

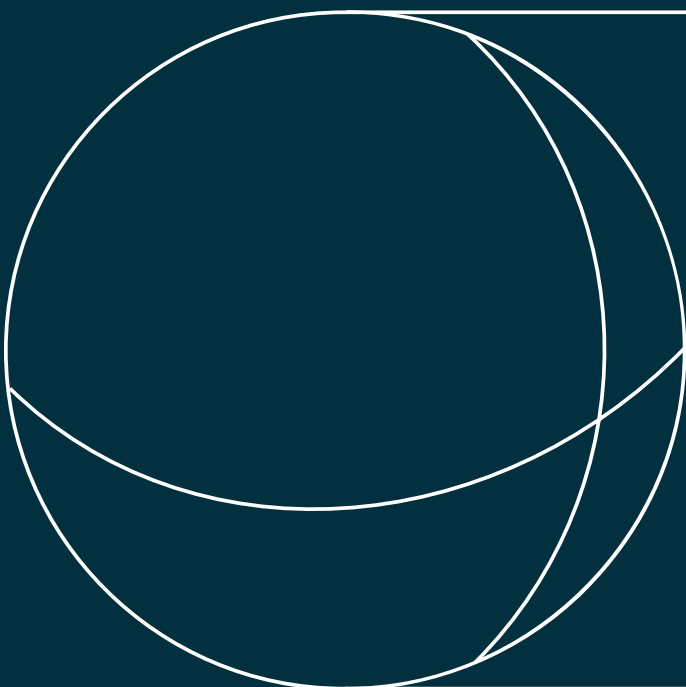
research report

Moving Global Biodiversity Governance Forward:

How to Strengthen the Convention on Biological Diversity

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Abstract

This report explores the potential to reform decision-making within the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and implement its most recent major framework, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF). Focusing on developments in the 2020s, we identify various challenges to democracy, effectiveness, and robustness within the CBD. These relate to how CBD meetings work, the effective participation of Indigenous Peoples, the gaps in reporting and implementation of CBD targets, and the question of sufficient biodiversity finance. Although we find that the overall reform potential within the CBD is limited, we identify several steps that can be taken towards further improving the CBD process. Additionally, we note that the CBD has proven relatively robust, considering the rise of geopolitical tensions in recent years. However, working towards the KMGBF's 2030 targets will require maintaining the framework's momentum, upscaling commitments to implementation and biodiversity finance, and investing in further trust-building among the parties.

Citation Recommendation

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Introduction

The 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is the landmark multilateral legal instrument for the “conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources” (CBD 1992, Article 1). Ratified by 196 countries, the CBD came into force in 1993. Its main decision-making body is the Conference of the Parties (COP). By means of consensus-based decisions, state parties have initiated various measures to strengthen international action on biodiversity, including three protocols: the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (CBD 2000), the Nagoya Protocol for Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits from the Utilisation of Genetic Resources (CBD 2010a), and the Nagoya-Kuala Lumpur Supplementary Protocol on Liability and Redress to the Cartagena Protocol (CBD 2010b).

The 2022 Kunming-Montreal
Global Biodiversity Framework
heightened international
ambition to halt and reverse
biodiversity loss.

The COPs have devised various action plans to fulfil the CBD’s objectives. In 2010, the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020 was adopted to implement action on biodiversity through its 20 Aichi Biodiversity Targets. It saw limited success, with only six of its targets partially achieved (CBD Secretariat 2020a, 10). This paved the way for the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), which heightened international ambition to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. It includes 23 targets to be achieved by 2030 and a further four long-term goals by 2050, namely to protect and restore, to prosper with nature, to share benefits fairly, and to invest and collaborate (CBD 2022). Yet global biodiversity action faces ongoing implementation challenges while the loss of biodiversity continues at an alarming rate (Diamond 1987; Leakey and Lewin 1995; Kolbert 2014; IBPES 2019). Many CBD parties fail to meet targets, investments, or even reporting requirements — casting doubt on the CBD’s effectiveness in delivering on its objectives. This is due to both a lack of adequate funding and an unwillingness on the part of governments to act decisively, in addition to insufficient capacity and technology transfer for developing countries.

Against this backdrop, this report explores the potential to reform the CBD, considering both decision-making and implementation processes. We focus on the most recent developments in the 2020s, most notably the KMGBF’s adoption at COP15 (2021/2022) and its operationalisation at COP16 (2024/2025), which marked great strides in global biodiversity governance. In these CBD processes, four specific challenges and related reform ideas are particularly important to democracy, effectiveness, and robustness (see the ENSURED project’s conceptual framework, as outlined in Choi et al. 2024): the issue of how negotiations function, the question of enhanced participation for Indigenous Peoples (IPs), the effectiveness and robustness of the KMGBF’s new reporting process, and the effectiveness and robustness of the CBD’s financial instruments.

This report is based on qualitative analysis of three types of data. First, an extensive review of the literature on the CBD and different actors' roles therein. Second, an analysis of COP and intersessional documents, including: (1) 44 Earth Negotiation Bulletin (ENB) reports (IISD n.d.), with a focus on COP15 and COP16, as well as relevant Subsidiary Body (SB) meetings; and (2) official CBD documents (Secretariat notes, COP decisions, and party submissions). Third, the insights shared by 12 interviewees spanning CBD Secretariat, state party, and non-state stakeholders (see the List of Interviews at the end of this report). Using qualitative content analysis and NVivo software, we applied a deductive codebook centred around effectiveness, democracy, and robustness (see Choi et al. 2024).

While the overall reform potential within the CBD is limited, various informal steps can be taken to further improve the CBD process.

We find that while the overall reform potential within the CBD is limited, various informal steps can be taken to further improve the CBD process. We also identify diverse trade-offs involved in these steps towards reform. For instance, while the enforcement of stricter speaking rules at CBD meetings might help to reach conclusions faster (and improve effectiveness), it would limit parties' right to be heard (negatively impacting democracy) and possibly decrease their commitment to the CBD process (reducing robustness). Despite the various challenges presented by geopolitics and polarisation, we note that the CBD has proven relatively robust. In working towards the KMGBF's 2030 targets, it will be crucial to maintain the KMGBF's momentum, to upscale implementation and financial commitments, and to invest in trust-building among the parties.

In the next section, we explain the main challenges involved in CBD decision-making and implementation. The third section compares key actors' positions on democracy, effectiveness, and robustness within the CBD. The fourth section explores the potential for reform and reflects on alternative pathways for biodiversity action beyond the CBD. The fifth section discusses the European Union's role in shaping reforms within the CBD. Finally, the sixth section summarises our main findings.

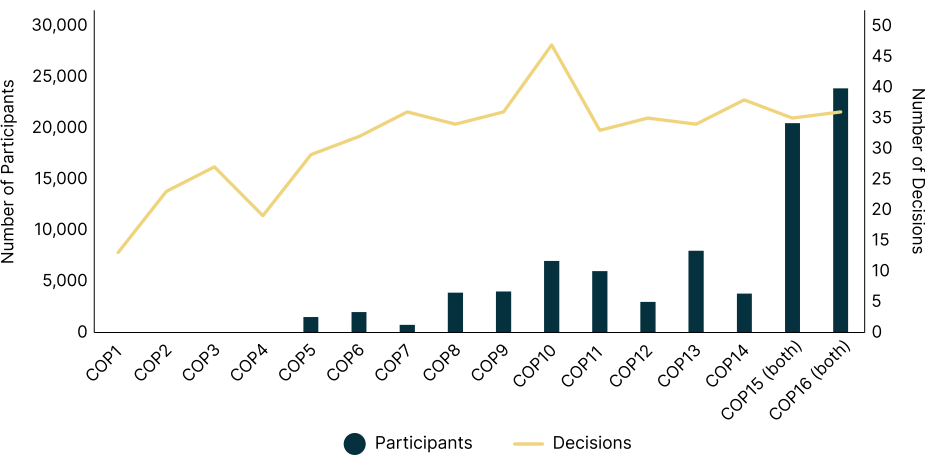
Challenges in CBD Decision-Making and Implementation

COP Decision-Making

As the CBD’s governing body, the CBD COP is “in a unique position to strengthen global biodiversity governance to steer change” (Smallwood et al. 2022, 44). The COP usually meets biannually, but the COVID-19 pandemic and negotiation gridlock have led to recent changes in this routine (such as the delayed/hybrid COP15-1; see also Table 2).

We focus on three specific challenges to the democratic and effective functioning of CBD COPs. First, state and non-state participation in these COPs has skyrocketed at the most recent conferences (see Figure 1). Increased participation can be seen as a sign of increased attention and access to biodiversity policymaking (thus contributing to democracy). However, this increased participation has not led to increased CBD output (Figure 1), and it has raised concerns about the effectiveness of COP meetings: “Biodiversity COPs may well be en route to turn into a similar type of circus like UN climate summits” (Zelli 2025, 3). Second, the resources different parties are able to devote to COPs vary significantly. Smaller delegations struggle to keep up with the demands of late-night and parallel negotiations (Hughes 2023), which results in unequal opportunities to effectively participate in the negotiations. Third, the CBD makes decisions by consensus (CBD 1994), which can lead to slow negotiations and lowest common-denominator agreements, including when the parties debate meeting efficiency.

Figure 1: Number of Participants and Decisions Taken at CBD COPs Over Time



Authors’ illustration. Source: IISD n.d.; CBD COP overview pages.¹

¹ COP participation numbers are based on the ENB summary reports for each COP (which are missing for COP1–4). COP15 (4,500 and 23,000) and COP16 (16,000 and 900) are combined scores.

Indigenous Peoples' Participation

Indigenous Peoples (IPs) are widely regarded as “custodians of biodiversity” (UN Secretary General 2024). They represent a small fraction of the global population but manage large biodiversity territories which are largely “in good ecological condition” (UN DESA 2025; WWF et al. 2021, 7). Within the CBD, IPs — like other non-state actors — can participate in meetings, be invited to make statements, and hold press-conferences, among other activities (CBD Secretariat n.d.-a). In this context, IPs are recognised as one group with local communities (IPLCs).

The CBD is widely seen as offering more space for IPLC participation compared to other multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). Nevertheless, there are limits. State sovereignty remains a core theme within the CBD, as decision-making is still controlled by state parties (Parks and Tsioumani 2023; Gabay 2024b; Rowley 2024). When we consider implementation, although IPs manage large shares of biodiversity territory, they receive a disproportionately small share of the available financial resources (UN DESA 2025). The gap between IPs’ extensive efforts on the ground and their limited influence has prompted calls for their “full and effective participation” in the CBD’s work, with the goal of improving both democracy and effectiveness (Catanoso 2025; UN Secretary General 2024).

The Implementation Gap

The CBD process has been setting ambitious goals for more than three decades, including in the original 1992 Convention, the 2002–2010 Strategic Plan, the 2011–2020 Strategic Plan and the associated 20 Aichi Targets, and the 2022 KMGBF. The two key instruments for reporting progress towards implementation are the National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) and the National Reports, which parties are required to submit regularly to the CBD. To date, this process has been characterised by a lack of implementation (CBD Secretariat 2020a) and a lack of compliance with reporting requirements: out of 196 parties, only 103 submitted their sixth National Report, which was due in 2018 (CBD n.d.-b). Furthermore, 85 percent of parties missed the deadline to revise their NBSAPs ahead of COP16 (WWF n.d.; Dunne et al. 2025).

Many targets have not been (sufficiently) concrete or quantifiable.

The literature identifies at least four reasons for this lack of effectiveness and robustness in CBD targets and reporting. The first is the lack of enforcement mechanisms and the fact that CBD obligations do not extend beyond soft law (Lim 2021; Smallwood et al. 2022; Rosendal and Tvedt 2015; Ekardt et al. 2023; Xu et al. 2021). The second involves ambiguities in the CBD’s target-based approach, as many targets have not been (sufficiently) concrete or quantifiable and have failed to do justice to their interconnections (Ekardt et al. 2023; Smallwood et al. 2022; Lim 2021; Runhaar et al. 2024). The third reason is challenges around domestic implementation and reporting, such as lack of resources, fragmented policymaking, lack of mainstreaming, and insufficient participatory processes for non-governmental actors (Runhaar

et al. 2024; Smallwood et al. 2022; Whitehorn et al. 2019). The fourth is a lack of political will among the parties to prioritise biodiversity policies, as compared to various (geo)political, economic, and other interests (Lim 2021).

Financial Resources

The need for biodiversity finance was explicitly addressed at the 1992 CBD. Yet more than three decades later, the biodiversity finance structure remains chronically underfunded (Barbier et al. 2018; Xu et al. 2021), with the annual biodiversity finance gap estimated at US\$700 billion (UNEP 2025). The KMGBF aims to progressively close this gap (CBD 2022, Goal D). However, this process is complicated by the diverse landscape of biodiversity finance (CBD Secretariat 2024b), which combines various types of funding instruments (such as subsidies, direct finance, and blended funding) as well as different funding sources and levels of implementation.

The biodiversity finance structure remains chronically underfunded.

This creates at least five challenges, with relevant implications for effective biodiversity action. First, there are funding gaps at the national level, as budgets for national biodiversity action are insufficient in developed and especially in developing countries (Adenle et al. 2014; Xu et al. 2021). Second, CBD parties make insufficient contributions (CBD Secretariat n.d.-b). Most developed countries fall behind and fail to pay their “fair share” of funding to developing countries (Chandrasekhar 2024; Pettinotti et al. 2024). Third, mobilising private-sector contributions remains a challenge (van der Hoff and Anyango-van Zwieten 2022; Svensson et al. 2025; Flammer et al. 2025). Fourth, making biodiversity finance available to relevant non-state actors has proven to be difficult (Monterroso 2025; Svensson et al. 2025).

Key International Actors' Positions on Reforms

This section analyses the positions on effectiveness, democracy, and robustness in CBD decision-making and implementation among major international actors and groups, in line with the ENSURED project's conceptual framework (Choi et al. 2024). We first explore the fundamental differences between these positions, then zoom in on the specific positions of major actors and relevant negotiation groups.

The first fundamental tension among CBD actors is rooted in the divide between developed and developing countries. Various interviewees discussed the need for further trust-building and understanding on both sides (Interviews 1, 3, and 11). From the very beginning, the prioritisation of conservation efforts versus the fair sharing of benefits from the use of genetic resources has been a key conflict within the CBD (Lim 2021; Rosendal and Tvedt 2015). Second, and relatedly, there is an imbalance in financial resources (made) available for biodiversity governance. As discussed above, the KMGBF aims to fill existing finance gaps, yet biodiversity finance represents a “longstanding North–South deadlock” (Zelli 2025). Third, different actors attach different meanings and values to environmental concepts (Obura et al. 2021; Vadrot 2020).

The second difference among CBD parties lies in their activity levels and their interest in negotiations. Fieldwork notes and ENB analysis show that Brazil, the EU, and Russia have been particularly vocal in CBD negotiations in the 2020s. Our interviewees also emphasised Brazil's active role (Interviews 1, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, and 11), describing it as “one of the strongest diplomatic and policy influencers in the CBD” (Interview 5), but also as a relatively polarising actor (Interviews 4, 10, and 11). Additionally, they mentioned Russia as an active player in negotiations (Interviews 2, 8, and 10), but described this as a rather recent development, since Russia has begun to use the CBD as a “platform for other [i.e., geopolitical] issues” (Interview 2). Other active and influential actors mentioned by our interviewees were Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), both within the African Group and individually; China, as the COP15 president; Colombia, as the COP16 president; Mexico, as an important agenda-setter; the Small Island Developing States (SIDS), as a more active group recently; and a variety of developed countries — especially the EU and its member states, as well as the United Kingdom, Australia, and Norway, often under the JUSCANZ Group umbrella.

It is important to note, however, that taking an active role in negotiations does not necessarily correspond with high ambitions in terms of biodiversity policies (Interview 10). The parties have different levels of interest in CBD negotiations — differences which stem from geopolitical interests (in the case of Russia, as above), megadiversity (in the cases of Brazil and the DRC), and/or environmental ambitions (in the case of the EU).

The following table compares the individual positions of major CBD actors.²

Table 1: Major Actors' Positions on Effectiveness, Democracy, and Robustness within the CBD

Continued on the next page.

Indicators	Positions
African Group³	
Effectiveness	Promotes effective financing mechanism as key to successful CBD implementation. Links finance and implementation gaps.
Democracy	Advocates for equal participation of developing countries (e.g., more funding, fewer virtual meetings). Supports traditional knowledge.
Robustness	Calls for new finance mechanism under COP. Supports coordination of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), Global Environment Facility (GEF) reform, and review of CBD Secretariat.
Overall position	Takes an active role in negotiations. Underlines inequalities in capacity building, funding support, and access to/transfer of technology.
Brazil⁴	
Effectiveness	Promotes higher ambition, but in line with national priorities and increased capacity support.
Democracy	Emphasises equal party participation, including the burden on developing countries. Supports role of IPLCs.
Robustness	Lula's administration supports CBD, whereas Bolsonaro's played a counterproductive role. Supports new financial instrument and MEA coordination.
Overall position	Megadiverse country. Very active in negotiations. Calls for ambitious action in line with domestic priorities.
China⁵	
Effectiveness	Influential in establishing KMGBF (as COP15 president) but emphasises national circumstances.
Democracy	Emphasises party-driven processes and equal party participation (e.g., technology, translation).
Robustness	Calls for increased funding from developed countries. Sole contributor to Kunming Biodiversity Fund. Not a party to all Protocols.
Overall position	Plays an increasing role in CBD (e.g., COP15 leadership).

² Simplifications are possible, as individual country and negotiation group positions can differ. In some cases, actors' positions on specific reform questions had to be deduced from their positions on related issues.

³ IISD n.d.; Greenfield and Weston 2024; ISAAA-AfriCenter 2023.

⁴ Chandrasekhar et al. 2024; IISD n.d.; Kiessling 2018.

⁵ IISD n.d.; Sharma 2023; CBD n.d.-a.

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European Union ⁶	
Effectiveness	Advocates ambitious rules (Protocols, KMGBF). Emphasises efficiency (e.g., no extra financial mechanism).
Democracy	Supports role of non-state actors (e.g., IPs, private sector) and hybrid/virtual processes (where appropriate).
Robustness	Strongly promotes CBD/COP processes and increased MEA coordination. Supports CBD process financially.
Overall position	Supports ambitious targets but also red lines (e.g., financial mechanism). Considered influential among developed actors.
India ⁷	
Effectiveness	Supports multilateral framework and KMGBF, but emphasises national priorities (e.g., agricultural subsidies).
Democracy	Emphasises equal and meaningful participation (e.g., in-person meetings). Promotes protection of traditional knowledge.
Robustness	Supports CBD process. Calls for new financial instrument under COP governance and GEF reform. Supports MEA coordination.
Overall position	Supports CBD and KMGBF. Emphasises equity and regional differences.
Russia ⁸	
Effectiveness	Emphasises multilateral cooperation. Opposes bringing other issues (e.g., human rights) within the scope of CBD.
Democracy	Emphasises party-led process and state sovereignty. Calls for support for developing-country delegates. Supports role of IPs.
Robustness	Not a party to all Protocols. Problematises insufficient funding through GEF. Supports review of CBD Secretariat.
Overall position	Recently taking an active role in negotiations. Supports state sovereignty within multilateral cooperation.
United States ⁹	
Effectiveness	Not a party but still influences decisions through coalitions and non-state actor activities.
Democracy	Not a party but played a limited role as an observer under the Obama/Biden administrations. No official observers present at COP16 in Rome.

6 IISD n.d.; Council of the EU 2022; Groen 2018; Delreux 2012.

7 IISD n.d.; CBD n.d.-c; India 2022, 2024.

8 IISD n.d.; CBD n.d.-d; Russian Federation 2021.

9 Brunnée 2004; Delreux 2012; van Buitenen et al. 2025.

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Robustness	Not a party, therefore, does not formally support CBD, but played an important role providing GEF funding under the Obama/Biden administrations. Provides no funding under the second Trump administration.
Overall position	Not a party due to perceived threats of sovereignty loss. Used CBD-aligned rhetoric under the Obama/Biden administrations. No interest shown by the Trump administration.
Small Island Developing States¹⁰	
Effectiveness	Promotes ambitious KMGBF targets. Emphasises requirement for more capacity building.
Democracy	Emphasises equal participation and capacity support. Supports role of IPLCs. Strong ties to non-state actors.
Robustness	Positive perception of the process, but calls for increased capacity.
Overall position	Increasingly active in CBD, but individual delegations have limited capacity. Supports ambitious action and an inclusive CBD process.

¹⁰ IISD n.d.; Gruby and Campbell 2013; Hall et al. 2020.

Unexploited Reform Potential Within the CBD

This section explores the unexploited potential for reform in terms of increasing the democracy, effectiveness, and robustness of CBD decision-making and implementation processes. We focus on four specific aspects relating to decision-making (i.e., COP functioning and IPs participation) and implementation (i.e., KMGBF reporting and biodiversity finance). To put these reform debates into context, Table 2 summarises the main developments over the course of the CBD's history. However, the following sections on reform will focus only on developments in the 2020s.

Table 2: Overview of Key CBD Events and Decisions

Continued on the next page.

Date	Key Events and Decisions
1992	CBD adopted
1993	CBD entered into force (currently 196 parties)
1996	COP3 Buenos Aires, including first decision on IPs involvement (III/14)
2000	COP5 Nairobi; Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety adopted; first meeting of Ad Hoc Open-Ended Intersessional Working Group on Article 8(j)
2001	Global Biodiversity Outlook (GBO) 1 published
2002	COP6 The Hague; Strategic Plan 2002–2010 adopted
2010	COP10 Nagoya; Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020 and Aichi Targets adopted; Nagoya Protocol and Supplementary Protocol adopted; Busan outcome document on Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) establishment
2014	COP12 Pyeongchang; decision to establish SB on Implementation (SBI) (XII/26)
2016	COP13 Cancún; Local Biodiversity Outlooks 1 published
2018	COP14 Sharm-el-Sheikh; Open-ended working group (OWEG) to develop new GBF established; Sharm El-Sheikh to Kunming Action Agenda for Nature and People launched
2019	Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Global Assessment Report; first of five meetings of OWEG to develop new GBF
2020	2011–2020 plan expired; deadline for achieving Aichi targets; GBO 5 and Local Biodiversity Outlooks 2 published; UN Summit on Biodiversity, including Leaders' Pledge for Nature
2021	COP15 Part 1, Kunming, hybrid format (COVID-19 context; Kunming Declaration adopted (call for urgent action, deep concern over insufficient progress to achieve Aichi targets); Debates preparing adoption of new GBF; Joint Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)–IPBES Report published

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2022	COP15 Part 2, Montreal; KMGBF and various implementation decisions adopted; NBSAP Accelerator Partnership initiative announced
2023	COP15 Part 2 Resumed, Nairobi; GEF establishes GBFF (Global Biodiversity Framework Fund)
2024	COP16 Part 1, Cali; Permanent SB on Article 8(j) (16/4) established; Cali Fund (16/2) established; COP16-Resumed 1, online
2025	COP16-Resumed 2, Rome; decisions taken on monitoring framework (16/31) and resource mobilisation (16/34)
2026	COP17 Yerevan; February deadline for seventh National Reports

How to Reform CBD Decision-Making

Decision-making within the CBD has experienced more procedural hurdles in the 2020s. While CBD parties have debated the effectiveness of their meetings, the room for actual reforms seems limited, as parties prioritise the CBD's party-driven nature. We focus on two entry points for reform: decision-making procedures and meeting efficiency.

From Consensus to Polarisation to Voting

The CBD process is based on consensus-based decision-making, as substantive voting has not been approved by the parties in the CBD's Rules of Procedure (CBD 1994). Finding compromises to achieve consensus among more than 190 parties is both an opportunity and a challenge. On the one hand, various interviewees emphasised the democratic potential and strength of decisions based on consensus, since no views are excluded (Interviews 2, 6, 8, and 9) and implementation is more likely (Interviews 5 and 6). On the other hand, consensus can also slow down the process and water down ambitions (Interviews 1, 2, 4, and 11). These issues are even more crucial in times of increased polarisation and (geo)politicisation (Interviews 5, 9, 10, and 11).

As such, the 2020s have seen new decision-making dynamics, including procedural voting, procedures to delay and suspend meetings, and consensus used strategically to block progress and enforce red lines. During COP16-R2, for example, the DRC delayed negotiations for more than one hour following a point of order during the second day of the short meetings. This activity can also be explained by the COP15 president's decision to gavel through the DRC's reservations when adopting the KMGBF (ENB COP15-2#13; ENB COP15-2#Summary; Interviews 9 and 10). Similarly, the election of new Bureau officers and SB chairpersons at COP15 was stalled due to a lack of consensus within the Eastern European States group and to Russia's call for a secret ballot vote (CBD Secretariat 2023; ENB COP15-2#Summary; ENB SBSTTA25 #5). At COP16, a vote was necessary to determine the host of COP17, with Armenia eventually selected (ENB COP16-1#Summary).

The potential for reform diverges in two directions: either strengthen trust among parties for effective consensus-building, or embrace more voting. First, trust could be enhanced by implementing more inclusive chairing practices, increasing interregional dialogues, and decreasing polarisation by resolving long-standing policy divides (for example, on finance). Second, options for informal voting within the CBD exist, for example, by a show of hands in plenaries (Interview 5) or by using polling apps (CBD 2024f). However, a formal move towards voting would have implications for CBD procedures (Interview 12). Furthermore, interviewees expressed doubts about the feasibility of voting (Interviews 4 and 5), the democratic character of, for example, a two-thirds majority (Interview 8), the time voting requires (Interview 5), and the appetite among parties to move towards voting (Interview 4). As such, the CBD is likely to remain a consensus-based process that resorts to ad-hoc voting when necessary.

Towards More Efficient and Effective Meetings

The meetings of the CBD's various bodies are characterised not only by an increasing number of participants in the 2020s, but also by a multiplicity of parallel meetings and an expanding number of agenda items (CBD Secretariat 2020b, 2024c). This has negative implications for equal party participation and meeting efficiency.

The equal and effective participation of parties, particularly those from developing countries, can be enhanced in at least two ways. First, a change in meeting organisation could address meaningful participation barriers in parallel meetings of plenaries, contact groups, and other actors (Interviews 2, 8, and 10). However, relevant trade-offs would have to be made. Meetings in smaller groups, including closed-door meetings, can move negotiations forward significantly by increasing effectiveness (Interviews 8, 9, and 10). At the same time, we found many examples of parties complaining about the impact of texts produced by "informal groups" which have "not been negotiated by parties" (ENB WG2020#1) and calling for broader participation due to concerns about democracy.

Second, increased domestic and international funding could strengthen CBD delegation resources, particularly for those from developing countries. Various interviewees identified resource imbalances among delegations as a problem (Interviews 2 and 10). During past CBD meetings, parties have repeatedly called for increased participation funding (Interviews 8 and 9).

Various interviewees identified resource imbalances among delegations as a problem.

For example, the African Group called for more "effective participation of developing country parties, urging funding for three participants rather than one" (ENB SBI4#10). Further capacity building is equally important in allowing all parties to engage meaningfully (Interview 8). In this context, both the CBD Secretariat and non-state actors can offer relevant training opportunities. However, the limited budget available for CBD processes constitutes a pertinent limitation in implementing such proposals.

The question of how to improve the effectiveness of COP meetings has also been a topic of CBD debates (CBD 2024f; Interview 12). Views on this

issue were submitted in October 2025 (CBD Secretariat 2025b), and the parties will discuss it again at SBI6 in February 2026. This discussion will likely include three considerations.

First, to save time during negotiations, parties could make stronger use of group statements in order to avoid various individual parties from that same group making further statements (Interviews 3, 6, and 9). Meeting chairs could also enforce speaking times more strictly, cutting off speakers, if necessary (Interview 9), but this requires sensitivity, as every party's views should be considered (with an eye to democratic participation). Many parties — such as the African Group — push back against curtailing speaking time, since they incur significant costs to travel to CBD meetings and want to make their voices heard (Interview 9). In a similar vein, the CBD Secretariat is experimenting with voluntary early submission of statements on certain SB agenda items (CBD Secretariat 2025a; Interview 12). Such procedures could inform parties prior to arrival,

thus saving time at meetings, improving the clarity of dialogue, and allowing more space for observer interventions (Interviews 6, 8, and 10).

Brazil and the African Group

emphasised that virtual meetings

place a high burden on developing

nations due to technical limitations.

Second, following the COVID-19 pandemic, the CBD has debated the use of virtual/hybrid features ahead of, during, and instead of its in-person meetings. During the pandemic, various CBD meetings took place virtually (CBD Secretariat 2020b, 2024a, 2024c), which speaks

to the robustness of the meeting format. This incurs trade-offs between cost efficiency and equal participation (democracy). For example, the EU and the UK highlighted the “collaborative, environmental, and financial advantages of hybrid meetings” (ENB COP15-2#6), while Brazil and the African Group emphasised that virtual meetings place a high burden on developing nations due to technical limitations (CBD Secretariat 2024a; ENB COP15-2#10). One interviewee also mentioned the importance of the daily allowances paid to developing-country participants as a motivation to keep in-person meetings alive (Interview 5). The CBD Secretariat has also emphasised the logistical and financial demands of virtual/hybrid formats (CBD Secretariat 2024c). Following the lack of consensus at SBI4 (CBD 2024f), COP16 confirmed the primary role of in-person meetings and laid out certain modalities regarding online meetings, such as maximum duration (CBD 2024e). In terms of concrete reform potential, in-person meetings are likely to remain the norm, with opportunities to increase virtual webinars and informal exchanges ahead of formal CBD meetings.

Third, CBD parties have discussed the overall COP workload. Canada, New Zealand, the DRC, Brazil, Mexico, and other parties have “lamented the negative impact of extreme workloads on the quality and effectiveness of decision making and negotiations” (ENB SBI4#4). There are two pathways to tackling this challenge. On the one hand, the duration and structure of meetings could be revised, including limiting evening sessions — as was fruitlessly discussed at SBI4 (CBD 2024f; Interview 9). On the other hand, agenda points could be reduced and agendas could be streamlined (Interviews 5, 8, 9, and 10), but this would be conditional on CBD parties giving up their individual priorities (and would also entail democracy concerns). SBI4 discussed whether the CBD Executive Secretary could

explore “options for streamlining agendas” (CBD 2024f), but no consensus was reached even on this exploratory language.

In sum, while CBD parties share an acknowledgement of the challenges to democracy and effectiveness in the CBD process, disagreements over how to tackle these challenges prevail — likely motivated by fears around giving up the party-led process.

New Opportunities for Increased Indigenous Peoples’ Participation

Recent years have seen progress in IP(LC)¹¹ involvement in biodiversity governance, and even some breakthroughs. The KMGBF is considered a milestone for the recognition of IPLCs: over one-third of its targets recognise their vital role in biodiversity conservation (Aubert and Dudley 2023). COP16 in Cali was known as the “COP de la Gente” (People’s COP) and, broadly speaking, observers believe it has lived up to its name in terms of the progress made in including IPLCs in the CBD (IWGIA 2025; Catanoso 2025; Landry and Hallosserie 2024; Chandrasekhar et al. 2024; ENB COP16-1#Summary). Next to the Cali Fund, there were three noteworthy IPLC-related decisions made within the KMGBF and at COP16, including a discussion of the importance of advancing IP(LC) involvement, as well as points of criticism, emphasising that IP(LC) involvement remains a work in progress (Martinelli and Martinelli 2024).

The KMGBF is considered a milestone for the recognition of IPLCs: over one-third of its targets recognise their vital role in biodiversity conservation.

First, a new subsidiary body on Article 8(j) and related provisions of the CBD (SB8J) was established in Cali. This came eight years after Bolivia first proposed it and constituted a historic victory for the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (IIFB) and the groups it represents (Gabay 2024b, 2024a; CBD 2024d; ENB COP16-1#Summary). The SB8J has the mandate to advise COP and other bodies on IPLC-related matters that fall within the scope of the CBD and its Protocols. Its first formal meeting took place in Panama City in October 2025. The decision to establish the SB8J substantially enhances IP(LC) involvement in the CBD process. SB8J replaced a long-standing ad hoc working group (WG8j) with a permanent body. This is a historic first: never before has a permanent and dedicated space for IPLCs been institutionalised within the context of a multilateral environmental agreement (IIFB 2024). Moreover, the SB8J decision invites parties to increase funding for the CBD’s voluntary Trust Fund, which supports IPLC participation (COP 2024b). However, the decision is not without criticism, as there are concerns about the administrative burden that the new SB8J may impose, or that it could lead to further exclusion rather than integration (Gabay 2024b, 2024a; CBD 2024c). Moreover, the parties were unable to adopt working methods for this SB in Cali. Indonesia and Russia noted the “complexity of creating such a body and the need for further consultations with relevant stakeholders”

¹¹ This section discusses both formal CBD decisions on IPLCs and IPs-specific concerns. As such, we switch between considerations of the single (IPs) and combined (IPLCs) actor groups.

(ENB COP16-1#11). Likewise, participants at the first SB8J meeting were “unable to agree on the modalities of its *modus operandi*, forwarding it to COP 17 entirely bracketed, reflecting diverging views on the balance between a Party-led process and the full and effective participation of IPLCs” (ENB SB8J-1#Summary). This debate — between enhancing non-state actors’ role and protecting the interests of various parties — reflects a key dilemma in enhancing democracy within the CBD. Furthermore, various interviewees expressed scepticism regarding the actual changes the SB will bring to the CBD process. One question is the extent to which the status upgrade from WG to SB will actually increase IPLC influence within the CBD (Interview 4). Another points to disagreements among IPLCs, which continue in the context of SB8J: “They are not the same and they don’t recognise themselves as the same [...] they are going to do very small progress, because a very core thing of the group is not solved” (Interview 11).

Second, the *Programme of Work on Article 8(j) and other provisions of the CBD related to IPLCs to 2030*, which was spearheaded by the Colombian COP presidency and its Latin American allies, was adopted at COP16 (Gabay 2024a, 2024b). Supporting the implementation of Article 8(j), this programme outlines key action areas, prioritising activities that directly contribute to KMGBF targets and goals, such as benefit sharing and acknowledging traditional knowledge. While the newly established SB8J is tasked with developing a plan of action, the COP Secretariat is mandated to research IPs’ experiences, including on access and resources. Delays in the new body’s operationalisation (as discussed above) have raised

The role of Afro-descendant communities in biodiversity conservation was explicitly acknowledged in Cali.

concerns about potential setbacks in implementing the work plan, given its central role in the execution of the SB’s mandate (IIFB 2024; CBD 2024b; ENB COP16-1#Summary).

Lastly, the role of Afro-descendant communities in biodiversity conservation was explicitly acknowledged in Cali, establishing these communities as a third recognised group alongside IPs and LCs (CBD 2024c;

COP16-1#Summary). This decision is expected to facilitate their access to financial resources as well as their inclusion in future CBD meetings (Freixes 2024). The proposal was spearheaded by Colombia and Brazil, with support from several other Latin American countries, notably Bolivia, Uruguay, and Mexico. These parties argued that Afro-descendant community territories face growing threats due to climate change, mining, and deforestation, while also demonstrating high levels of conservation. During the negotiations, this proposal was challenged by the African countries, led by the DRC (ENB COP16-1#8), and other parties who argued that existing language already covered these communities (ENB COP16-1#4). These concerns were accommodated by moderating the language (Gabay 2024a): Parties are merely invited, as appropriate and in line with national legislation and circumstances, to recognise such contributions. Furthermore, collective rights-deriving terms such as “Afro-descendant peoples” were deliberately avoided (Freixes 2024).

Taken together, although the COP in Cali was heralded for various IP-related agreements, it also ended in disappointment, as not all the issues

were resolved in time (Chandrasekhar et al. 2025). Some of these were addressed at the follow-up meeting in Rome: for instance, an indicator was added to the monitoring framework to track land-use change and land tenure within traditional IPLC territories (Catanoso 2025; Gabay 2024a). Yet other priorities must still be addressed, such as more substantial direct access to funding (Gabay 2024b; Interview 4) and better IP integration in domestic policymaking and implementation (Interview 2). Advocates for the meaningful participation of IPs in biodiversity governance would indeed argue that continued progress depends not only on preserving the momentum created by implementing the decisions agreed in recent years, but also on addressing these outstanding issues.

From Reporting to Implementing KMGBF Targets

In addition to considering CBD decision-making, it is crucial to reflect on the potential for reforming implementation activities in pursuit of CBD targets. In this context, the adoption of the KMGBF at COP15 in 2022 has created momentum as a “historic decision to prioritize nature in sustainable development practice” (ENB SBI3#1). The increased ambition lies in the framework’s new, more harmonised and comprehensive structure: it combines more ambitious targets for 2030 and goals for 2050 with a new monitoring and review mechanism, and a new strategy for resource mobilisation (Interviews 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, and 10). At the same time, interviewees expressed doubts about the KMGBF’s ambitious timeframe and about whether the political will to implement the framework exists (Interviews 1, 4, and 11). Noting the rate of biodiversity loss and the time it takes for ecosystems to recover, some doubt whether the KMGBF is ambitious enough: “I think we made some progress, but again, I don’t think it’s effective in terms of urgency” (Interview 11). Against this background, in this section, we discuss the potential for reform in CBD implementation via the KMGBF’s reporting and review structures.

To ensure its “successful implementation,” the KMGBF notes the need for “effective mechanisms for planning, monitoring, reporting and review” (PMRR) (CBD 2022). It was not until the Rome meetings that consensus was reached, and this ambition materialised. In two decisions (CBD 2025b, 2025c), the parties specified the monitoring framework (which lays out different types of indicators) and the PMRR process. To enable comparative insights, the parties agreed on a uniform reporting template for their National Reports and will submit individual targets via an online reporting tool (CBD Secretariat 2025c). Following the February 2026 National Report deadline, an ad-hoc scientific and technical advisory group will prepare a “global report on collective progress” in implementing the KMGBF. The results of this report will be discussed at COP17 in October 2026. While this process is ongoing, we can already identify four challenges and related reform opportunities.

The first (and most immediate) problem is that parties have had very little time to prepare reports before the upcoming February 2026 deadline,

Interviewees expressed doubts about the KMGBF’s ambitious timeframe and about whether the political will to implement the framework exists.

given that the final reporting decisions were only taken in February 2025. Although, failure to meet reporting deadlines is not uncommon in the CBD process (Zelli 2025), this short timeline will likely exacerbate the issue by creating various challenges for the parties (Interviews 2, 4, 5, 9, and 10), including the lack of time to build national monitoring infrastructure, capacity problems at the national level, limited resources in developing countries, and the need to adapt to many new and multi-faceted indicators. Given all this, it may not be possible for (some) parties to meet the February deadline. Our interviewees noted that it would be “good if we have 40 reports in February” (Interview 5) and predicted “a lot of gaps and missing data” (Interview 2). This short timeline nevertheless offers opportunities for learning and reform. As Interviewee 9 argued, if all the parties struggle to report on certain targets, then they will have the opportunity to improve specific indicators. As such, COP17 can offer an opportunity to review not only collective progress but also the new framework’s effectiveness.

A larger role for scientists in global reporting — in tasks such as developing global datasets and collecting ecologists’ input on indicators — would improve comparability.

Second, irrespective of the timeframe, the parties are faced with significant reporting and implementation challenges. Stakeholders see the KMGBF and its monitoring framework, with its relatively concrete and quantitative targets, as a step forward (Interviews 5 and 9) compared to the ambiguities of the Aichi targets (Lim 2021; Smallwood et al. 2022) and the lack of specific reporting in past NBSAPs (Runhaar et al. 2024). Still, our interviewees expressed doubts about the comparability of the new reports (Interviews 5, 7, and 9), since various

targets are still too broad or too global, which leads to the risk of cherry-picked data and different interpretations of the same indicators. In terms of reform potential, on the one hand, it is important to acknowledge that resolving this complexity is impossible because biodiversity protection is inherently complex (Interview 9; Ekardt et al. 2023). On the other hand, enhancing the comparability of targets and actions is possible, with increased guidance and capacity support from the CBD Secretariat, as well as initiatives such as the NBSAP Accelerator Partnership (Interviews 6 and 7). A larger role for scientists in global reporting — in tasks such as developing global datasets and collecting ecologists’ input on indicators — would also improve comparability (Interviews 3, 7, and 9).

Third, the KMGBF explicitly expresses a whole-of-government and whole-of-society ambition (CBD 2022, Section C and Target 14). Various interviewees reported difficulties in achieving whole-of-government approaches domestically. This is evident in the lack of high-level representation and participation by actors beyond strictly environmental domains at CBD COPs (Interview 1), particularly the absence of government actors in economy and finance (Whitehorn et al. 2019; Interview 1), and difficulties in bringing together actors across departments for national reporting (Smallwood et al. 2022; Interviews 6, 8, and 11). The potential for reform is limited here, as it would require domestic action and reprioritisation. At the COP level, more political weight could be placed on invitations to high-level segments at CBD COPs. When it comes to whole-of-society approaches, two reporting challenges arise: the lack of resources (Interviews 10 and 11) and modalities to engage societal

actors (such as young people, IPLCs, and the private sector) meaningfully (Interviews 7, 10, and 11). Non-state actor involvement in the CBD has also been contested among the parties. For example, at COP16, Zimbabwe — supported by Cameroon, Egypt, the DRC, and Russia, and opposed by the EU and Norway — fought to include a footnote in the decision regarding non-state actors' limited opportunities to submit information to the CBD (ENB COP16-R2#2). At CBD negotiations, the space for meaningful non-state actor involvement is also limited, due to both party preferences and limited channels of influence for certain actors, such as Global South youth groups (Orsini and Duque 2025). Reform potential within the CBD lies in further formalising these actors' involvement, which would rely on consensus-based decision-making and therefore seems unlikely. In addition, whole-of-society approaches can be promoted domestically, for instance by involving non-state actors in COP delegations and implementation actions.

Fourth, the question of how to move from reporting requirements to filling the implementation gap has long been debated within the CBD (Friedman et al. 2022; Whitehorn et al. 2019; Lim 2021; Smallwood et al. 2022). The new global review mechanism encourages more ambitious implementation and thus KMGBF compliance. However, this new mechanism is also explicitly established as “facilitative, non-intrusive and non-punitive” and will focus on global progress towards targets, not on individual parties (CBD 2025b). The process of preparing the global review of collective progress is also explicitly party driven. While the mechanism was designed to create a new sense of accountability, it is not an enforcement mechanism (Interviews 8 and 11). This was also evident in COP debates, where parties disagreed on the review's ambition and the use of sources, among other issues. The EU, Switzerland, and the UK, for example, promoted additional review measures (such as voluntary country review), while Argentina and Russia suggested “spending limited time on” such measures (ENB SBI4#7). These reform measures are faced with a trade-off between effectiveness and robustness, as increased stringency in reporting rules creates a risk that parties will withdraw or ignore these rules.

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In sum, the effectiveness of the KMGBF reporting process is in its test phase. At COP17, it will be crucial to see the outcome of the review and whether parties demand more compliance, thus creating or limiting the space for further reforms.

Closing the Biodiversity Finance Gap

To assess the reform potential of biodiversity finance under the CBD, this section examines both the mobilisation of sufficient resources and the effectiveness of its financial instruments. Both debates relate to concrete Convention workstreams and were operationalised in the KMGBF: the availability of financial resources (Article 20) and the financial mechanisms to distribute them (Article 21) (CBD 1992). In the process of negotiating the KMGBF (Goal D, Targets 14–19), both streams were eventually agreed as a package deal at COP16 (CBD 2025d, 2025e; ENB COP16-

R2#Summary). This coupling was originally opposed by the Group of Latin American and Caribbean Countries, the African Group, and the Pacific SIDS, which preferred separate workstreams (ENB COP16-R2#1). This debate exemplifies larger trade-offs within the finance negotiations. On the one hand, package deals effectively tie up debates, but the parties above stressed that tangible outcomes were required for both. In the following section, we explore the reform potential for increased resource mobilisation within the CBD, and then identify reform pathways for specific instruments under the KMGBF, such as the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund (GBFF) and the Cali Fund.

More Resources

One straightforward opportunity to advance biodiversity action is to increase the available finance. Current estimates indicate that total global biodiversity investments amount to between US\$135 billion and US\$156 billion per year (originally from 2019, adjusted for inflation in 2023, according to the IPBES), which is far from the estimated US\$700 billion needed annually (IPBES 2024; UNEP 2025). This gap is even more critical in the context of the current trend of shrinking international aid budgets (Interview 4). In response, KMGBF Target 19 aims to increase

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financial resources from all sources to US\$200 billion per year by 2030. To achieve this ambitious goal, two reflections are relevant.

The first is how to broaden the contributor base among states. In recent years, the firewall between the developed and the developing world has been crumbling, as emerging actors such as China are increasingly viewed as sources of funding (Interviews 4 and 9). This question had long been contested. At COP15, developing countries “insisted” on referring to “financial resources from developed countries” (ENB COP15-2#6). This narrative continued at COP16: among others, Russia spoke for BRICS countries, calling for an increase in financial resources provided by “developed country parties” (ENB COP16-1#5). In contrast, actors such as the EU, Norway, and the UK have “urged expanding the donor base, calling on developed country parties and developing country parties able to voluntarily do so” (ENB SBI4#2). The final COP16 decision includes a provision calling on developed country parties as well as “Parties that voluntarily assume the obligations of developed country Parties” to increase funding (CBD 2025e). Whether and how this will happen remains to be seen, but the compromise opens the door to increased funding.

The second is how to broaden contributions beyond states. Developed countries, including the EU, have stressed the importance of private resource mobilisation (ENB COP16-R2#Summary). As such, Decision 34 taken at COP16 repeatedly mentions resources from “all sources” and the role of private-finance actors (CBD 2025e). Concrete examples include the Cali Fund (which targets private-sector funding) and the GBFF (which is open to private funding). However, neither fund has yet received private-sector contributions (as of November 2025). To further mobilise such funding, we have identified two additional opportunities. On the one hand,

the robustness of biodiversity finance hinges on a fundamental consensus concerning its definition (van der Hoff and Anyango-van Zwieten 2022). Developed parties typically view biodiversity through a market lens, with monetary prices and scientific metrics (Interview 7), while IPLCs stress traditional knowledge and lack a history of data collection (Karmushu 2025). CBD delegates “do not speak the same language” in this debate, which means that future COPs need to tackle this essential question of definition (Interview 10). Such debates can build on the UN Development Programme’s Global Biodiversity Expenditure Taxonomy (UNDP 2024) and the upcoming Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) report on business and biodiversity (Interview 7; CBD 2024i). On the other hand, an increasing number of efforts focus on financial innovation (Flammer et al. 2025). Blended finance, for example, decreases the risk for projects with a lower expected financial return, thus incentivising private investors. This is already happening, as the eighth replenishment of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Trust Fund has so far achieved a non-grant cofinancing ratio of 19.2:1, mobilising US\$19 for every GEF dollar in investment (GEF 2025a). Blended finance is just one form of innovative financing proposed by the parties. One EU–CBD Secretariat dialogue also refers to biodiversity certificates and credits, guidance on payments for ecosystem services, and biodiversity net-gain requirements (CBD 2024h).

One or Many Instruments?

The CBD’s financial architecture is fragmented, consisting of many different instruments (Interview 9). Current debates on different types of funding instruments focus on two recently created funds: the GBFF and the Cali Fund. Both were established to serve the CBD’s objectives and boost KMGBF implementation.

The first contested instrument is the GBFF. The 1992 CBD text foresaw the establishment of a permanent financial mechanism (CBD 1992, Article 21), which is still pending. As such, most biodiversity funding currently goes through the GEF, which is acting on an interim basis (CBD 1992, Article 39). This process has caused tensions between CBD parties. On the one hand, recipient countries such as the DRC see the establishment of a new instrument — beyond the GEF — as a red line (Interview 10), requesting more COP authority over the financial mechanism and voicing concerns about the GEF Council favouring donor countries (CBD 2024g; Ching 2025). On the other hand, donor parties such as the EU view the GEF framework as sufficient (ENB COP16-1#Summary). They caution against further fragmentation, since this would reduce effectiveness; divert funding from implementation to administration (Interview 11), leading to indirect and duplicated work; and decrease the overall focus (Interviews 9 and 11). As a compromise, COP15 established a new fund — the GBFF — under the GEF superstructure. To improve the effectiveness of this fund compared to the previous GEF instruments, the

To improve the effectiveness of this fund compared to the previous GEF instruments, the GBFF was established with shorter timelines, templates, country ceilings, and allocation shares.

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Today the GBFF is operational, collecting US\$386 million in pledges and having allocated funding across two tranches (GEF 2025b). Three opportunities remain to reform the GBFF in its current form. First, despite calls for more direct funding, implementation still proceeds through implementing agencies (Karmushu 2025). Second, the aspirational target of allocating 20 percent to IPLCs is a move in the right direction, yet some observers criticise the lack of clear assessment criteria (CBD 2024g). Third, the fund is officially open to contributions from “all sources” (CBD 2022). However, as of June 2025, contributions have only come from 11 states and one subnational entity (GEF 2025b). So, while developed countries succeeded in opening the fund to all sources and establishing it under the GEF (rather than as a separate entity under COP governance), they now need to ensure it gets filled. The limited compromise reached in establishing the GBFF is also evident in the COP16 decision to create a new “intersessional process” to continue reflecting on a dedicated CBD financial mechanism, including a review of existing mechanisms, and to push a decision on “whether to establish a new entity” to COP19 (ENB COP16-R2#Summary).

The second contested instrument is the Cali Fund — established at COP16 — to support fair benefit-sharing from the use of digital sequence information (DSI) on genetic resources and the operationalisation of KMGBF Target 13. The fund relies on voluntary donations from private DSI users, with a suggested contribution of 1 percent of profits or 0.1 percent of revenue, and will allocate resources in a “fair, equitable, transparent, accountable, and gender-responsive manner,” with at least half the funds earmarked to support the needs of IPLCs (CBD 2024a, 4). Crucially, the fund is administered by the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, not the GEF (CBD 2024a). A fund with private finance outside the control of the GEF was seen as an innovative financing tool. Yet as of November 2025, the Cali Fund had not received a single donation. This is due to both the decision-making process that established the fund and its design flaws. While private actors were involved in shaping the fund, its final format was decided by state parties (Interview 9). Design challenges include the

voluntary nature of the contributions, unclear profit versus revenue formulas (Kamath and Thambisetty 2025), the fact that the allocation formula has yet to be decided, the lack of a clear taxonomy, national frameworks for contributions (Interviews 7, 9, and 11), and the unfinished rulebook (CBD 2024a; CBD Secretariat 2024b).

While some progress on these issues is planned for COP17, our research identifies two opportunities to ensure that the Cali Fund is effective. First, the fund’s

voluntary nature and insufficient incentives discourage private actors from contributing. Parties need to develop national encouragement frameworks, combined with effective certification schemes (Interviews 7 and 9). Second, a robust taxonomy framework on biodiversity needs to be established. As discussed above, while multilateral efforts to define this

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framework are already underway (Interview 7), it is essential to establish a consensus on taxonomy and pathways for business involvement within the COP and CBD frameworks explicitly.

Alternative Pathways

In terms of alternative pathways for global governance transformation (Choi et al. 2024), we do not anticipate parties moving away from the CBD. Of course, global biodiversity action also takes place outside the CBD — one example is the 2020 UN Biodiversity Summit. However, the KMGBF has created momentum, making it likely that parties will continue to invest in this process for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the global attention and resources dedicated to biodiversity are already limited, which would make any move to a new forum very costly for policymakers.

Despite rising geopolitics and anti-environmental positions among major world powers, namely the US, the CBD has proven relatively robust. While the US is not a party to the CBD, the second Trump administration may negatively impact it in at least two ways. The US may further disengage from CBD processes, as it did not send government observers to the Rome COP16 meetings (Chandrasekhar et al. 2025). It may also decrease its contributions to global environmental finance, which will in turn impact biodiversity finance. However, some observers explicitly framed the February 2025 COP16 agreements as a sign of “green diplomacy surviv[ing]” despite the Trump administration’s challenge to multilateralism (Guillot 2025).

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Thinking beyond the immediate CBD, parties could further invest in increased synergies and collaboration between MEAs (Lim 2021; Smallwood et al. 2022; Friedman et al. 2022; Hughes 2023). COP16 passed a dedicated decision on cooperation with other conventions and international organisations (CBD 2025a). Investing in synergies between the three Rio conventions (climate, biodiversity, and desertification) offers advantages and also presents challenges (Interviews 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, and 12). One interviewee described clustering efforts as “absolutely a no-brainer from an administrative, budgetary, but also policy point of view,” yet they identified challenges in the preference of certain parties (including the US and Russia) to avoid such clustering (Interview 4). In 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and IPBES published a joint report on the interrelated challenges of climate change and biodiversity. In September 2025, the Rio Conventions’ Secretariats launched a joint website, stating their commitment to increasing synergies (Rio Conventions n.d.). As such, global biodiversity governance might be further integrated into the Rio sustainability agenda.

The EU's Role in Reforms

To understand the EU's role in CBD negotiations, it is worth differentiating the internal and external contexts of its positions and activities. We first discuss how domestic ambition and EU member-state coordination shape the EU's external role, and then discuss EU negotiation activities.

Internally, the EU has built a strong record on binding environmental legislation that supports the CBD's goals (Beresford et al. 2016). Spurred by the 2019 European Green Deal, the EU passed relevant legislation and developed new strategies to place a high priority on biodiversity and broader environmental concerns (Interviews 2 and 4). However, three caveats are necessary. First, differences exist among EU member states in terms of interest in the topic (and by extension in CBD negotiations) and the extent to which EU biodiversity policies are implemented (Interviews 2, 5, and 10). Second, previous studies have called for closer alignment of EU policies with KMGBF and Aichi targets (Ituarte-Lima et al. 2019; Aggestam 2024). Third, doubts have emerged regarding the EU's continued commitment to high environmental standards (Interviews 1, 4, and 5). This includes criticism of the second von der Leyen European Commission for failing to sufficiently prioritise the topic, as evident in the lack of high-level attendees at COP16, the weakening of Directorate-General (DG) Environment compared to other DGs, and intra-Commission staffing decisions (Interviews 1 and 5). Thus, our picture of the EU's internal biodiversity ambitions in 2025 remains unclear.

Furthermore, the EU's activities within the CBD are conditioned by coordination among EU member states. Various interviewees described the strength of the joint negotiation system at the CBD, emphasising the importance of pooling negotiation resources among the Commission and EU member states (in terms of expertise and staff capacities) and the capacity to speak with one voice (Interviews 8 and 10). At the same time, certain factors weaken the EU's joint representation at the CBD. As described above, variations in the level of commitment to biodiversity lead to a weakened joint position (Interview 2). Significant time resources and speed are also required to facilitate EU coordination (Interviews 2, 7, 8, and 10), and a single joint intervention in negotiations might be perceived as weaker compared to the many voices of other CBD actors (Interviews 10 and 11).

The EU is generally seen as a highly ambitious, active, and influential actor in CBD negotiations.

Pivoting to the EU's role in CBD negotiations, the EU is generally seen as a highly ambitious, active, and influential actor in CBD negotiations (Delreux and Ohler 2021; Ohler and Delreux 2021). Our interviewees confirmed the importance of the EU's bridge- and coalition-building activities (Interviews 2 and 11). The

second Trump administration, with its anti-environmental stance, has put the EU in the pole position of defending environmental norms (Interview 5). This speaks to previous EU positions within the CBD promoting "strong and measurable" targets (ENB COP15-2#12). At the same time, our interviewees noted that the EU often focuses on technical questions in negotiations (Interview 2), calls for very ambitious goals that seem

impossible to achieve (Interview 11), and lacks a sense of appreciation for other delegations' (limited) resources (Interview 11). In addition, the EU's negotiation position remains conditioned by other CBD actors' interests and power (Interview 8; Groen 2018). As such, if other parties do not wish to align with the EU, then its influence is limited (Pipart 2022).

Conclusions: Acknowledging Challenges but Maintaining Momentum

The objective of this report has been to explore the reform potential in CBD decision-making and implementation processes. We focused on developments in the 2020s, as key steps towards more effective global biodiversity governance were taken with the adoption and operationalisation of the KMGBF.

In terms of effectiveness, democracy, and robustness, we identified various challenges that the CBD should tackle in order to improve its internal functioning generally and to achieve the KMGBF targets specifically. Importantly, we often see interrelated challenges — such as unequal party participation — impacting both the democratic quality and the effectiveness of CBD meetings. Relevant trade-offs may need to be made where reforms could enhance one of the above qualities while negatively impacting another. A recurring theme in these considerations is the parties' concern to keep the CBD party-driven, rather than ceding negotiation or decision-making authority to a smaller committee or to non-state actors. While enforcing stricter speaking rules at CBD meetings might help to reach conclusions faster (improving effectiveness), it would limit parties' right to be heard (negatively impacting democracy). Similarly, while more stringent reporting rules might improve the KMGBF's reporting process (and consequently its effectiveness), such rules might also decrease the framework's stability, as more parties choose to withdraw or to ignore the rules (reducing its robustness).

In sum, while this report has identified various opportunities to increase the CBD's effectiveness, robustness, and democracy, we have determined that the overall reform potential is limited — at least in cases in which formal rule changes and consensus-based amendments would be required. This is largely due to the existing divisions among parties and the lack of trust between Global North and Global South actors. At the same time, the CBD itself has proven to be relatively robust, as parties have been able to take decisions on operationalising the KMGBF even in times of increasing geopolitical tensions — albeit with some delay and after lengthy debates. If the parties continue to find ways to overcome polarisation and (geo) politicisation within the CBD, then further fine-tuning (rather than broader reforms) of existing procedures and mechanisms may be possible.

The next meeting of the CBD COP in October 2026 will constitute a critical moment in this regard. The parties will hold the first debate on the results of the global review of collective progress towards the KMGBF targets. This could be a test case for parties' continued commitment not just to the CBD process, but to actually achieving the targets they have established together. To do so, it will be crucial that the parties maintain the momentum created by the KMGBF, to upscale commitments to implementation and biodiversity finance, and to invest in further trust-building among parties.

List of Interviews

Number	Date	Interviewee	Location
1	07/07/2025	Party stakeholder	Online
2	08/14/2025	Party stakeholder	Online
3	08/18/2025	Party stakeholder	Online
4	08/18/2025	Party stakeholder	Online
5	08/19/2025	Party stakeholder	Online
6	08/25/2025	Party stakeholder	Online
7	08/29/2025	Party stakeholder	Online
8	09/01/2025	Party stakeholder	Online
9	09/10/2025	Party stakeholder	Online
10	09/10/2025	Non-party stakeholder	Online
11	09/19/2025	Party stakeholder	Online
12	09/24/2025	CBD Secretariat stakeholder	Online

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