Are we missing the 2010 target?

The Convention on Biological Diversity set out to significantly reduce, by 2010, the rate of biodiversity loss, and simultaneously contribute to poverty alleviation. Fifteen years on, the only significant achievement may be the setting up of many new protected areas which, by restricting access to community resources, could end up further impoverishing communities, says **Ashish Kothari**

Will the world meet the 2010 target? This was the question uppermost in the minds of delegates from nearly 200 countries, and members of several hundred civil society organisations gathered in Bonn , Germany , in the second half of May. The occasion was the 9 th Conference of Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity, an international treaty that had back in 1993 laid the ground for comprehensive and effective action to protect the earth's living beings. Fifteen years later, it was time to take stock of what the convention had achieved. It was also the right time to ask about “2010”….an iconic figure that has been reverberating in the corridors of those who care about life on this planet.

What's with this figure? In 2002, governments of the world decided “ to achieve, by 2010, a significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national level as a contribution to poverty alleviation and to the benefit of all life on Earth. This was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly, and incorporated into the Millennium Development Goals. Both the primary goal of reducing biodiversity loss, and its links with the secondary goal of poverty alleviation, represented a significant commitment on the part of countries to take urgent action on two of humanity's most pressing problems. It was therefore natural for the several thousand participants in Bonn to ask: in 2008, are we anywhere near achieving these goals?

Biodiversity loss is humanity's loss

I don't need to explain that poverty is one of the biggest blots on human civilisation. But perhaps the issue of biodiversity loss, and how it relates to poverty, could do with some elaboration.

Biodiversity --- or the range of plant, animal, and micro-organism life around us --- is the basis of everything we care about. It is what makes the planet livable, for instance through the generous gift of oxygen that minute algae plants in the oceans provide us with, or the regulation of climatic patterns we are so used to (and are now disrupting), the replenishment of fertility in the soils we grow our food in, and so on. Simply put, without biodiversity, we would all be dead in a matter of minutes. Or rather, we would not have existed in the first place!

And yet we have treated this crucial resource as if it was expendable. We have plundered forests at rates that are mind-boggling: in the last 300 years we've lost 40% of the world's forest cover, and are currently losing 13 million hectares each year, including 6 million hectares of relatively intact ‘primary' forests. We have mistreated soils so badly that over half the world's arable land is degraded. We have abused and overgrazed vast tracts of grasslands, converting them into dead deserts. We have polluted or drained out wetlands beyond the point of recovery, with over 50% having been lost in just the last 100 years. Even the oceans --- once considered infinite in their ability to provide us fish and absorb our pollutants --- are facing collapse. Sixty per cent of coral reefs could be lost by 2030. All this has had a devastating impact on plant and animal species; if some current estimates are to be believed, one more species may have gone extinct in the time it took you to come to this site and read this article.

So what? Won't the billions of dollars that people are making, and the incredible technologies we are developing,

help us pay or find our way out of any environmental crisis? Not this one. A series of recent reports put together by hundreds of the world's scientists, under the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, point to the fact that biodiversity loss is already causing our food producing and water recharging systems to collapse, and recovery is going to be exceedingly difficult. Two-thirds of fish stocks in the high seas are already exploited beyond recovery. Another worldwide assessment, the Global Biodiversity Outlook, paints a similar grim picture. And in a preliminary report by a global team of economists as part of a European Commission and German government funded study 'The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity' (TEEB), it is revealed that biodiversity damage is leading directly to staggering economic losses. No overall estimate of this is possible, but to get an indication: currently, says the report, " each year we are losing ecosystem functions with a value equivalent to around EUR 50 billion from land-based ecosystems alone"

(http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/economics/index_en.htm).

Putting a human face to these cold statistics helps gauge the true extent of this unfolding tragedy. In Haiti (the Caribbean), the loss of 97% of its forests in the last few decades, has resulted in severe soil erosion, flooding, decreased rainfall and consequent drought, loss of land productivity, and severe water pollution from sediment and human effluents….all major reasons for over 50% of its population being malnourished, and over 90% of its children suffering chronic intestinal parasitic diseases. Several billion people in the world have depended *directly* (ie in their day-to-day existence) on biodiversity for their food, medicine, livelihoods, and so on. Thousands of cultures continue to gain their strength from *direct* interactions with nature or with modified ecosystems such as traditional agricultural landscapes. Whenever there is irreversible damage to biodiversity, the immediate impacts are on such people...though eventually even those of us who buy food from supermarkets and medicines from pharmacies, are affected. But it is the 'ecosystem people' who suffer the most, and indeed their poverty is enhanced because of the loss of resources for domestic consumption and for livelihoods. If current trends continue, over two billion people along the coasts and in forests will face serious loss of not only livelihoods but also essential nutrition and well-being.

What is causing this loss?

Has the world done enough to check the loss of biodiversity, since it decided 15 years ago to take action? To answer this, one must first look at the main causes of destruction and damage.

Fisheries are a good example to learn from. For thousands of years traditional fisherfolk have lived along the seas or inland waterways, catching fish or other aquatic resources. There is little evidence of their having caused irreversible damage, though undoubtedly there may have been a few sites where overfishing would have resulted. It is however when industrial-scale fishing started a few decades ago that the depletion began. Massive ships with sophisticated navigation and fish school detecting systems, deep-sea trawling equipment that would scrape up every bit of marine resource, and refrigeration and processing facilities that could make fish last for weeks before getting to land, began to operate both near the coast and deeper into the oceans. Soaring consumer demand from not only industrial countries but also the increasingly wealthy affluent class in 'developing' countries, has fueled these fishing monsters. In the space of a few decades, virtually every ocean and sea in the world (except perhaps the Indian Ocean) is overfished. Ironically, governments, mostly of industrial countries (including now China and India), subsidise the fishing industry by about 30 billion dollars annually.

As in aquatic resources, industrial technologies and uncontrolled consumption have led to massive deforestation. These are coupled with a desperate push for land amongst the poor, who often have no alternative but to clear trees to grow crops or graze livestock. Tens of millions of hectares of natural diverse forest have been converted to plantations of industrially useful trees like palm oil and eucalyptus; in the latest twist, the supposedly ecologically conscious decision of industrial countries to convert from petrol to 'biofuels', is leading to further

conversion of forests into fuel plantations. Meanwhile, we continue to lose the world's most diverse and climatically vital forests in the Amazon, central Africa, and south-east Asia , to timber logging and conversion into soyabean and cattle ranches. In Brazil alone, since 1970, over 600,000 square kilometres of rainforest have been destroyed….an area almost double the size of India!

And now the latest threat: climate change. This one is even more scary, for while deforestation contributes enormously to the carbon emissions that are tilting the fine balance in our atmosphere, the resulting changes in climatic patterns are further damaging forests. The ocean's ability to absorb pollutants reduces as climate change affects the productivity of its biodiversity….another vicious cycle. Cause and effect merge into one deadly combination that is self-perpetuating.

Unless, that is, humans take some drastic action. And so the question again: have we done enough to stem the rot?

The world takes action…or does it?

At COP9 in Bonn , delegates reviewed the implementation of several conservation related work programmes. Each of the world's major ecosystems --- forests, marine areas, drylands, inland wetlands, agricultural lands --- have detailed action plans (see www.cbd.int). In addition there are cross-cutting plans such as one to expand and strengthen protected areas. Many of these are very impressive in concept, and some, like the protected areas work programme (www.cbd.int/protected/), are extremely progressive in building in elements of democratic governance and equity. Many countries also reported renewed attempts to conserve ecosystems and expand their protected area (PA) network, and civil society organisations including indigenous peoples and local communities also spoke of their own initiatives.

Overall, though, it was clear that the world was nowhere near reaching the 2010 target. It is of course difficult to gauge this precisely, since precise estimates of ecosystem and species loss are very difficult to make. But if some gross indicators are taken, the picture is quite bleak. Deforestation rates may have gone down very marginally, but the world's most biologically diverse forests in the tropics continue to be degraded at alarming rates. There is little let-up in the over-exploitation of marine fisheries. Species listed in the Red Data book of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), have steadily increased, with only a handful showing encouraging recoveries.

One interesting discussion at COP9 concerned protected areas (PAs). Many countries have made impressive progress in expanding the area under PAs. It is however not clear if this has helped secure some more ecosystems and species from threats, for thousands of PAs across the world remain without adequate on-ground protection. Secondly, and this was a hot topic at COP9, many new PAs continue to be set up in conventional top-down manner, adversely affecting the livelihoods of communities living inside or adjacent to them by stopping or restricting access to resources. In other words, attempts to meet the first part of the 2010 target (reduced rate of biodiversity loss) may actually be taking us further away from meeting the second part (alleviating poverty)! Conversely, there is little evidence that conventional poverty alleviation programmes, which continue in most countries, have integrated biodiversity conservation. It is only in a few countries that the two are explicitly being put together; Madagascar for instance has committed to tripling its PA coverage, but by following more democratic policies and encouraging community conservation initiatives along with the more usual government ones.

In the case of agriculture, too, innovative programmes to conserve crop and livestock diversity appeared to be floundering in the quagmire of massive loss of land, aggressive push of corporate chemical-intensive agriculture, and the newest threat, genetically engineered crops. The TEEB report mentioned above states that almost 40% of the land currently under low-impact forms of agriculture (which use high levels of biodiversity and low levels of chemicals), “could be converted to intensive agricultural use, with further biodiversity losses.”

These low-impact agriculture practices are what should be encouraged. Yet at COP9, the official celebration of World Biodiversity Day (May 22nd), with the central theme of agricultural biodiversity, did not have farmers and pastoralists centre-stage. A global movement of small farmers, alienated from the process, had to publicly protest to make their voices heard. Countries have clearly missed the message that civil society has tried hammering in for years: that the world's crop and livestock diversity is best conserved by the millions of small farmers and pastoral communities that have generated it in the first place. Instead, many governments are flirting with dangerous technofixes, spurred on by powerful corporations, to ‘solve' the world's food and agro-product problems. One such is genetic engineering. But that's the subject of another, future article in this column.

Can we achieve 2010?

Doubtful….very very doubtful. Most government delegations at COP9 did not seem to be in a mood to take the drastic actions needed to even begin moving towards a significant reduction in rate of biodiversity loss. At the start of the conference, NGOs, indigenous peoples and local communities had presented to the delegates what they considered to be some essential steps. These included:

halting all illegal logging and phasing out commercial operations in the most valuable forests;
a moratorium on industrial fishing till the seas recover;
recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities to their territories and lands, and to their own conservation practices;
securing protected areas with full respect to the rights of communities in them;
substantial increase in funding for biodiversity conservation, while phasing out all kinds of ‘perverse' incentives such as agricultural subsidies that encourage unsustainable practices;
support to farmers and pastoralists to conserve agricultural biodiversity;
greater recognition of the enormous value of biodiversity in our lives, and building the true value into planning, budgeting, and accounting systems;
prohibitions or moratoria on genetic engineering, and expensive techno-fixes for climate change problems.

Governments politely heard these out, some agreed in public, many agreed in private…but when it came to the negotiations, there were always a few countries to block major progressive moves.

Nobody, of course, expects the CBD process to achieve a revolution, especially given that the delegates coming to it are from agencies that are amongst the weakest in their own governments back home. But if delegates coming to these meetings are indeed committed to the CBD's goals, they need to display far more guts and honesty. News coming in on the last day of the month suggests that at least on one matter, they did; they all agreed to call for a moratorium on the mad scheme to “fertilise” the oceans with huge inputs of nutrients into the sea to absorb carbon faster.

But such decisions are exceptions rather than the rule; overall, the negotiations are bogged down in political doublespeak and obstructionist behaviour of some governments. Several million dollars are spent for each such meeting, and after nine of them since 1993, we are all asking ourselves: is it worth it?

We have two years left to 2010. We cannot possibly achieve the target set in 2002. But we can do our hardest to start moving towards it. For this, civil society will need to mobilise itself even more, governments who care will need to be bolder, and the corporations and governments who simply don't care, will need to be shamed and defeated. A tall order, very tall indeed. But do we have any alternative? We only have one world, and our life depends on it!

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