for short-term actions. So, rather than to develop policy to implement solutions, transition governance is an approach for (national) governments to facilitate emerging sustainability transitions in their societies by developing the collective strategic capacities for transformation and empower those involved to act more effectively towards transitions in their own daily context.

10. Sustainability transitions research has so far mainly worked within national systems and on regional or urban scales. **The models and empirical basis for transition governance suggest that it is possible for policy-makers to use 'shadow governance', e.g. developing transformative networks and innovations anticipating windows of opportunity, to help reorient development pathways and accelerate the diffusion of transformation.** If we link this to the CBD work, we argue that transitions governance could help to complement the global governance efforts with national and regional transition movements and explore how they could work in a co-evolutionary way towards achieving desired sustainability transitions. If we apply this perspective to biodiversity transitions, we could make the following suggestions:

A. Towards national biodiversity transition strategies

11. So far the focus of the Convention process in supporting the Parties has been on mapping biodiversity pressures and developing national biodiversity strategies, and capacity development tools and guidelines to alleviate these and to address the underlying causes. The proposed transition perspective suggest that these efforts might be complemented with a process that focuses more on bottom-up and action oriented approach tailored to specific cultures and contexts. To this end we could envisage a **framework for supporting representatives to develop transition networks and agenda's in**

the national contexts in such a way that they identify transformative visions and goals that *close the ambition gap* while simultaneously developing the capacities and concrete actions that *close the implementation gap*.

12. A transition governance approach engaging a global network of transition researchers along with a global academic community on biodiversity and ecosystems would roughly suggest a process along the following lines to be delivered to national representatives. This would be adapted to each particular country:

- Representatives open to exploring ways to guide and accelerate sustainability transitions identify with transition researchers most relevant sectors and transition potentials.
- An interdisciplinary team of scientists from global and ideally the national and local context, map these sectors in terms of their persistencies, current regime dynamics, transition potentials and relevant (local and global niches).
- A local group of civil servants from relevant departments and potentially a number of relevant societal actors receive a week training/capacity building on transition management processes and identify potential change agents and relevant participants for the transition process.
- These form a gender balanced transition team that is supported by transition action researchers (either physically or by video-conferencing) to organize a series of transition arena processes going through the process of participatory reflection, upon desired and potential sustainability transitions, and concrete actions.
- The transition team with the support of the scientific network synthesizes the outcomes in national transition strategies. They are further enriched with ideas, knowledge and insights from other countries and examples from other regions, and integrated into national strategies and a global biodiversity transition roadmap.

13. The advantages of such a transdisciplinary process is that capacity building is combined with direct knowledge implementation and relevant change agents in national economies are empowered to take innovative actions. In that way the specific outcomes of a transition strategy document could be seen as secondary to actually speeding up sustainability transitions. A second strong advantage is that such national strategies could provide the building blocks for a global strategy, while at the same time offering very concrete prospects for sustainable economic development within national contexts. Rather than having the biodiversity agenda conflicting with economic growth, this strategy seeks to find sustainable economic development models for biodiversity relevant to sensitive sectors. The involvement of entrepreneurial civil servants from related departments in the process could also help to build cross governmental support.

B. An enriched narrative and shared vision

14. Biodiversity is a complex concept. This could be influencing the development of policies which to a large extent have mainly been the responsibility of institutional representatives and academics. A societal transition is a broad shift in collective cultures, structures and practices. It would be worthwhile to explore how to engage a broader audience and work towards empowering and mobilizing other actors like business, civil society, and intermediaries to work towards desired goals. To create such broad ownership means opening up the narrative and moving beyond biodiversity and nature to also touch upon issues that affect people's daily lives. In other words, connecting biodiversity and

biodiversity restoration to people's lives via showing all the widespread and unrecognised ecosystem services like health benefits, medicinal applications, employment opportunities and support of local economies.

15. A new narrative is emerging: the concept of ecosystem services has momentum and connects biodiversity and human activities. It is however a rather anthropocentric narrative with focus on economical applications and implications often leaving out the more qualitative connections to nature. But this synergy with ecosystem services and natural capital thinking certainly offers huge potential to make visible and tangible the value of preserving and investing in biodiversity and ecosystem diversity.

C. A transformational strategy

16. A broader strategy needs to be developed complementing conservation approaches with transition governance, thus positioning and addressing biodiversity within broader more sector or region specific transition strategies. This should build upon the narrative developed in GBO-3 and the conclusions of GBO-4 and based upon combining processes of conservation, transformation and regeneration:

a. Conserve what is still there and work even more aggressively and effectively on a global and national scales for this.

b. Transform societal regimes going from unsustainable practices towards operating within ecological boundaries (not only in the sectors agriculture, fisheries and forestry but also in, for example, energy, mobility, water management, healthcare, construction etc.).

c. Regenerate / restore degraded ecosystems, unsustainably developed areas, develop regenerative business models, and redevelop the human connection to nature.

D. Back casting scenarios and normative transition pathways

17. There is a growing interest in expanding the scenario methodologies and foci within the Convention process, through use of methodologies like backcasting and involving other scientific disciplines. To help support and orient transformative actions, transition scenarios imply an articulated and shared understanding of desired futures and identifying what is needed to get there. Transition scenarios are an instrument for building shared normative agendas and coalitions using the approach of future visioning and back casting. Selected actors are facilitated to formulate shared guiding principles for desired transitions that are translated in a number of future images representing a diversity of solution strategies. These future images are then translated into transition pathways with intermediate goals and necessary (resources and institutional) conditions and actions through back casting.

E. Engage with natural capital

18. Based on the concept of natural capital and related approaches the aim could be to facilitate national governments towards making a natural capital assessment and account and, based on this, formulate goals to work towards a 'sustainable balance sheet'. Rather than presenting a static picture one could think about a 'dynamic balance sheet' in which economies in balance with nature generate as much ecological value as is used (but not necessarily create closed systems). For these synergies with the natural capital coalition, the accountancy sector, and NGOs working on conservation and restoration, engagement and social innovation are needed.

F. Support national and regional transition capacity

19. Develop a strategy to support governments in accelerating and guiding transitions in their own economies by providing assessments and analytical tools, governance instruments, and capacities and learning exchange platforms. The complementary strength that could be contributed through DRIFT and the broader sustainability transitions research network, for example and more widely with transitions research, to component of the strategy is thru a good understanding of and ample experience with working within national governance and urban governance contexts. Adding the more regional and national ‘bottom-up’ perspective could be a way to operationalize a dual-track approach: intra- and inter-governmental.

G. Make biodiversity a higher societal and political priority

20. Develop a more public engagement not through communication and iconic animals but through ‘nature’ in a way that it mobilises public voices and makes them part of the more political dimension of transitions. This will require strengthened political commitments to take decisions and fast track opportunities that could affect incumbent interests and positions. This could be carried out through partners in different ways, such as by building the case, gathering data and evidence (of good and bad); using citizen science for example by creating an app; developing public campaigns; crowdfunding conservation in local communities; petitioning against identified malpractices; boycotts of certain business etc. This would be outside the work of the Convention, for non-governmental organizations to consider.