

SISTERS IN DIALOGUE

ON THE ENVIRONMENT

PROTECTING BIODIVERSITY: IMPLEMENTING OUTCOMES OF COP15

By **Sister Maamalifar M. Poreku, MSOLA**

COORDINATOR, SOWING HOPE FOR THE PLANET (UISG)



Sister Maamalifar Poreku is a Missionary Sister of Our Lady of Africa. She was born in Ghana, attended university in the UK, and holds a Masters of Arts in Peace Studies & International Relations from Hekima University College in Nairobi, Kenya. Sister Maamalifar has extensive teaching experience in Ghana, Kenya and Malawi, as well as a background of involvement in grassroots environmental advocacy. Since March 2023, Sister Maamalifar coordinates Sowing Hope for the Planet, the environmental network of the International Union of Superiors General¹ (UISG).

CARING FOR PEOPLE AND OUR PLANET

Biodiversity enables humans to live well, in balance and harmony with Mother Earth. It is the pillar that supports all systems of life. Today we appear to be alive, but in fact we are partly dead: Mother Earth is struggling because of the injuries inflicted upon her by human greed and by our lack of care. May the all-loving and all-seeing, who knows the intentions and actions of each one of us, empower us with a clear vision to make the outcomes of COP15 a reality for those most affected by the consequences of biodiversity loss.

THE GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY FRAMEWORK

COP15 – the 15th Conference of the Parties² to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, which took place in Montreal, Canada in December 2022 – was a crucial moment in advancing the protection and restoration of our planet's biodiversity. This conference culminated with the adoption of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework³ (GBF), which committed 196 nations to dealing with the growing, global loss of terrestrial and marine biodiversity, and highlighted a series of key goals.

However, the GBF lacks legal basis for implementation, assessment, management and funding. There is no clause in this document that guarantees the use of traditional knowledge, which is of great concern to Catholic networks advocating alongside indigenous communities worldwide. In addition, it is not a binding instrument, thus leaving room for governments to take backward steps – which are occurring every day, all around the world.

Goal A focuses on the maintenance of integrity, connectivity and resilience within all ecosystems, and on increasing the area of natural ecosystems by 2050. However, we witness contrary actions taking place. Sowing Hope networks tell us that **many families have recently been moved – not once, but twice – from their land in Uganda, to lay pipelines for the extraction of fossil fuels.** This has a negative impact on biodiversity, devastates nature, and causes human suffering. Trees, bushes and shrubs will be cut down across a vast area to lay these pipelines.

This will deprive many animals and other species of their habitats, potentially leading to their extinction. In addition, the polluting effects of fossil fuel extraction will cripple both human life and nature.

Goal B concerns the sustainable use and management of biodiversity, and the contribution of nature to people. In spite of this, we witness actions that violate, devalue and damage ecosystems. The Adorers of the Blood of Christ, **a religious congregation in the US, recently lost a court case against the Williams Companies, which seized their cornfield to expand the Transco natural gas pipeline.** They launched a second case for damages, which they won, but this will not mitigate the negative effects of fossil fuels on the environment.

Goal C addresses the equitable sharing of monetary and non-monetary gains from the use of genetic resources, digital information and traditional knowledge. One example that demonstrates how this is not being actioned, however, is the **violent eviction of a whole community of Maasai families from the Ngorongoro National Park, their ancestral land in Tanzania, to make way for tourism and trophy hunting.** The Maasai are part of the ecosystem in Ngorongoro, as they co-inhabit the land with animals and other species. This eviction violates their human rights, with no respect for their dignity or traditional knowledge in dealing with the ecosystem.

In another example: **Eduardo Mendua was tragically murdered last year, soon after COP15. Eduardo was an Ecuadorian indigenous leader, advocating against the government's expansion of fossil fuel extraction on indigenous land in the Amazon rainforest.** The government has not spoken about his murder, but activists and human rights organisations know that he was killed for resisting the exploitation of the forest for capitalist gain.

Another example: **genetically modified seeds are constantly transported from the Global North to the Global South, thereby imposing a new food system which has devastating effects on the livelihoods of local people.** This practice does not take into account the traditional knowledge related to genetic resources or differences in ecosystems. Instead, it kills local vegetation, eliminates local seed stocks, and impoverishes people who are already vulnerable.

Goal D finally, guarantees all Parties equitable access to the necessary means to implement the Global Biodiversity Framework. But our networks have so many questions on this goal. How can this be ensured? How can we guarantee that funding is delivered with no strings attached, that it does not determine the further exploitation of nature, that it's free of corruption? How will the trust fund work, if countries do not trust one another? How will the Framework function, without being a legally binding agreement? How can it be implemented without any strategic plan or procedure for monitoring and evaluation? Who will ensure that voices from the margins are taken into consideration?

SISTERS FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

The last question is a key concern of the environmental statement recently published by UISG. On the 3rd of November 2022, we launched Sisters for the Environment: Integrating Voices from the Margins⁴. The essence of this statement is rooted in the worldwide experiences of advocacy and direct community service that have coalesced around Sowing Hope for the Planet since it was launched in 2018.

This document includes the good practices and experiences of Sisters advocating for the protection of biodiversity, and for the rights of those most affected by its devastating loss. Since the 1990s, for example, the Missionary Sisters of Saint Columban have **advocated for and with indigenous Subaanen people in the Philippines:** Sister Anne Carbon⁵ shared her experience of raising awareness on the consequences of mining, and on the importance of maintaining a spiritual connection with the land.

Sister Jyotisha Kannamkal⁶ shared her own story from India, describing her community's **commitment to recording positive actions in favour of Mother Earth.** Actions undertaken by her community, she told us, include “growing kitchen gardens, planting trees, farming organically, conserving water, saving electricity by installing LED bulbs, using solar energy, differentiating waste, reducing food waste, composting, recycling, rejecting single-use plastic, and educating children through the Green School Movement. I see these – she says – as small drops of grace in the vast ocean of our care for creation.”

RADICAL SOLUTIONS TO RADICAL CHALLENGES

In order to tackle the root causes of problems that are generated by human activity and by our systems of profit, we need to imagine a transition across all areas of our lives. **As Catholic Sisters, this is how we approach the implementation of COP15: as a holistic challenge to strengthen our care for Creation.**

We need to promote access to appropriate financial resources for all – especially for stakeholders in the Global South and for faith-based organizations, whose efforts are often hampered by financial constraints. Structures must be put in place to prevent corruption, the diversion of implementation funds to other operations, or even the use of financing to protect biodiversity for activities that ultimately exploit nature.

We must encourage global leaders to think outside the box when it comes to financial commitments and lifestyle changes, and seek radical solutions to radical challenges. While I applaud the results of COP15, I can't help wondering how much could have been achieved by now, if the funds spent on 15 biodiversity conferences had been spent on implementing programmes to protect and restore biodiversity on the ground.

IMPLEMENTING OUTCOMES OF COP15

Firstly, then, the implementation of COP15 requires a **global ban on all activities that undermine the safeguarding and restoration of biodiversity** – for example cutting down trees, mining, burning charcoal, burning bush or forest, and pollution of any kind.

Each regional intergovernmental community – for example the EU, ECOWAS, EAC, MERCOSUR, OAS, and so forth – should establish a **strategic plan on how to implement the outcomes of COP15**. This plan should include procedures for implementation, a process of accountability, and a scheme for monitoring and evaluation.

Then, national governments should be given guidelines to establish their own strategic plans. At the national level, these plans should **involve local governments and traditional rulers, including indigenous chiefs**, making them responsible and accountable for the implementation of COP15.

Crucially, we must **rebuild trust among all actors**, creating a new social contract and finding ways to negotiate a viable compromise between different stakeholders, to balance the interests of each group in the most productive and peaceful way possible. There is a need for democratic governance and strong civil society in this process, in order to achieve successful outcomes that will make new policies sustainable for the future.

Education is also an important means to increase knowledge of ecosystems and biodiversity. **Integrating biodiversity loss and climate change in educational programmes** can improve the outlook and attitude of students regarding nature, natural resources, and the importance of appreciating and protecting Creation.

Finally, I believe it is vital to **think and speak in a positive way**. Discussions of environmental issues often consist of warnings and alarming statistics. This, of course, reflects the reality that our world is experiencing due to climate change and large-scale extinctions. However, portraying problems without offering solutions can lead to paralysis and hopelessness in policymakers and the public. We must counterbalance bad news with optimism and with the suggestion of practical ways forward.

As Sisters, we are committed to seeking a way forward with all partners of good will. **May COP15 be the first step on a long and fruitful journey towards the restoration, protection and care of our common home.**

1. <https://www.uisg.org/en/>
2. <https://www.unep.org/un-biodiversity-conference-cop-15>
3. <https://www.cbd.int/gbf/>
4. https://www.sowinghopefortheplanet.org/files/shftp_uploads/2023/1/Sisters_for_the_Environment_EN_compressed.pdf
5. <https://advocacy.uisg.org/sister-anne-carbon/>
6. <https://advocacy.uisg.org/india/>