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“ We must thoroughly change how we use our land and seas ”

Biodiversity is a core issue of German development cooperation. Parliamentary State Secretary Maria Flachsbarth on achievements, lessons learnt and remaining challenges.

Ms Flachsbarth, with the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020 adopted in Nagoya, Japan, in October 2010, governments opted for halting the loss of biodiversity on our planet. However, the latest UN Global Biodiversity Outlook presents a rather gloomy picture. Isn't the world taking the conservation of biodiversity seriously enough?

The IPBES report on the global state of biological diversity has confirmed that our present efforts to conserve biodiversity are not sufficient to secure our natural basis of life in the long term. Of course this is not good performance. Even so, we can also present success, as the Global Biodiversity Outlook 5 demonstrates.

What exactly does this success look like?

For example, world-wide, the rate of deforestation has been reduced by around a third compared to the previous decade – this relates to Aichi Target 5. Regarding Target 6, in areas with good fisheries management, marine fish stocks were maintained or restored. Progress has also been made concerning Targets 11 and 12. Between 2000 and 2020, terrestrial areas under protection grew from 10 to over 16 per cent, and marine protected areas rose from 3 to over 7 per cent, while the conservation of key biodiversity areas grew from 29 to 44 per cent. And thanks to conservation measures such as the designation of protected areas, hunting restrictions, the control of invasive species alien to certain areas, ex-situ conservation and the reintroduction of species, we have managed to reduce the number of species threatened by extinction. Without these measures, extinction levels of birds and mammals in the last ten years would probably have been two to four times higher.

Another achievement is that the Nagoya Protocol, which regulates access to genetic resources and a balanced and fair sharing of the advantages resulting from their use, has come into force. It is now being applied in at least 87 countries. And international financing of biodiversity conservation was doubled between 2011 and 2020. Thus we have also made progress with Targets 16 and 20.

Do we know more today about the significance of biodiversity than we did nearly 30 years ago, when the United Nations adopted the Convention on Biological Diversity?

We have indeed learnt a lot about nature conservation over the last 30 years. Based on the Convention, we have intensified cooperation world-wide. We have developed many methods and tools and tested them successfully, and have gathered experience in implementing measures to conserve biodiversity, especially regarding how these can be effectively and inclusively designed and offer benefits both for humans and for nature. Thanks to progress in science, we also know more and more about the interaction at local level between ecosystems and species and genetic biodiversity as well as global interrelations between biodiversity, climate and health, and can use these insights to make decisions and steer processes. Thus we know too that in addition to protecting ecosystems, we must thoroughly change how we use our land and seas. What is lacking is a consistent implementation by all actors.

Has the corona pandemic acted as a wake-up call in this respect?

The pandemic has once again shown how vulnerable we humans are and what direct impacts destroying nature has on us as humans – both regarding our health and well-being and economically. Biodiversity and health are closely linked, and most new infectious diseases, including COVID-19, are zoonoses. We have been shown clearly that preventing the development and spreading of new diseases requires protecting nature. This is why we have been making even more efforts to give biodiversity conservation more attention since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the International Alliance against Health Risks in the Trade of Wildlife and their Products, together with the German Federal Ministry of Environment (BMU) and other partners, we have created a communication platform to promote international dialogue, sharing expertise among various actors and significantly reducing certain health hazards arising from legal and illegal trade in and consumption of wildlife.

In future, this will improve the prevention of zoonoses while at the same time contributing to biological diversity.

This year, your Ministry is backing the conservation of biodiversity with 600 million euros. What exactly is this money being used for?

Via government financial and/ or technical bilateral cooperation, the BMZ is supporting the protection of 668 areas in 80 countries comprising an overall surface of more than two million square kilometres, six times the size of Germany. We are also assisting our partner countries in considering the triad of conservation, sustainable use and fair benefit sharing and combining the conservation of biodiversity with economic development and mitigating and adapting to climate change.

Could you give some examples?

With the programme “Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KaZa)”, for instance, we are supporting Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe in linking up their national conservation areas via the largest terrestrial, cross-border conservation area world-wide. For this purpose, the BMZ has so far provided more than 35 million euros. By building up endowment capital, the Legacy Landscapes Fund, launched in May 2021 and kick-started by Germany with a contribution of 82.5 million euros, creates long-term financial security for protected areas in developing countries and newly emerging economies which are of outstanding significance in terms of global biodiversity. Here, public finance leverages private (philanthropic) funds at a rate of 2:1. And the Blue Action Fund, started in 2016 by the BMZ and KfW Entwicklungsbank, is now one of the largest funds world-wide addressing marine conservation. It supports NGOs developing the extent and quality of marine conservation areas. With the initiative “MeerWissen”, evidence-based political decisions are backed via German-African research partnerships. And we support the international initiative “Save Our Mangroves Now!” run by the World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). This initiative mobilises political decision-makers and seeks to halt the loss of mangrove forests.

You also mentioned support for policies that foster sustainable use of resources and fair benefit sharing ...

Examples here include the multi-donor initiative on ABS – Access and Benefit Sharing Capacity Development with Norway, Switzerland and the European Union, and the Initiative

BioInnovation Africa. Within these initiatives, fair framework conditions for the distribution of profits from genetic resources are being promoted, and European-African business partnerships are being developed for fair and sustainable value chains for products with natural ingredients. By 2022, this is to create more than 10,000 hectares of areas used under consideration of conserving biodiversity as well as several thousand additional sustainable jobs at local level. Another example is the eco.Business Fund Africa, set up to finance and support resource-efficient and biodiversity-friendly forms of production. It addresses financing partners as well as, directly, businesses in developing countries and emerging economies.

We are aware that we can only cope with the enormous challenges by working together. All contracting states have to raise their efforts. We are supporting our partner countries in this context. In addition, we are seeking to get stronger commitment on the part of the private sector. Global supply chains have to be conceived with a view to conserving biodiversity, and finance flows must no longer be channelled into measures harming biodiversity.

But despite all our knowledge, intact ecosystems continue to suffer destruction on a massive scale. For example, human activities destroy around 13 million hectares of forest each year. Partner countries in German development cooperation are affected too. How do you get your local political partners to rethink their approaches?

Nature is being destroyed in several of our partner countries. That is why we are supporting them in implementing their biodiversity targets. In politically difficult times, too, we seek to work out ways together with them aimed at not losing sight of the biodiversity targets. We have a wide range of tools for this purpose which are applied at all political levels and among a diversity of actors. However, the destruction of nature always also has a lot to do with our behaviour as consumers here in the Global North. Much of the food sold in Germany comes from, or is based on, primary products from countries with a high level of biodiversity. We have to address this too if we wish to tackle the drivers of biodiversity loss. We have to rid our supply chains of deforestation and make them more sustainable, and we have to use nature in a sustainable way.

The policy paper on the conservation of biodiversity which your Ministry issued in October 2020 is titled “Investing in Biodiversity – A Matter of Survival”.

It demonstrates that biodiversity loss is also jeopardising the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. 2030 isn't that long off. What must happen to turn the tide?

We must urgently agree on a new, ambitious global biodiversity framework which we can then swiftly and reliably implement, and which genuinely reverses the trend. Various aspects need fine-tuning to achieve this. First of all, we must significantly increase investment in the conservation of biodiversity and promote innovative alliances tapping new sources of finance from the private sector and from philanthropists, and thus provide additional resources. We must secure nature reserves and other protected areas and thus promote good governance and an effective and fair management of these protected areas which actively involves the participation of the local people and observes human rights. We must combat poaching and the illegal wildlife trade along the entire value chain throughout the world. We must implement sustainable utilisation concepts in agriculture and forestry as well as fishery and avoid biodiversity losses through the use of fertilisers and pesticides as well as land degradation while simultaneously changing consumer behaviour in general. We must combat climate change, which is regarded as one of the most important causes of species extinction, and commonly address biodiversity and climate change mitigation and adaptation. We must pursue a holistic, interdisciplinary health approach covering the complex links between human beings, livestock and wild animals and seeking systemic solutions to health problems. And last, but not least, we must ensure that the population in developing countries receive an appropriate share of the profits accruing from the exploitation of biodiversity in research and business.

How optimistic are you that the resolutions agreed in Kunming will not remain mere paper tigers?

Given the level of engagement that many of the contracting states have shown over the last few months, also because of the impact the corona pandemic has had, I feel confident that we are going to implement the resolutions in a joint effort. It is however important to strengthen the implementing and control mechanisms and commit all relevant actors to take action.

The interview was conducted by Silvia Richter.

The complete interview is available at: www.rural21.com