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**TRANSFORMATIVE
BIODIVERSITY POLICY
AT A STALEMATE:
CONSENSUS ON "AGE OLD"
PROBLEMS, COHERENT
PATHWAY FORWARD NEEDED**

Transformative biodiversity policy at a stalemate: Consensus on “age old” problems, coherent pathway forward needed

Biodiversity Capital Research Collective

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The Centre for Climate Justice (CCJ) at the University of British Columbia advances the urgent social, political, and economic changes necessary to address the climate crisis.

Climate and Community Institute (CCI) is a progressive climate policy think tank developing cutting-edge research at the climate and inequality nexus.

Third World Network (TWN) is an independent non-profit international research and advocacy organization involved in bringing about a greater articulation of the needs, aspirations, and rights of the peoples in the South and in promoting just, equitable, and ecological development.

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Summary

In 2024 we released the findings of a report, [“Exporting Extinction: How the international financial system constrains biodiverse futures.”](#) Through the study of five highly-biodiverse countries, this research shows how the international financial and monetary system pressures governments to maintain and expand sectors known to cause biodiversity loss—industrial agriculture, forestry, oil and gas, and mining. Study results point to the critical need to address the political economic rules that constrain government action on biodiversity loss, particularly for states that must play by these rules but have little power to influence them.

The report did not issue directive recommendations. Instead we convened five focus groups with biodiversity policy and movement experts to better understand practitioners’ perspectives on the barriers to and opportunities for systemic international political-economic change. Focus group participants: 1) agreed with the report analysis, with some caveats; 2) offered a variety of recommendations towards those ends; 3) noted that these recommendations were not new, but, importantly, rarely appear in biodiversity policy debates; 4) pointed to power asymmetries and market ideologies as key barriers to explain why long-standing recommendations have not been advanced; and, 5) articulated tensions across their organizational and personal theories of change.

Key insights from the focus groups:

- Participants expressed a clear appetite for structural approaches to changing the political-economic “rules of the game” in order to advance action on biodiversity loss.
- With participants pointing to the “age-old” nature of the report insights and to some of the recommendations generated in the focus group, it is apparent that participants do not see a lack of knowledge or ideas as the primary barrier.
- Yet the conversations across the focus groups reveal that despite agreement with the report analysis, there is far from a shared understanding of the implications of that analysis, never mind a wider shared theory of change.
- Perhaps more importantly, there is no set of agreed upon strategies or directions for change, nor coherence about the leverage points.
- Participants displayed little unity on where to focus energy: groups and organizations appeared to be going in their own direction, preventing collective power from emerging.
- This suggests a kind of stalemate—that there isn’t enough power or consensus to advance many of the recommendations suggested.

The focus groups reveal the need for more strategic discussion among stakeholders, who seem to agree about the nature of the problem—pointing to the political-economic ‘rules of the game’—but do not yet hold a shared strategy for reform.

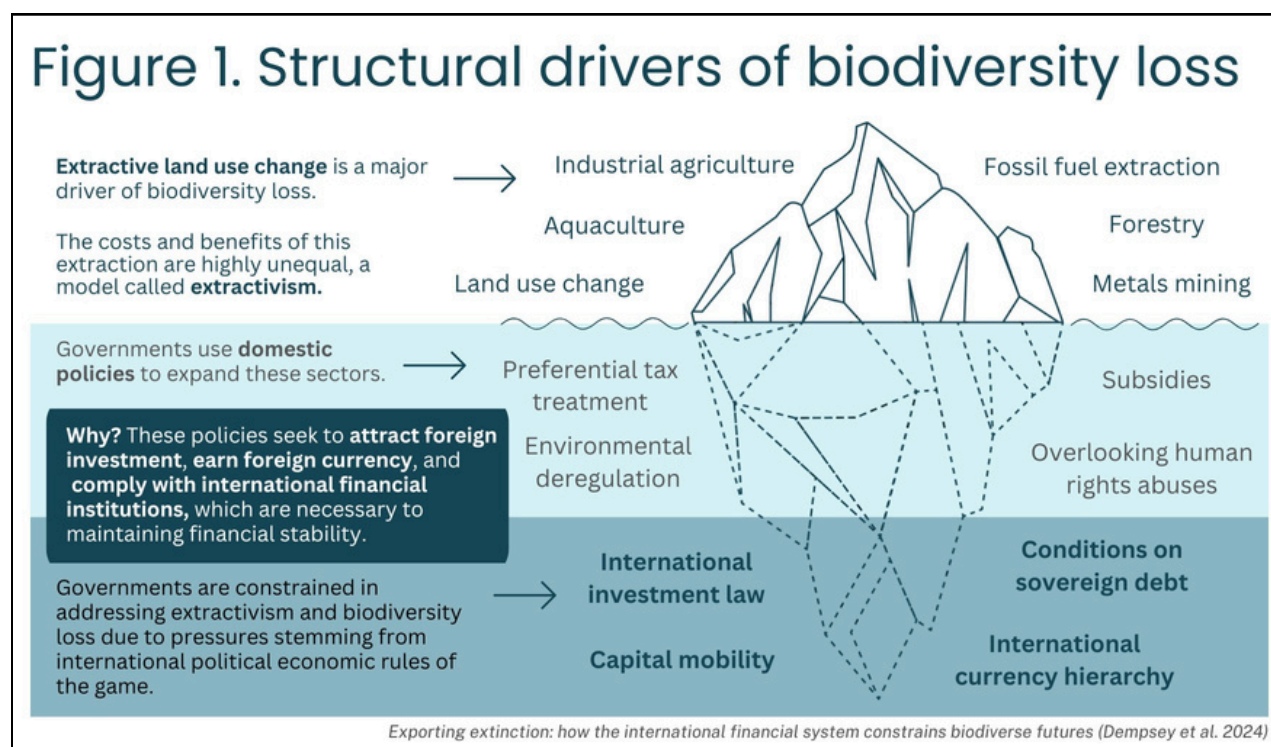
International financial architecture (IFA) reform is increasingly on the agenda of multilateral discussions, including the 2024 [Summit for the Future](#) and the [G20 meetings in Rio de Janeiro](#). (The international financial architecture is defined by the [United Nations](#) as “the governance arrangements that safeguard the stability and function of the global monetary and financial systems.”) Yet the trajectory of that reform is unclear, the status quo is maintained by powerful forces, and IFA discussions remain largely separate from issues of biodiversity and rights.

We are also living in a moment characterized by massive geopolitical economic and environmental uncertainty—from trade wars, climate whiplash, to increasing nationalism and far-right electoral wins. With these uncertainties come new challenges but also new opportunities. While there will be an understandable tendency for policy experts and civil society to defend existing institutional forms and policy regimes, it will be paramount to foreground progressive multilateral alternatives to the status quo.

There is a clear opportunity for the communities focused on rights, biodiversity, forests, and land to formulate collective strategies to advance structural political-economic change in line with their mandates. Alongside these fast-changing political dynamics and uncertainties, pathways for intervention are emerging around the IFA and beyond, but they require more organization, coordination, and focus if those changes are to be in line with diverse ecosystems and the realization of land, Indigenous, and human rights.

Introduction

In May 2024 The Centre for Climate Justice released a new study with our partners at The Climate and Community Institute and Third World Network, titled “[Exporting Extinction: How the International Financial System Constrains Biodiverse Futures.](#)” Through the study of five highly-biodiverse countries, our research found that while many governments continue to support extractive sector expansion with domestic policies, governments’ policy autonomy to choose differently is highly constrained by their position within the international financial and monetary system, under conditions of financial and political subordination (see figure 1, below).



The report did not make directive recommendations. Instead, we carried out a second phase of the research process to engage actors in international biodiversity policy spaces. In a series of focus groups, we asked participants a set of questions to glean their reactions to our research findings and to better understand practitioners’ perspectives on the barriers to and opportunities for changing this persistent and unequal system.

We conducted five focus groups engaging a total of 21 key actors from different areas of expertise and institutional bases, from both Global North and Global South, including from civil society, academia, national governments, international financial institutions (IFIs), and philanthropy. All five focus groups took place on Zoom and lasted approximately 75 minutes each. The focus groups were facilitated by an external facilitator; a summary of our findings are outlined below.

Focus group findings

1. Feedback on “Exporting Extinction”

Participants began the session with a prompt to reflect on the report. For the most part, participants in all focus groups communicated agreement with the report findings, with concern that these issues are not receiving more attention: “I think it's a great analysis of how profound the system is really pushing countries towards resource extraction and how important this is for biodiversity.” Many participants emphasized that while these dynamics were well-known to them, they appreciated the clear presentation and the direct link to biodiversity. There was interest in further exploration of why these issues remain so under-explained or un-addressed in biodiversity policies and debates. Over and over we heard that the primary challenge is an age old question: what can be done about these persistent dynamics?

Participants also provided constructive critical feedback, which was also not consistent or agreed upon. Two participants reflected concern that the report went too easy on domestic actors, while others appreciated the focus on structural international pressures. Several participants wanted to see more emphasis on Global North and Global South elite consumption, which they see as driving imports and thus resource extraction. One participant from an International Financial Institution (IFI) pushed the group to think about how the Global North is implicated in the findings:

“The ways of living in the Global North are fully dependent on these processes. And so just as [another focus group participant] said, that actually the financial instability comes also from bucking that trend, and that if we were to push against that, then...not only is the Global South going to face financial instability, but also the Global North if the rules were changed.”

One academic participant reflected that the report could have emphasized the role of multinational companies and global value chains:

“One aspect that really stood out to me...is the fact that it's not just financial subordination that is relevant, but quite often also subordination of Global South economies within global value chains. I think you have the nuts and bolts of that in the actual content of your findings ... but it needs to be made clearer that it's not always financial actors and financial incentives. It's also the actions and financing flows of big powerful multinational companies, a lot of whom exist in very powerful concentrated oligopolies, particularly when we're talking about major commodity markets. So I think the global value chain perspective is really important. And that's because it's not only the need to get dollar financing in to alleviate their external vulnerability, which is a very powerful driver ... But it's also the fact that a lot of these Global South economies will be competing for a limited share of external demand from the Global North in terms of inward foreign direct investment flows. ...And what is a Global South economy offering to that multinational? It's cheap labor. It's a really low tax environment, low regulatory environment. So this is all connected to the factors you've already drawn out. But it's not necessarily coming from a global or financial sector. It's also coming from the multinational kind of globalized offshoring dynamics that have really taken hold over the past 40 years.”

Another participant was looking for more analysis on how IFIs like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have changed in the past decades; another wanted to see further historical elaboration in the cases. Also focusing on the case studies, two participants wanted to see an analysis of counter-examples, citing Costa Rica and Belize, wondering if those are outliers or signs of a new economic model.

Participants also reflected on the iceberg diagram (figure 1), which was appreciated for its representation of complex issues, and became a source of commentary and debate on the root or underlying causes. For example, two participants suggested a need for another layer to the iceberg at the bottom to show worldviews and belief systems, which for several participants are the primary underlying drivers. Another participant wanted to see more emphasis on the role of economic growth and job-creation in the diagram.

2. Key recommendations or opportunities

Next, participants were asked to use a Miro board (a digital collaboration platform) to suggest policy recommendations based on the report's analysis. Reviewing and reflecting on others' suggestions, participants acknowledged that many of their recommendations were not new and had been circulating for decades. It was also noted that these ideas were, as yet, marginal in biodiversity policy debates.

In the figure below, we synthesized and sorted each recommendation based on whether it was included in biodiversity policy debates always, sometimes, rarely, or never. Included in figure 2 are the most common ideas that were put forth. The figure illustrates how the majority of policy interventions suggested by respondents are rarely or never included in biodiversity policy debates.

Figure 2. Extent to which recommendations from participants appear in biodiversity policy debates



3. Primary barriers to achieving these recommendations

Following the brainstorm, we asked participants to identify the primary barriers to achieving any one of these recommendations. Given that many of the recommendations to address the underlying drivers of biodiversity loss were not new, power asymmetries were identified as a key barrier to explain why very good—and often longstanding—proposals have not been implemented. Participants pointed to, for example, trade imbalances, the consumption power of the Global North, and the barriers to addressing capital mobility given the rules set by IFIs. Others acknowledged the power imbalances within international systems, with some countries—Northern ones—yielding much more power than others within these institutions.

Another key barrier repeatedly raised was the world views and economic ideologies that prop up existing systems (namely neoclassical economics and ideologies of Western control and supremacy). An academic participant who engages with IFIs shared that in their experience:

“[People in financial institutions] genuinely believe in the power of markets to solve all of these issues, and just have such a low base level of knowledge on these structural drivers. So their base case hypothesis of why extractivism persists in these countries—it's what you said in the paper—the assumption of corruption and the rest of those micro dynamics and really ignoring the structural drivers.”

To that end, an IFI participant noted the importance of ideas and worldviews in institutions:

“The doctrines—and I would even say in some cases, the dogmas that dominate the approaches that staff in these institutions work with—are super important because they say a lot of things that for them are obvious, but implicitly, behind those ideas, there are worldviews about what's the role of the state, what's the role of money in the economy, and so on. And these things are usually completely implicit and naturalized... And there are, of course, very powerful interests, vested interests behind these worldviews, which unfortunately, a lot of practitioners are not even aware of.”

These engrained worldviews can produce tensions when engaging with finance and business interests on these issues. Participants acknowledged that on the one hand, there are opportunities to push these actors to prioritize biodiversity. But on the other hand, there are risks that these actors might then drive the agenda towards a profit- and market-oriented approach, given the underlying assumptions they bring to the table.

Participants also presented conflicting ideas about the power of states and opportunities at the national level. While some characterized states as incapacitated and lacking autonomy, others identified governments as the problem and as unwilling to implement the identified recommendations. Ultimately, even as participants acknowledged the limitations of existing interventions, they also lamented a lack of concrete alternative pathways. One civil society participant described their job as approaching governments “to try to convince them to do things.” They wondered that if this model is giving governments things they want to retain power and legitimacy, “how can they obtain them through some other alternative pathway?” Another IFI participant noted the need not only for alternatives, but also proof of concept. The same participant mentioned some unlikely biodiversity policies like “job guarantees and universal basic income.” These approaches were “kind of unthinkable for a long time,” but with increasing evidence, are gaining “much more momentum.” Even to the extent that alternatives do exist, one participant from civil society identified that we lack coherent, unifying narratives to support movement building. Relatedly, this participant argued: “We have ceded the space for movement building and organizing transnational, transversal, internationalist, anti capitalist [movements] to a professional managerial class.”

Analysis: from stalemate to work-arounds to political opportunities

The focus group participants conveyed general consensus in favour of the argument of the report (though some participants wished for an expanded focus, see above). Participants expressed clear appetite for structural approaches to changing the “rules of the game,” but there was very little consensus or coherence on if or what the opportunities are for that change. While some participants expressed disappointment with existing, mainstream approaches, others wondered whether some of the efforts are incrementally bringing about more transformative change. Many participants in the focus groups also conveyed a kind of fatigue and doubt about how to effect structural change. In light of this feeling of stalemate—that there isn’t enough power or consensus to implement most of the ideas suggested—many groups were going in their own direction, with very few organizations coordinating to take on similar strategies or trying to gear up towards something that would combine the efforts of various government, NGO, academic, and IFI actors.

One sees this lack of consensus in the variety of recommendations participants offered around debt for nature swaps—some felt it had promise and was a step towards transformative change, for others it was an example of a reformist rather than transformist policy, and for others it exemplified how biodiversity policy is increasingly dominated by the financial sector. This reflects different ways participants understood underlying or root drivers but also how different actors and institutions understand and negotiate the power asymmetries of the contemporary moment as they attempt to implement changes. Those differences appear in a variety of analyses of the role of the financial sector. Quite a few participants pointed to the financial sector itself as a key barrier for change, as exemplified in the following quote from a focus group participant:

“Sovereign debt forgiveness is a really good example of that—there are a huge, powerful group of financial actors who stand to lose a lot of money from sovereign debt forgiveness, as we’ve seen in Argentina; these voices are very powerful in shaping the actual direction of a lot of the conditionalities that end up shaping extractivism, as you mentioned in your report.”

But if some participants blamed the power of the financial sector and its massive influence in many countries, other participants pointed to strategies that leverage the power of the financial sector to push governments:

“Political will is just so lacking in so many governments... So it's a real problem to work out: what is that lever that we can get governments to step up and actually do what's needed and the private finance lever is one we could mobilize.”

This latter quote suggests that some organizations are trying to find “workarounds” to state inaction. For example, one participant noted a need for more emphasis on trade issues and biodiversity, but concluded that it was “a geopolitical nightmare of an issue to get agreement on. I can't see much compromise or scope for finding ways in the middle.” However, all of the recommendations in Figure 2 require extensive state action and cooperation. The question of how to move states on these fundamental political-economic issues was far from resolved in the focus groups; this is a clear priority for strategizing.

While some viewed engagement with big finance as opportunities to push governments, others saw the “massive risks,” “because then it’s the private sector setting the terms.” Those risks were reiterated by many others: one participant from civil society said that there was good intention in bringing finance and corporate actors to biodiversity meetings, to “convince them to adapt the fiscal and economic policies to the needs of biodiversity.” But, they went on, “what we’ve actually seen is because these individuals and these actors are so powerful, they [have] now very much influenced the biodiversity debate. ... And they bring with them a very clear, profit-oriented, market-oriented agenda that is then integrated into the whole biodiversity debate.” In one focus group this led into a conversation about the difference between mainstreaming biodiversity—which for some participants means bringing biodiversity into the existing economic model—and alignment, which means that economic policies need to be aligned with ambitions of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Opportunities to break the stalemate?

As figure 2 demonstrates, many of the ideas suggested as possible policies or recommendations rarely appear on the agenda in biodiversity politics. After a process of generating recommendations together in the focus group, one participant reflected—similar to many others—that many of the proposals are “not new.” Rather, they went on to say:

“What struck me really is that a lot of these ideas are actually addressing the centers of power. They’re not necessarily in the biodiversity space... they are at the trade arena, or at the IFIs, for example. And it points to the need for us as actors to really do this cross-constituency and cross- and multi-sectoral approach to the challenges that we face in the biodiversity sphere, meaning that we need to reach out beyond our immediate circle, to activists, to civil society, to academics operating in these different spaces so that we can synergize and work together on these issues.”

This was a point reflected by another participant, who suggested that “actively trying to push biodiversity into that [international financial reform] conversation helps,” as does the flip side, “bringing that conversation into the biodiversity space.”

Towards that objective, an IFI participant encouraged biodiversity policy advocates and professionals to engage at the spring IMF meetings in Washington DC and with the executive level of the IMF. This same participant pointed out that while engaging international structures are “super important,” it is particular countries (namely G7 countries) that give those structures power, drawing attention to the need to “change the domestic political landscape [...] to build political coalitions to support these kinds of agendas.” This points to the pressing need for civil society to connect the dots between the international and national, particularly to build coalitional power that can push the world’s richest countries to advance structural change agendas. Advancing internationalism is therefore a key challenge for movements in G7 countries.

Many reiterated the importance of advancing and normalizing structural economic analyses like the report in biodiversity policy spaces, but also the need to build more consensus and alignment across the various analyses. One participant concluded that changing global political economic “rules of the game” will require mass mobilizations of people, not only policy wonks. Such mobilizations rely on formulating a clear “meta narrative,” as they described it, one able to help everyday people make sense of the intersecting crises, from wars, to authoritarian right wing populism, to unaffordable costs of living and extractivism over the long

duree. Yet the conversations across the focus groups reveal that despite agreement with the report analysis, there is far from a shared understanding of the implications of that analysis, never mind a wider shared framework. Perhaps more importantly, there is no set of agreed upon strategies for change, nor coherence about the leverage points. These missing pieces suggest clear opportunities for the wider community of actors and institutions, within biodiversity but also clearly beyond.

Finally, we also heard the importance of being ready for political opportunities when they appear. Repeating the common dictum across the focus groups, another participant stated that the report identifies an "age-old" set of macro-economic problems that "we've been struggling with...for my entire career." But, what is new, they said, is that "there's so much conversation right now at the global level about the reform of the international financial architecture," going as far to say that at present there is "more conversation than I've seen in the rest of my career." With crises "coming at us fast and furious," including but not only the debt crisis, they emphasized the importance "to be ready to take advantage of constellations and crises" as they appear.

Conclusion

Participants in the focus groups agreed that we need to change the political economic rules of the game in order to implement CBD decisions and the KMGBF. Participants also suggested that the main barrier to achieving these goals was not a knowledge problem (e.g. we don't know what to do), but rather one rooted in power asymmetries, pointing to the importance of strategy and organizing. Despite these coherences, participants displayed little consensus on where to focus energy, a lack of coordination preventing collective power from emerging. This suggests a clear opportunity to formulate more coherent, collective strategies to advance structural change, ones able to find pathways through the tensions. Are there leverage points or paths that can combine efforts to push states to advance the recommendations outlined in figure 2? What might those be?

International financial architecture (IFA) reform is increasingly on the agenda of multilateral discussions, including the 2024 [Summit for the Future](#) and the [G20 meetings in Rio de Janeiro](#). Many of the recommendations in figure 2 are entwined with IFA reform agendas, such as sovereign debt restructuring. But the trajectory of that reform is unclear, the status quo is maintained by powerful forces, and those discussions remain largely separate from issues of biodiversity and land rights. There is a clear opportunity for the communities focused on rights, biodiversity, land, and forests to engage, intervene and advance IFA reform in line with their mandates.

Because IFA-related issues such as debt, tax, trade and investment agreements, and credit ratings are so infrequently on the table in biodiversity policy debates, we will not be able to move through this disagreement on strategy without more opportunities for open debate among stakeholders. In that vein, we extend thanks to our participants for joining these focus groups and openly sharing their perspectives about these issues. We believe that more spaces for conversation across sectors, institutions, and ideologies are needed to advance our collective understanding of the drivers of biodiversity loss and strategies to build power to address them.