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Federal Agency for Nature Conservation

Implementing GBF Target 16: Addressing biodiversity impacts of food consumption

POLICY BRIEF #04/2024

Key messages

- Prevailing consumption patterns accelerate nature degradation worldwide, endangering the basis of human **health and well-being**.
- Especially **agri-food systems significantly contribute to global biodiversity loss,** mainly through unsustainable agricultural practices. 83% of the global agricultural area is occupied to produce animal-based food, yet provides under 20% of global calories.
- Target 16 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework aims at a **transformative change of consumption systems** to reduce their global footprint. This brief lists recommendations for its implementation, focusing on food.
- Governments are called to establish supportive **policy, legislative or regulatory frameworks that address the whole food system**, including measures that promote a shift towards **sustainable production practices**. Actions should also enhance the capacity of developing countries to implement these frameworks.
- Policy action should **promote a shift towards sustainable and plant-based diets**, also generating human health benefits. Improving access to sustainable alternatives, incentive systems and voluntary measures are key for a socially acceptable transition.
- Action to **tackle food waste across value chains** is also urgently required, since around one third of global food production is either lost or wasted.
- To enable sustainable consumption choices, all relevant actors require a **better understanding of the interlinkages between consumption and biodiversity**. Governments are called to make these links more visible through a range of information and capacity building instruments.

Keywords: Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, Sustainable Consumption, Sustainable Food Systems, Transformative Change

1 How are biodiversity and consumption connected?

1.1 Biodiversity and ecosystem services are at risk from consumption patterns

Biodiversity and ecosystem services are vital for human and planetary health, for our societies and our economies (IPBES, 2019). Yet we face an unprecedented loss of global biodiversity, with the nature and climate crises mutually reinforcing each other (Pörtner et al., 2021). Biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse are ranked among the three most severe risks of the coming decade (World Economic Forum, 2024). Globally, around 55% of the GDP (equivalent to about US$44 trillion) is moderately or highly dependent on nature (World Economic Forum, 2020). This means that the loss of biological diversity will lead to significant costs for the global economy, with political inaction further aggravating risks and costs considerably (Dasgupta, 2021).

Prevailing consumption patterns, including overconsumption linked with unsustainable production practices, have accelerated global biodiversity loss in the past 50 years (IPBES, 2019). Manifestations of such loss include, for example, the conversion of biodiverse ecosystems (e.g. large-scale deforestation for new production sites) as well as the overexploitation and pollution of land and seas (Kliem et al., 2019).

There is **urgent need to transform consumption and production systems** to protect, sustainably use and restore biodiversity. Such a transformation should address all consumption domains, including food (see below) but also mobility, housing, leisure etc. Much of the work to date has focused on the production and resource efficiency side. Broader efforts are required to trigger systemic change in demand as well as supply, also tackling waste generation, addressing what is driving consumption and aiming to significantly reduce overconsumption.

It is important to acknowledge that consumption is unequal globally, with some countries and income groups responsible for larger per capita footprints (Wilting et al., 2017). Through global supply chains, the consumption of goods in the Global North is often linked to severe nature degradation in the countries of origin, typically in the Global South (Kliem et al., 2019). Moreover, nature degradation driven by domestic or global consumption often impair the supply of key ecosystem services, ranging from the decline of globally important carbon sinks to the loss of regulating and supporting services that local resilience and livelihoods depend on.

Fig. 1: Agricultural expansion is often linked to the destruction and conversion of biodiversity-rich ecosystems. Here: deforestation for new oil palm plantations in Borneo, Malaysia. (Credit: iStock/Alexpunker)

1.2 Food systems and diets have the largest impact

Within the interrelated consumption domains which compose our lifestyles, **food consumption is the most important driver of biodiversity loss** in many countries and regions (Wilting et al., 2017). Food systems currently cause 80% of deforestation, 70% of biodiversity loss on land and 50% in freshwater, and generate around one third of all global greenhouse gas emissions (Almond et al., 2020; Crippa et al., 2021). These negative impacts are largely located at the level of agricultural production. Reasons are twofold. Firstly, multiple factors are driving changes in consumption and dietary habits, leading to changes in land use that cause the direct destruction of natural ecosystems. Secondly, intensification of production practices leads to the loss of structurally diverse, extensive agricultural landscapes previously characterised by rich biodiversity, as well as a reduced diversity of genetic resources and often water overuse and pollution.

Overconsumption in general, including the **growing consumption of meat and other animal proteins** in an increasing number of countries **has a major biodiversity impact**. Agriculture occupies around half of the Earth's habitable land (FAO, 2022). Of that, livestock and its feedstock occupy 83%, but only to produce less than 20% of the world's supply of calories (Poore & Nemecek, 2018). The expansion of some feed crops can be associated to the destruction of critical habitats and biodiversity hotspots around the world. Tackling these challenges should consider the national circumstances and needs of countries, particularly developing ones.

Promoting healthy, plant-based diets is a way to address these issues. It is estimated that a global shift towards plant-based diets could reduce land use for food production by three quarters (Poore & Nemecek, 2018). Diet shifts are also necessary to address health concerns and human wellbeing.

Besides the environmental impacts of intensive agricultural production systems, they can also exacerbate negative social impacts. Extreme cases might include large scale land acquisition, displacement of smallholders, exploitation of workers and human right violations. This social dimension of globalized consumption systems also deserves urgent attention.

1.3 Reducing food waste is essential for sustainable consumption

Not only what we eat has a great impact, but also what we do not eat: Food waste is a major problem, both from an ethical perspective, in a world where millions of people still experience hunger, as well as from an economic perspective and due to its environmental footprint which is unequally distributed globally. According to the UNEP (2021) Food Waste Index Report, each year **17% of food production goes to waste in retail, households and the food service industry,** in addition to the estimated 14% of harvested food that is lost along the supply chain before it reaches the retail stage (FAO, 2019). This means that nearly a third of global food, and consequently also the land, freshwater and other resources required for its production are wasted.

To tackle this issue, possible measures include establishing national strategies for food loss and waste reduction, launching awareness raising campaigns in order to shift consumers' social norms and promoting better management to reduce food waste in retail, restaurants and along value chains. To minimize post-harvest food losses, it is also key to provide affordable access to credit and technologies for developing countries to develop required infrastructure, e.g. cooling and storage solutions.

The global community has committed itself to reducing food waste by half by 2030, as one component on the target on sustainable consumption (Target 16, see box below) of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), and in line with Sustainable Development Goal 12.3.

2 Which measures are needed for biodiversity-friendly and equitable food consumption?

2.1 Boost policy integration for sustainable consumption

Like many GBF targets, Target 16 goes beyond 'conventional' nature conservation measures, instead aiming at a **transformative change** of prevailing consumption systems. Its implementation requires an integrated whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach.

- The objective to reduce the global environmental footprint of consumption and overconsumption in an equitable manner needs to be **integrated into the updated National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) as well as all relevant sectoral and cross-sectoral plans and policies** (Lopez & Teufel, 2022; WWF et al., 2024). This includes mainstreaming biodiversity into sustainable consumption strategies, economic development plans, bio-economy plans, circular economy strategies and sustainable public procurement criteria, among many others (see also GBF target 14). The needed global environmental footprint reductions should be measured against quantified footprint targets in order to produce meaningful assessments and define strategies.
- Governments need to set up adequate and ambitious national and global mechanisms that ensure leadership at the highest political level and **drive commitment and action for biodiversity across key sectors of the economy and society.** Implementation must involve all relevant ministries, including Agriculture, Finance, Environment, Planning, Education and Health. Additionally, support to enhance the capacity of developing countries to implement these transformative changes needs to also be considered.
- Policy measures should be developed **with the participation of local stakeholders, including cooperatives, smallholders and indigenous peoples and local communities**, to ensure effectiveness, social equity and a just transition.
- Progress should be measured through suitable and meaningful **national indicators**, building on the GBF monitoring framework in synergy with existing indicators such as the SDGs.
- To significantly reduce the overconsumption of land, water, energy and raw materials and substantially reducing waste generation, **sufficiency** should be promoted as a core principle guiding transformative policies (Berger et al., 2024). Promoting sufficiency-oriented lifestyles will stimulate solutions that tackle multiple environmental impacts at once, substantially reducing the risk of shifting consumption impacts from one environmental issue to another.

GBF Target 16: Enable sustainable consumption choices to reduce waste and overconsumption

Ensure that people are encouraged and enabled to make **sustainable consumption choices** including by establishing **supportive policy, legislative or regulatory frameworks**, improving **education** and access to relevant and accurate **information** and **alternatives**, and by 2030, **reduce the global footprint of consumption in an equitable manner**, including through **halving global food waste**, significantly **reducing overconsumption** and substantially **reducing waste generation**, in order for all people to live well in harmony with Mother Earth.

2.2 Reform land and sea use policy to promote sustainable food systems

To reduce the biodiversity impacts of food consumption, policy action that addresses the **whole food system, including the production side**, is crucial. Governments should **make use of all available policy instruments, including regulatory action,** to promote sustainable practices in agriculture, fishery, aquaculture etc.

Moreover, they should provide affordable access to credit and technologies and knowledge transfer, particularly for developing countries, to enable the implementation of sustainable and resilient food systems, including infrastructure to minimize post-harvest food waste.

Synergies can be pursued with the following other GBF targets (excerpts from the GBF):

- Address land and sea use change by ensuring that all areas are under **participatory**, **integrated and biodiversity inclusive spatial planning** and/or effective management processes, while respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities (GBF Target 1).
- Ensure that the **use, harvesting and trade of wild species is sustainable, safe and legal**, preventing overexploitation and minimizing impacts on non-target species (GBF Target 5)
- **Reduce pollution** to levels that are not harmful to biodiversity or human health, including by reducing excess **nutrients** and the overall risks from **pesticides and highly hazardous chemicals** by at least half and working towards **eliminating plastic pollution** (GBF Target 7).
- Ensure that **areas under agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries and forestry are managed sustainably**, including through a substantial increase of the application of biodiversity friendly practices, such as **agroecological** approaches (GBF Target 10).
- Ensure the full **integration of biodiversity** into policies, regulations, planning and development processes etc. within and across **all levels of government and across all sectors**, in particular those with significant impacts on biodiversity (GBF Target 14).
- Encourage and enable **businesses and financial institutions** to regularly monitor, assess and transparently disclose their biodiversity-related risks and negative impacts along their operations, supply and value chains, and provide information needed to consumers to promote sustainable consumption patterns, in order to **progressively reduce negative impacts on biodiversity** (GBF Target 15).
- Identify by 2025, and **eliminate, phase out or reform incentives, including subsidies,** harmful for biodiversity and scale up positive incentives for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity (GBF Target 18).

How can legislation tackle forest loss? The EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR)

The new **Regulation (EU) 2023/1115 on deforestation-free products (EUDR)** aims to combat deforestation and degradation driven by land conversion for the production of **cattle, wood, cocoa, soy, palm oil, coffee, rubber** and their derived products. Under the Regulation, any operator or trader who places these commodities on the EU market, or exports from it, must be able **to prove that the products do not originate from land deforested or subject to forest degradation** after 31 December 2020, and that they are compliant with the relevant domestic legislation of the country exporting the products.

Meeting the requirements of this regulation will call for the targeted value chains in developing countries to implement full traceability regimes. Among other things, the success of this due diligence requirement will demand widespread adoption by different stakeholders, notably including small farmers and intermediaries.

2.3 Encourage sustainable diet shifts

A crucial lever to curb biodiversity impacts of food consumption is **promoting a shift towards low-meat or plant-based diets** that are both healthy and ecologically sustainable (Galli et al., 2024; Poore & Nemecek, 2018; Springmann et al., 2018; Teufel et al., 2021), focussing on high per capita meat consumption countries first. Depending on the social and cultural context, this can require shifting complex value frames. Therefore, governments should focus on **incentive systems and voluntary measures** to ensure a socially and culturally acceptable transition. Moreover, national circumstances of developing countries need to be taken into account when designing and implementing policy measures.

- **Enhance the availability of plant-based and sustainably produced options**: Adjusting and reviewing procurement practices and menu offerings in public canteens (including schools, hospitals and penitentiaries) can be a powerful tool, e.g. through modified procurement guidelines. Moreover, choice editing approaches can ensure more positive and sustainable outcomes, e.g. retailers do not stock product associated with severe environmental impacts but instead offer sustainably produced alternatives. Governments have a key role to play in making sustainable consumption choices the default option.
- **Align National Dietary Guidelines with biodiversity targets**: Recent studies found that providing clearer advice in dietary guidelines on limiting the consumption of animal-based food, in particular beef and dairy, would have the greatest potential for increasing their environmental sustainability (Martini et al., 2021; Springmann et al., 2020).
- **Promote new dietary aspirations such as training programs for chefs and kitchen staff**: This can encourage the development of attractive plant-based and sustainably produced alternatives, as well as help reduce food waste (Kliem et al., 2019).
- **Establish Ecological Price Incentives**: Ensure affordability and accessibility of plant-based and sustainably produced food options. Such financial incentives can effectively steer consumer behavior, if designed carefully and combined with non-market-based measures (Funke et al., 2022). Price reductions for healthy and sustainable food also contribute to social equity.

Fig. 2: Plant-based diets provide benefits to human health and the environment (Credit: iStock/vaaseenaa)

- **Reduce harmful subsidies**: Agricultural subsidies that support environmentally harmful practices in the meat and dairy industry should be phased out and eliminated in a just, fair, effective and equitable way (in line with GBF Target 18, see above). For example, the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU allocates 80% of its budget to emission-intensive animal products (Kortleve et al., 2024; Springmann, 2022). Re-designing these subsidies holds a great potential to make not only food production more sustainable, but also allow food prices to better reflect true costs.

2.4 Improve access to information

To make sustainable consumption choices, a basic **understanding of the local, regional and global consequences of consumption practices** is required. Governments can make the interlinkages between consumption and lifestyles,

pollution, food waste, biodiversity loss and social impacts more visible (Teufel et al., 2021).

- **Improve education**: Integrate information about the links between biodiversity and food consumption into school curricula and education, to raise awareness for tomorrow's decision makers and encourage sustainable lifestyles. Address latent values that exist in the society towards nature as those can be strong levers for transformation (Chan et al., 2020). This will underpin needed policy frameworks and new business models.
- **Enhance accessibility of existing information tools**: Environmental impacts of food should be easily and intuitively discernible. Help consumers to identify reliable ecolabels when available or certificates based on meaningful biodiversity criteria, targeting also domestic consumption. Where available on the market, ecolabels can help guide consumers towards products that are produced with less impact on nature. Support the integration of biodiversity criteria into existing reliable labeling schemes (see also UN Trade and Development's BioTrade Principles and Criteria) or, where not yet available, develop new high-quality labels.
- **Build capacities for informed decision-making among producers and businesses**, helping them to understand and effectively reduce biodiversity impacts and prevent food waste at all stages of the value chain and ensure fair sharing of benefits among producers and other supply chain actors. Producers should make a sustainable livelihood for themselves and family.
- **Build awareness among policy-makers** from various ministries and agencies that are connected to develop and implement agri-food-related policies. Ensure that policy action addresses the diverse factors fueling demand, to effectively promote behavior changes.

How to foster global collaboration and exchange? The One Planet network

The One Planet network is a **global community of practitioners, policymakers and experts** that work towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 12: "Ensuring sustainable patterns of consumption and production".

Within the One Planet network's Programme on Consumer Information, the **Working Group "Biodiversity & Consumption"** strives to help reduce the negative impacts of consumption on nature, by activating stakeholders, strengthening collaboration and providing many ready-to-use information materials.

Find out more: https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/programmes/consumer-information-scp/biodiversity

3. Conclusions

Implementing Target 16 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework requires a **transformative change** of the way we produce and consume. The target commits governments to establish **supportive policy, legislative or regulatory frameworks**, as well as improving education and access to information and alternatives.

In the context of **food systems**, which drive biodiversity loss globally, policy action needs to effectively promote **sustainable production practices** (through regulatory instruments where necessary, and access to finance/credit and insurance when possible). Moreover, policies around choice editing should edit in more sustainable consumption options and edit out more problematic ones. Policy action needs to support **shifts towards plant-based diets and more sustainably produced options**, food waste reduction, as well as incentivizing and nudging society towards adopting nature-friendly lifestyles.

An **integrated and holistic approach** is key to achieve systemic changes, while considering the different capacities of countries, including developing ones, to implement these changes.

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