

# Will the Glasgow Declaration save the world's forests?

Governments have repeatedly failed in delivering ecological and socio-economic justice

6 NOVEMBER 2021, ASHISH KOTHARI



Ladakh (India) pastures are crucial for pastoralists but threatened by mega-energy projects © Ashish Kothari

On 2<sup>nd</sup> November, at the 26<sup>th</sup> Climate Conference of Parties, 124 countries issued a [Declaration on Forests and Land Use](#). It contains a bold commitment to “halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030 while delivering sustainable development and promoting an inclusive rural transformation.” Such a goal, it recognizes, is essential to meet the Paris Agreement to limit global average temperature increase to below 2 degrees and if possible, to 1.5 degrees.

More specifically, these countries said they will strengthen efforts to conserve forests and other terrestrial ecosystems and enhance their restoration. They will facilitate trade, development and agricultural policies that will enable this, empower communities to become resilient and enhance rural livelihoods, and generate funds and align financial

flows to support all these actions. They also committed to recognize the rights of Indigenous Peoples and other local communities as relevant to these goals and actions.

The signatory countries contain 86% of the world's forests, so if they are true to their commitment, global deforestation could well be halted or reduced to near zero by 2030 (though some countries with significant forest cover are missing, such as India, Malaysia, Uganda). But there lies the rub: how genuine is the commitment? Is this grandstanding on a global scale, noting that the world's eyes are on Glasgow and some dramatic gestures have to be made? Or is it a genuine acknowledgement that urgent action is indeed needed for the survival of life on the planet?

I would dearly like to believe it's the latter; that a combination of intense public pressure, scientific opinion, and astute political sense has finally turned the tide in favour of the earth. But my usually optimistic self finds itself unable to take these 124 national leaders at their word. And this is not only because the likes of Brazilian President Bolsonaro, who has [accelerated deforestation](#) in the Amazon, are signatories. It is because of more structural reasons: reversing deforestation and land degradation requires challenging the very fundamentals of a global economy and governance that centralizes power in the hands of governments and capitalist corporations. It requires questioning and finding systemic alternatives to 'development' based on the 'holy cow' of economic growth. It means dismantling or defanging institutions like the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank and the IMF, and 'free trade' treaties, all much more powerful than multilateral environmental and human rights treaties. And it requires a dramatic shift of power to grassroots communities everywhere and the dismantling of patriarchal, racist and colonial relations. Somehow, I can't see these 124 worthies even acknowledging the depth of transformations needed, let alone taking actions in these directions.

If you think I'm being cynical, let's look at recent history. In 2010, almost all countries of the world (the United States being a notable exception) agreed to the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020, under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The Plan contained the so-called Aichi Targets, to be met by 2020, which included conservation of terrestrial and marine ecosystems, species of flora and fauna, and other actions necessary to reverse the horrendous loss of biodiversity over the last few decades. In September 2020, the UN released a report, the [Global Biodiversity Outlook 5](#), with the depressing conclusion that not a single Aichi Target had been fully met. The world had failed to achieve the following, Target 5: "By 2020, the rate of loss of all natural habitats, including forests, is at least halved and where feasible brought close to

zero, and degradation and fragmentation is significantly reduced.” As the UN summed up: “Despite encouraging progress in several areas, the natural world is suffering badly and getting worse.”

Note again that the Aichi Targets are part of the CBD. This is a legally binding instrument finalised in 1992. If targets under international law, with a much more universal commitment, have not been met, what are the chances that a non-legally binding commitment (which the Glasgow Declaration is) will be?

The Declaration and related announcements have several seemingly positive elements. There is an acknowledgement that global trade, agricultural and financial flows that generate deforestation have to be changed. Over \$20 billion have been committed by countries, donors and the private sector for relevant actions. 30 financial institutions with over \$8.7 trillion of global assets have said they will use ["best efforts"](#) to eliminate investments in activities that lead to deforestation by agricultural commodity production, such as beef, soy, pulp & paper, and palm oil, by 2025.

There will undoubtedly be some positive outcomes of these commitments, just like the Aichi Targets did lead to conservation action for some species and ecosystems. Some governments and companies will indeed move towards reducing their ecological footprint. But the Declaration itself has flaws that will nullify these benefits by allowing continued deforestation. The catch-all phrase “in accordance with relevant national legislation and international instruments, as appropriate” is similar to what is contained in CBD and other environmental instruments, neatly enabling countries and corporations to sidestep global commitments. The Declaration reiterates the goal of ‘resilient and inclusive growth’, despite increasing evidence that economic growth requiring continued extraction of materials, use of energy, and dumping of wastes, is simply [unsustainable on a finite planet](#). And quite a bit of the finance is likely to head towards ‘net-zero’ kind of actions in which polluters continue to pollute and pay someone else to absorb the pollution, with all its [well-known pitfalls](#), or to actions that could displace communities in the name of setting up protected areas or plantations disguised under nice-sounding terms like ‘nature-based solutions’.

Unless the enormous power of multinational corporations and national governments can be reined in, a future Global Biodiversity Outlook in 2030 is likely to conclude that the Glasgow Declaration has failed. For this people’s movements, particularly those of the youth that have emerged strongly in the last few years, and of Indigenous People, workers, farmers, fishers, pastoralists, need to join hands. We could use the Glasgow Declaration as a tool to expose companies and governments that do not stick by their commitments. We could push ourselves for



more citizens' action that regenerates and protects nature, such as Indigenous Peoples and local communities protecting [Territories of Life](#), or the growing movement to recognize the [rights of nature](#) and hold governments accountable to their commitment to respect Indigenous and community rights. Most important, we have to claim power where we are, in villages and town neighbourhoods, and exercise it with responsibility towards other people and the rest of nature. Governments have repeatedly failed in delivering ecological and socio-economic justice, and there is no reason to believe they will suddenly change their spots.

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## Ashish Kothari

Founder-member of Indian environmental group Kalpavriksh, Ashish taught at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, coordinated India's Biodiversity Strategy & Action Plan process, was on Greenpeace International & India Boards, and helps coordinate Vikalp Sangam and Global Tapestry of Alternatives.

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