

What the **Global Biodiversity Framework** says about agriculture



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In December 2022, in Montreal (Canada), 196 States signed a Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), pledging to take urgent action to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. No doubt a historic achievement for the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, but is the framework really fit for purpose?

Here, we take a closer look at the targets in the GBF, and what they mean for agriculture - what's good, what's bad, what's missing, and how can movements and NGOs use it?

The good

Addressing the effects of agriculture on biodiversity, [Target 10](#) of the Framework ensures that "agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries and forestry are managed sustainably" in an effort to conserve and restore biodiversity while "maintaining nature's contributions to people, including ecosystem functions and services." This should be held as the standard for practices that may affect biodiversity.

The Target also acknowledges that efforts to achieve this should include "a substantial increase of the application of biodiversity-friendly practices" such as agroecology and "other innovative approaches". We'll come back to these "innovative approaches" in the Bad section.

Pollution by pesticides being especially relevant to agriculture, Target 7 presents an opportunity to get real results by outlining more concrete indicators. The Framework aims to reduce the risks and impact of pollution by 2030, "to levels not harmful to biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services". These efforts include reducing excess nutrients lost to

the environment and the overall risk from pesticides and highly hazardous chemicals by at least half.

The bad

Unfortunately, the specifications of biodiversity-friendly practices mentioned in Target 10 also suggest the use of sustainable intensification and, vaguely put, "other innovative approaches".

"Sustainable intensification", or the disproven idea of increasing yields without adverse environmental impact nor the cultivation of more land, presents an especially harmful threat to biodiversity. Proponents have called for a broad set of practices and techniques, which compromise biodiversity and the well-being of surrounding ecosystems for the sake of productivity and lack consideration for their impacts on people and communities.

These practices can include reducing tillage through the use of genetically modified (GM) crops, which actually require intensive use of pesticides, or even reducing land use by moving cows to mega-stables, which can lead to more agrocommodity plantations for animal feed. By using the "sustainable intensification" argument, corporate lobbyists have therefore been able to further promote biotechnology, fertilisers and pesticides.

The term also contributes to the false notion that we do not already have enough land or resources to feed the world - an idea used by the agribusiness industry to gain access to more land. It contradicts sharply with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's findings that there are enough resources to feed the world's population now and in 2050, if we first redistribute food and reduce loss and waste, rather than increase production.

“Other innovative approaches” also points largely to biotech proposals. Synthetic biology and other extreme forms of GMOs are amongst the first to be qualified as such approaches. However, many have high risks, both for biodiversity and human health. Gene drives, for example, alter the genetic makeup of species by passing down transgenic genes to offspring, which can threaten entire ecosystems.

Corporate coopting

Listing agroecology as an “innovative approach” alongside biotech solutions rather than the important ecologically and socially sound alternatives to industrial agriculture could open the term up to cooptation by powerful corporate players. Movements and organisations everywhere should remain vigilant and push back against this to ensure that the transformative potential of agroecology isn’t undermined.

Finally, the references to “ecosystem services” throughout the report limit the value of nature to its economic contributions and may enable the financialisation of nature.

The missing

Before the start of the GBF process, the [IPBES global assessment](#) report warned that agriculture was the main culprit for biodiversity loss and that real transformative change would need to happen in this sector in order to prevent biodiversity collapse. The GBF, however, does not include specific mandates related

to agriculture that would guarantee implementation of the goals set out in the Target.

Report after report has shown how monoculture plantations, GMOs, and pesticides undermine biodiversity. Yet, the GBF does not place restrictions on these practices, on the contrary, it promotes them. Therefore, the necessary systemic change for the agriculture sector has not been an outcome of COP15, where the agribusiness and biotech industries had [significant influence](#). Restrictions and regulations on these industries need to become a central part of new rounds of policymaking.

Using the GBF to win battles at the national and local level

Resisting the biotech and agribusiness industry remains an uphill battle. However, Target 10 provides criteria against which to test their claims: is the sector becoming more sustainable? Do their actions lead to conserving and restoring biodiversity?

Movements and organisations should demand that governments take these key questions as a guiding principle, and monitor whether the actions of the industry detract from them, especially in instances where “sustainable intensification” is being promoted.

Finally, movements and organisations should also call on their governments to implement policies that reflect the inclusion of agroecology in the GBF.

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