

Office for Systemic Justice
Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph of Canada

Protecting Biological Diversity Requires a Just Transformation

By Sue Wilson, CSJ

In December 2022, the representatives of 188 governments from around the world as well as environmental NGOs, Indigenous groups, women's groups, labour, scientists, academics, and faith groups gathered in Montreal. On behalf of the CSJ Federation, I was an official delegate at the meeting.



The focus of the meeting was the protection of biodiversity. On the surface, the **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)** is about protecting global biodiversity through four headline goals: conservation, sustainability, equity, and adequate means of implementation (financing). Twenty-three targets then spell out how the goals will be achieved.

Dig a little deeper into these goals and targets, and it's clear that what's needed is a transformation of humanity's relationships with earth and all earth's inhabitants. It is, at heart,

a spiritual and ethical task. Indeed, as the CBD meeting progressed, it seemed as if the encyclical, *Laudato Si*, had been written for a moment such as this.

Consider three themes which are integral to both *Laudato Si'* and **Target 3**, the headline target from the CBD.

“Everything is closely related, and today's problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis” (*Laudato Si'*, 137).

Interconnection

Target 3 calls for the conservation and management of at least 30% of each nation's lands, inland waters, coastal areas, and oceans by 2030. But, even with the stipulation that these protected areas must be significant for biodiversity and eco-system wellbeing, such areas are insufficient in themselves.

All earth's inhabitants “are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion.” (*Laudato Si'*, 89)

Ecological corridors are essential to create connections between protected areas. These networks protect genetic diversity, promote the restoration of habitats, support the migration of species, and increase the viability of protected species.

And so, *connectivity* becomes the litmus test for deciding which areas to protect. We must follow the path which earth's many species traverse. And stronger connectivity demands stronger international relationships because it requires cooperation across national borders.

But the *lens of interconnection* takes us deeper still. At the CBD, many Indigenous groups and local communities raised concerns about the 30% conservation target. Their reasoning surfaced deeply-embedded patterns of colonialism: Some nations might use the 30% target as an excuse to remove Indigenous peoples from some of their lands, as has happened in the past through, for example, the establishment of national parks.

Dialogue

Dialogue was critical for making headway. It was deeply significant that, in a world where *extreme views are becoming more prevalent, polarizing, and problematic,*

“There is an urgent need for politics and economics to enter into a frank dialogue in the service of life” (Laudato Si’, 189)

nations and civil society groups gathered *to create common ground through dialogue*. While one can certainly make the case that the targets achieved in the global framework don’t go far enough, they do represent significant steps forward in the protection of biodiversity. And the dialogue itself matters.

The concerns raised by Indigenous peoples, about the 30% conservation target and the potential for its abuse through the removal of Indigenous peoples from their land, also put a spotlight on the critical role Indigenous peoples have played in the protection of biodiversity. According to the United Nations, *80% of the world’s biodiversity is found on Indigenous lands*, despite Indigenous peoples only making up five per cent of the global population.

As a result of important interventions by Indigenous groups, and strong support from various sectors, the final text recognizes the *critical role* of Indigenous peoples in the protection of biodiversity and *the rights* of Indigenous peoples over traditional territories. It respects and protects the customary sustainable use of resources by Indigenous peoples and acknowledges the importance of traditional knowledge. It also reinforces the need for Indigenous peoples’ *free, prior, and informed consent* before undertaking any conservation projects on their lands.

“The urgent call to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change” (Laudato Si’, 13)

The final framework doesn’t go as far as many Indigenous peoples and their allies wanted. Nor are there mechanisms in place to ensure compliance. As a result, recognitions of rights and territories are still in danger of being undermined by colonial attitudes and practices. At the same time, it is important that these recognitions are in place because they create *stepping-stones toward further change*.

“Everything in the world is connected” (Laudato Si’, 16).

“A healthy politics is sorely needed, capable of reforming and coordinating institutions, promoting the best practices and overcoming undue pressure and bureaucratic inertia” (Laudato Si’, 181).

Systemic Change/Transformation

Perhaps the most frequent refrain from Civil Society groups at CBD was the call to address the *drivers*, or *root causes*, of biodiversity loss: climate change, pollution (especially plastic pollution), colonialism, the global economy (WWF urged governments to create a target to reduce the footprint of production and consumption by half), debt and finance.

“Get to the roots of the present situation, so as to consider not only its symptoms but also its deepest causes” (Laudato Si’, 15)

All these drivers of biodiversity loss *intersect and interact with each other*. Consider colonialism:

The practices of colonization, both past and present, have created racist barriers in the economy and society, displaced many Indigenous peoples from the ancestral lands for which they cared, ignored Indigenous knowledge, and treated the earth and its inhabitants as mere resources. Likewise, in the Global South, colonialism has distorted the development of societies and economies, creating environmental degradation and a reliance on cash crops for export.

Voices from the Global South (e.g., Third World Network) spotlighted the importance of addressing the connections between debt, austerity, and biodiversity loss:

- Debt can incentivize ecologically-damaging resource extraction for export.
- Austerity, which is driven by debt, can limit fiscal policy space for biodiversity protection.

But it was Pierre Du Plessis, the representative from Namibia, who most poignantly spotlighted the importance of addressing the drivers of biodiversity loss in his closing remarks:

“If we are to have any hope at all of living in harmony with nature by 2050, we need to acknowledge the global economic and financial architecture that came out of *the violence of colonization, resource extraction and plantation agriculture*, to drive markets for manufacturing in countries that are today rich and control the resources of the world. The whole “developed” versus “developing” narrative which has bedeviled our consultation forums for so many years needs a much more comprehensive and holistic solution than what we have managed to craft in this biodiversity framework.”

This critical dialogue between Global North and South is not new but it progresses slowly with significant resistance. Biodiversity protection, climate action, and basic justice depend on a breakthrough.

Conclusion

Clearly, the path forward needs to be one of transformation. a transformation rooted in both **consciousness-raising** and **action**.

“A great cultural, spiritual, and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal” (Laudato Si’, 202).

The erosion of planetary eco-systems is mirroring the growing social and economic fissures within and between nations We have *breached planetary boundaries* and *frayed the threads of social cohesion*. What’s more, these imbalances are interacting in ways which reinforce downward spirals. We need a **just transformation** of the way we live, relate, and work.

A *just transformation* will be rooted in a dialectical movement between *consciousness-raising* and *action*:

- *Both science and mysticism are awakening* us to the intimate interpenetrations between God, cosmos, earth, and all earth’s inhabitants. We are all part of one complex, interacting whole. We are one body.
- *Profound systemic changes are needed to reflect this unity*. re-imagining paradigms of economic growth; re-shaping models of finance, production and consumption; re-working established structures of power to ensure that no one, no eco-system, is left behind.
- *New levels of consciousness* and *new ways of acting* are mutually dependent. We act from whatever level of consciousness we have, but *contemplative reflection* on the impacts of our actions and interactions awakens us to new awareness, to deeper levels of consciousness. Our transformation lies in the *graced and ongoing dialectic* between the two, with contemplative practice guiding and sustaining our movement from one to the other.

The way of **integral ecology**, at the heart of *Laudato Si’*, urges us to be attentive to the *interconnected and interacting drivers of ecological and social harms*. We find our way into integral ecology by sinking into an intimacy with God which transforms how we see all our relationships; by nurturing new relationships with the eco-systems in which we live; by making lifestyle changes which reflect our interconnected relationship with all earth’s inhabitants; by engaging political representatives in conversations about the need for a *just transformation* and by working to change the policies and structures which shape our current ways of relating to earth and each other.

Where are we on the “long path of renewal”? How are we contributing to a *just transformation*? What *else* can religious congregations do to work with each other, and with other groups, to change not only consciousness and lifestyles, but also the policies and institutions which structure our current ways of relating to earth and each other?

This is the call of integral ecology. It’s the most pressing spiritual and ethical agenda of our time.