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Summary of the Informal Meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice of the Convention on Biological Diversity: 17-19 and 24-26 February 2021

Before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, 2020 was supposed to be a year for nature and biodiversity, culminating with the adoption of a new post-2020 global biodiversity framework. Yet, in a stark example of the relationship between humans and the natural world, one year ago global lockdowns commenced, and the multilateral environmental agenda was put on hold. As the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) ambitious schedule of in-person meetings was postponed time and again, there was no choice but to meet virtually to maintain momentum and advance the preparations for the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 15).

Over the course of six days, the CBD held an informal meeting in preparation for the 24th meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA 24). Participants had an opportunity to comment on the SBSTTA 24 agenda items, however since this was an informal meeting, no negotiations took place. They first discussed the development of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework since this is expected to be one of the major outcomes of COP 15. Throughout the session, many raised issues for inclusion in the draft framework. Specific discussions focused on the monitoring framework.

Other agenda items discussed included:

- synthetic biology;
- risk assessment and risk management of living modified organisms (LMOs);
- marine and coastal biodiversity,
- biodiversity and agriculture; and
- invasive alien species.

There was insufficient time to consider an additional agenda item on the programme of work of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

The informal sessions convened for three hours each day from 17-19 and 24-26 February 2021. Over 2,000 delegates registered for the meeting, with 1,200 representing parties and non-parties and over 800 from intergovernmental organizations, Major Groups, Indigenous peoples and local communities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Participants delivered brief statements on each agenda item. These statements could also be submitted online and are publicly available. The SBSTTA Chair and Bureau will prepare a brief procedural report setting out who spoke on the respective agenda items.

A Brief History of the Convention on Biological Diversity

The CBD was adopted on 22 May 1992 and opened for signature on 5 June 1992 at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio "Earth Summit"). The CBD entered into force on 29 December 1993. There are currently 196 parties to the Convention, which aims to promote the conservation of biodiversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of genetic resources. The COP is the governing body of the Convention, and there are currently four subsidiary bodies: SBSTTA; the Working Group on Article 8(j) and Related Provisions; the Subsidiary Body on Implementation (SBI); and the Open-ended Working Group (OEWG) on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

Key Turning Points

Three protocols have been adopted under the Convention. The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (January 2000, Montreal, Canada) addresses the safe transfer, handling, and use of living modified organisms (LMOs) that may have adverse effects on biodiversity, taking into account human health, with a specific focus on transboundary movements. It entered into force on 11 September 2003 and currently has 171 parties. The Nagoya-Kuala Lumpur

In this Issue

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Supplementary Protocol on Liability and Redress to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (October 2010, Nagoya, Japan) provides for international rules and procedures on liability and redress for damage to biodiversity resulting from LMOs. It entered into force on 5 March 2018 and currently has 48 parties.

The Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-sharing (October 2010, Nagoya) sets out an international framework for the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources, including by appropriate access to genetic resources and transfer of relevant technologies, taking into account all rights over those resources and technologies, and by appropriate funding, thereby contributing to the conservation of biodiversity and the sustainable use of its components. It entered into force on 12 October 2014 and currently has 129 parties.

Other major decisions include:

- the Jakarta Mandate on marine and coastal biodiversity (COP 2, November 1995, Jakarta, Indonesia);
- work programmes on agricultural and forest biodiversity (COP 3, November 1996, Buenos Aires, Argentina);
- the Global Taxonomy Initiative (COP 4, May 1998, Bratislava, Slovakia);
- work programmes on Article 8(j), dry and sub-humid lands, and incentive measures (COP 5, May 2000, Nairobi, Kenya);
- the Bonn Guidelines on Access and Benefit-sharing and the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation (COP 6, April 2002, The Hague, the Netherlands);
- work programmes on mountain biodiversity, protected areas, and technology transfer, the Akwé: Kon Guidelines for cultural, environmental, and social impact assessments, and the Addis Ababa Principles and Guidelines for sustainable use (COP 7, February 2004, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia);
- a work programme on island biodiversity (COP 8, March 2006, Curitiba, Brazil);
- a resource mobilization strategy, and scientific criteria and guidance for marine areas in need of protection (COP 9, May 2008, Bonn, Germany);
- the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020, including the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, and a decision on activities and indicators for the implementation of the resource mobilization strategy (COP 10, October 2010, Nagoya, Japan);
- an interim target of doubling biodiversity-related international financial resource flows to developing countries by 2015, and at least maintaining this level until 2020, coupled with targets aiming to improve the robustness of baseline information (COP 11, October 2012, Hyderabad, India); and
- a plan of action on customary sustainable use of biodiversity as well as the "Pyeongchang Roadmap," a package of decisions on resource mobilization, capacity building, and scientific and technical cooperation linking biodiversity and poverty eradication, and monitoring implementation of the Strategic Plan (COP 12, October 2014, Pyeongchang, South Korea).

COP 13 (December 2016, Cancún, Mexico) considered: issues related to operations of the Convention, including integration among the Convention and its Protocols; progress towards implementation of the Strategic Plan and the achievement of the Aichi Targets, and related means of implementation; strategic actions to enhance the implementation of the Strategic Plan and achievement of the Aichi Targets, including with respect to mainstreaming biodiversity within and across sectors, particularly in agriculture, fisheries, tourism, and forestry; and biodiversity and human health interlinkages. It also launched consideration of a series of items on emerging technologies, including synthetic biology, gene drives, and digital sequence information (DSI).

COP 14 (November 2018, Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt) set up an intersessional OEWG on the post-2020 framework, and established an intersessional process, including an *Ad Hoc* Technical Expert Group (AHTEG) to continue work on DSI on genetic resources under the Convention and the Nagoya Protocol. COP 14 further adopted the Rutzolijirisaxik voluntary guidelines for the repatriation of traditional knowledge relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity as well as voluntary guidelines and guidance: on the integration of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures into wider land- and seascapes; on effective governance models for management of protected areas, including equity; for the design and effective implementation of ecosystem-based approaches to climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction; for a sustainable wild meat sector; and for avoiding unintentional introductions of invasive alien species associated with trade in live organisms.

Report of the Meeting

On Wednesday, 17 February, SBSTTA Chair Hesiquio Benitez opened the informal meeting and led a moment of silence in memory of those whose lives have been lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On behalf of the COP-14 Presidency, Hamdallah Zedan (Egypt) expressed hope that progress will be made to enable an ambitious and transformative post-2020 global biodiversity framework. CBD Executive Secretary Elizabeth Maruma Mrema noted that this informal meeting is an important step in implementing the work of the Convention, including the formulation of a post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

The meeting proceeded with statements by regional groups, parties, observers, Major Groups, Indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs), and NGOs commenting on the documents prepared for SBSTTA 24. SBSTTA Chair Benitez explained that there will be no conference room papers produced, and that the CBD Secretariat will prepare a brief procedural report.

Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework

SBSTTA Bureau Member Marina von Weissenberg (Finland) chaired the discussions on this agenda item, which took place on Wednesday and Thursday, 17-18 February. The Secretariat introduced the relevant documents (CBD/SBSTTA/24/2; CBD/SBSTTA/24/3, Add.1, Add.2). A number of delegates welcomed setting a target of 30% land and marine protected area coverage and urged monitoring its implementation. ITALY proposed to: consider direct and indirect drivers of nature decline; raise the profile of nature-based targets; and take into account the social benefits of targets. UGANDA emphasized the need to have national inputs into the targets and indicators, and recommended an ecosystems-based approach. CHILE recommended "welcoming" the fifth Global Biodiversity Outlook (GBO-5) rather than taking it into account, since it is essential to making progress in living in harmony with nature and underlines the usefulness of nature-based solutions. SOUTH AFRICA welcomed the summary on the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation (GSPC) in GBO-5, noting its importance in motivating action. Pointing to the importance of work specific to plant conservation to meeting the CBD objectives and conservation of traditional knowledge, MADAGASCAR requested preparation of an update to the GSPC to be in line with the post-2020 global biodiversity framework and to promote actions to address species

decline. Noting the important role of the GSPC in relation to plant conservation and its contribution to the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, the GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR PLANT CONSERVATION called for a post-2020 GSPC. FINLAND and DENMARK called for an increased role of IPLCs in the development of the framework and its indicators. BRAZIL, ARGENTINA, CUBA, and BHUTAN urged increased cooperation and mobilization of international resources among parties to ensure implementation. BHUTAN noted that lack of regional-level discussions on the monitoring framework holds back countries in need of support for successful monitoring.

Noting that many countries may not have sufficient data to monitor biodiversity outcomes, South Africa, for the AFRICAN GROUP, stressed that national reporting should continue to be the main reporting instrument under the Convention, including using National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) as the principal planning instruments under the proposed framework. The AFRICAN GROUP, AUSTRALIA, and CHILE suggested using 2020 as the baseline year for monitoring. Antigua and Barbuda, for the LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN GROUP (GRULAC), urged that the post-2020 global biodiversity framework be simple, realistic, and actionable, taking into account differing circumstances between developing and developed countries. Australia, for JUSCANZ, called for a clear, practical monitoring framework aligned with capacities, noting that a tiered structure can accommodate differences, while headline indicators can foster consistency.

ECUADOR called for a clear and realistic global framework that reflects the post-pandemic reality and urged establishment of an *ad hoc* technical expert group (AHTEG) on operationalization of the monitoring framework. MEXICO urged parties to address the disparities between the proposed goals, targets, and indicators. PERU said the global framework should seek to balance conservation and sustainable development and enable survival of future generations. THAILAND noted the delay in the approval of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework due to the pandemic and recommended implementing it in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. PALAU underlined the importance of marine issues in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework and expressed concern at the high number of headline indicators.

The NETHERLANDS said genetic diversity indicators have not been considered enough and that access and benefit-sharing regimes and processes should also be monitored. A Dutch youth representative then urged other parties to include youth in their delegations, reminding them that youth experience the effects of the biodiversity crisis.

Expressing concern at a lack of reference to benefit-sharing, biosafety, and digital sequencing information in the draft, EGYPT called for clear linkages between the post-2020 global biodiversity framework and the nationally determined contributions (NDCs) under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). TURKEY asked to take into account differences in research infrastructure, institutional capacity, human resources and expertise on genetic resources, and traditional knowledge. Arguing for evidence-based monitoring, the RUSSIAN FEDERATION stressed that while the Convention foresees inclusion of local and Indigenous knowledge, this "cannot replace cutting-edge research." AUSTRIA highlighted gaps in the framework on genetic diversity, urban diversity, climate change, pollinators, and ecosystem restoration, among others.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, for CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE (CEE), argued that the monitoring framework should foresee disaggregated indicators for national use. MEXICO noted that the monitoring framework still has a number of headline indicators and goals needing to be built, and argued against leaving these open to modification by an AHTEG after the adoption of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. DENMARK proposed adding references to circular economies and equitable governance to the monitoring framework. MALAWI stressed the importance of having a timely monitoring framework that is measurable and focuses on the most vulnerable. FRANCE welcomed the monitoring framework structure and how it foresees that countries can provide different levels of detail. COLOMBIA called for a structured framework where only the headline indicators are mandatory for reporting.

NORWAY noted that "considerable work" remains before the launch of the monitoring framework, calling for contact groups at the next formal SBSTTA meeting to discuss indicators for the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. CHINA, the EU, BELGIUM, Bosnia and Herzegovina for CEE, CANADA, and AUSTRIA supported a smaller list of headline indicators. COSTA RICA, supported by ARGENTINA, recommended keeping only one or two headline indicators per target to ensure a clear and coherent framework. SPAIN said it was important to approve a sufficient and realistic number of headline indicators as part of the COP decision on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework to measure the progress made at national and global levels. He also identified gaps with regard to pollinators and marine biodiversity.

A number of delegates from developed countries expressed hope that headline indicators would be agreed upon at COP 15. MOROCCO argued that the indicator list should continue to be discussed in intersessional work between COP 15 and COP 16.

Many delegates supported that COP 15 establish an AHTEG on operationalization of the monitoring framework. PORTUGAL recommended focusing on indicators that are measurable, fully developed, and operational. The UK stressed the importance of a robust framework through a smaller number of indicators with potential for global aggregation, while leaving flexibility for parties to use them according to national circumstances. CHINA and THAILAND stated that parties should be allowed to determine national indicators in line with their national circumstances. SWEDEN suggested including a science-based glossary, and supplementing headline indicators with a set of standardized indicators to be used by parties, as applicable. GUATEMALA pressed for indicators that are clear, achievable, and time bound. The EU called for prioritizing those indicators that are available to all parties, and that can be aggregated and communicated globally. JAPAN proposed that headline indicators only apply to targets that require global efforts, rather than purely local implementation. SWITZERLAND recommended focusing on quantitative and comparative headline indicators that have already been proven to be effective, and making their use compulsory. BELGIUM said that some goals and targets currently lack indicators urged parties to fill the gaps. The DOMINICAN REPUBLIC supported indicators disaggregated by gender, age, and population groups. GEORGIA recommended priority for selection of baseline indicators based on cost-efficiency. She asked to include an indicator on human-wildlife conflict and improving targets related to mainstreaming biodiversity. ARGENTINA recommended first assigning indicators for goals and targets that are not finalized yet and developing a basket of headline

indicators, so the useful ones can be chosen when adopting the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. JORDAN called for indicators to be measurable, monitored, and reviewed so parties can implement goals, and for resource mobilization and capacity building.

The FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UN (FAO) stressed the important role of genetic diversity and agricultural biodiversity, urging inclusion of sustainable use as a pathway to biodiversity protection. The ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS (ASEAN) Centre for Biodiversity stressed the value of regional coordination and recommended a simple monitoring framework with a select set of headline indicators. The UN EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION (UNESCO) stressed the "transformative power" of education, noting the links between protecting biological and cultural diversity. UN WOMEN recommended gender-specific indicators; integrating a gender perspective by disaggregating indicators by sex; and developing a gender action plan as an implementation tool for the post-2020 framework.

Underscoring the role of traditional knowledge in biodiversity conservation, the INTERNATIONAL INDIGENOUS FORUM ON BIODIVERSITY (IIFB) called for the inclusion of the four traditional knowledge-related indicators already used under the Convention in the global framework. Taking into account that Indigenous lands often have high conservation value and linguistic diversity linked to biological diversity, she urged using a rights-based framework focusing on restoring the rights of Indigenous peoples. The CBD WOMEN'S CAUCUS called for a stronger rights-based approach, and for gender equality and empowerment to be integrated consistently throughout the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. The GLOBAL YOUTH BIODIVERSITY NETWORK (GYBN) said that when the contributions of youth are not being measured, they become invisible, and urged taking into account intergenerational equity and priorities of Indigenous peoples and ensuring youth participation in CBD processes. Noting links between human rights, a healthy planet, and the rights of Indigenous peoples, the CBD ALLIANCE urged that the post-2020 framework take on a "One Health, One Welfare" approach.

The WORLD WILDLIFE FUND stressed the importance of ambitious goals and targets that integrate a rights-based approach and argued for further ambition in finance-related aspects of biodiversity restoration. SUBNATIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS proposed that the framework explicitly refer to subnational governments, and apply indicators at a subnational level.

BUSINESS FOR NATURE pointed to the importance of the involvement of business in meeting the objectives of the CBD and the post-2020 global biodiversity framework and its monitoring. RESOURCE AFRICA urged a rights-based approach to conservation and sustainable use, noting that without it, access of IPLCs can be denied by states. BIOVERSITY INTERNATIONAL called for the inclusion of an ambitious target on food systems and reference to the Multilateral System of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. Stressing that the strength of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework depends on the strength of data availability, the GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY INFORMATION FACILITY (GBIF) noted the importance of government investment in biodiversity data initiatives. The CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL FORESTRY RESEARCH highlighted the need to think critically and holistically about environmental and social challenges.

Synthetic Biology

SBSTTA Bureau Member Gaute Voigt-Hanssen, Norway, chaired the discussions on this agenda item, which were held on Thursday and Friday, 18-19 February. The Secretariat introduced the relevant document (CBD/SBSTTA/24/4/Rev.1).

Ethiopia, for the AFRICAN GROUP, called for substantive matters relating to digital sequencing information to be addressed under synthetic biology, and for SBSTTA and the COP to consider whether synthetic biology should be classified as a new and emerging issue. Belarus, for CEE, MEXICO, and FRANCE stressed the need to use a precautionary approach with regard to organisms with engineered gene drives, which might be unintentionally released into ecosystems. AUSTRIA, BELGIUM, GERMANY, MOROCCO, PORTUGAL, and SWITZERLAND also supported a precautionary approach to organisms with engineered gene drives. The UK said the COP decision mandating a precautionary approach is still in force.

Noting the discussion of synthetic biology has taken too long, ETHIOPIA warned of an uncertain future if precautionary regulations are not established. CUBA pointed to potential adverse effects on biodiversity, calling for ways to regulate and avoid accidental release; and to potential benefits requiring both implementation of access and fair and equitable benefit-sharing. He said that free, prior, and informed consent of IPLCs, who could be affected, is required. COLOMBIA said that use and benefits of synthetic biology are of national interest and can contribute to CBD objectives, including dealing with invasive alien species; and that risk assessments should happen on a case-by-case basis based on the product, not the technology used. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION emphasized the difference between synthetic biology and genetic engineering, and suggested it would be premature to establish criteria for synthetic biology. CHILE sought clarification on the definition of "synthetic biology" and "technical advance."

Emphasizing the need for capacity building and technology transfer, BRAZIL welcomed the work of the AHTEG on synthetic biology. The EU urged an efficient process in line with work under other conventions. MALAWI called for strengthened collaboration with the Cartagena and Nagoya Protocols. NORWAY supported the proposed process, urging a division of labor under the Convention and Cartagena Protocol to avoid overlap and duplication. Together with the UK, he urged that LMOs with engineered gene drives be addressed under the Cartagena Protocol. ITALY pointed out that the current AHTEG found most synthetic biology falls under the definition of LMOs, and it is a complex issue covering a wide range of techniques and fields of application. ECUADOR urged the work to be defined within the CBD framework, and supported ongoing work and decisions on this issue. On whether synthetic biology could be considered a new and emerging issue, AUSTRIA, PORTUGAL, and ARGENTINA argued that no further work should be done beyond that already completed. AUSTRALIA and JAPAN argued against considering synthetic biology a new and emerging issue. Noting they had previously raised the issue of whether synthetic biology should be considered a new and emerging issue, NORWAY said they saw no need to maintain this position, and to review the process for new and emerging issues.

AUSTRIA, GERMANY, PORTUGAL, ARGENTINA, and CHILE supported a horizon-scanning process to determine new developments in synthetic biology, with CHILE cautioning that it should be focused only on synthetic biology. SWEDEN supported efficient horizon scanning that can assess the potential positive

and negative impacts through multidisciplinary expertise over two intersessional periods. SWEDEN and FINLAND indicated flexibility with regard to the assessment step. Reemphasizing the need to address engineered gene drives, FINLAND supported a coordinated and non-duplicative approach. THAILAND said biosafety assessments should be implemented as needed, and urged information exchange on risk assessments.

CEE, FRANCE, NEW ZEALAND, SWITZERLAND, JAPAN, BELGIUM, and CANADA supported a horizon scan of developments in synthetic biology to be led by a multidisciplinary technical expert group. BELGIUM expressed interest in other options. JAPAN supported a two-year horizon scanning process. CHINA agreed on the need for multidisciplinary discussions on the risks related to synthetic biology. PARAGUAY and ARGENTINA disagreed with the need for an additional expert group and argued that SBSTTA should complete the scan.

The EU, supported by AUSTRIA, GERMANY, and CHILE, proposed to clarify that the *modus operandi* and selection of members for the multidisciplinary technical expert group mirror the one for the previous AHTEG. CANADA and MEXICO underlined the need to consider the role of IPLCs in these discussions. The EU urged that the multidisciplinary technical expert group have a process to gather information, compile and assess it, and then report on the outcome using a multidisciplinary approach. The UK supported this proposed process and urged further discussion on how this work will inform decision-making. NEW ZEALAND and CANADA sought clarification on whether the multidisciplinary technical expert group would be *ad hoc*. The EU recommended having two intersessional rounds of horizon scanning and then have SBSTTA 28 make a recommendation to COP 17. JORDAN said the COP should be able to clarify issues and put in place monitoring and control mechanisms, and recommended the issue be considered at COP 16.

Warning that synthetic biology can have a negative effect on traditional knowledge, genetic diversity and indigenous lands and waters, IIFB and the INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S NETWORK ON BIODIVERSITY called for assessment of cultural and socio-economic effects. She demanded the implementation of free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous peoples and the precautionary principle when considering approving research. Supported by others, she urged the full and effective participation of Indigenous peoples in the related processes, including participation in the multidisciplinary technical expert group of at least seven Indigenous representatives with one from each of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) regions.

The CBD WOMEN's CAUCUS, the CBD ALLIANCE, and THIRD WORLD NETWORK called for a global moratorium on any release of organisms with engineered gene drives into the environment. GYBN said that fast-developing technologies bring a sense of urgency to the development of guidelines, as well as to ensuring that these technologies are safe. The CBD ALLIANCE urged that the multidisciplinary technical expert group address health, cultural, and socio-economic impacts, and that the issue return for COP consideration every biennium. THIRD WORLD NETWORK urged that the multidisciplinary technical expert group include expertise on the diversity of application of synthetic biology, including to health. The INTERNATIONAL PLANNING COMMITTEE FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY raised the need to guarantee the safety and traceability of synthetic biology products. FRIENDS OF THE EARTH-US urged SBSTTA to take on transient modification techniques as a new and emerging issue due to their potential to impact evolutionary processes.

SBSTTA Chair Benitez expressed regret that 20 NGOs were not able to take the floor on the issue due to lack of time.

Risk Assessment and Risk Management of LMOs

The informal meeting considered this item on Friday, 19 February, and Wednesday, 24 February. SBSTTA Bureau Member Gaute Voigt-Hanssen (Norway) chaired the session. The Secretariat introduced the relevant document (CBD/SBSTTA/24/5).

NORWAY urged a clear division of labor for the work under the CBD and the Cartagena Protocol. AUSTRIA said it was vital to continue work on risk assessment and for SBSTTA to identify specific issues to be considered. PORTUGAL said SBSTTA should continue working on a process to identify issues that may require further consideration.

Parties were divided on whether to develop additional guidance on risk assessment of LMOs with engineered gene drives. Ethiopia for the AFRICAN GROUP, BRAZIL, the UK, JAPAN, THAILAND, and PARAGUAY argued that existing resources sufficiently address risk assessment needs. Belarus, for CEE, FINLAND, MEXICO, PORTUGAL, and THAILAND called for further guidance to be developed. NORWAY agreed and called for capacity building on engineered gene drives. Belarus, for CEE, MEXICO, and FINLAND supported developing these through an AHTEG. Ethiopia, for the AFRICAN GROUP, argued against an AHTEG on risk assessment due to a lack of clear mandate. PARAGUAY argued that an AHTEG should be constrained in time and scope. The UK and JAPAN argued that these should be assessed on a case-by-case basis under the Cartagena Protocol.

AUSTRIA said the information gathering process should be party-driven and, with GERMANY, stressed that any additional guidance must be of high scientific value. The EU urged that the guidance address general issues related to engineered gene drives and specific applications like mosquitos. Supported by a number of parties, he proposed to have a smaller expert group draft the guidance, then have an open online forum for input by all, including stakeholders, and then have an AHTEG finalize it.

On living modified fish species, Ethiopia, for the AFRICAN GROUP, BRAZIL, NEW ZEALAND, and THAILAND cautioned against elaborating further guidelines and, instead, considering the issue on a case-by-case basis. PORTUGAL and FRANCE noted existing guidance can be used. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION said living modified fish should only be released in semi-contained systems and that multi-year testing for gene drive risks should be conducted on a case-by-case basis in contained systems to reduce the risk to biodiversity. As a non-party to the Cartagena Protocol, ARGENTINA noted that previous AHTEGs took a long time to develop guidance and that parties could not reach consensus. He urged considering other mechanisms to develop science-based risk assessments.

The CBD ALLIANCE said gene drives present a potentially irreversible threat due to evolutionary processes and called for a global moratorium on their release into the environment. GYBN said current LMO guidance is not specific enough to cover potential impacts, including socio-economic ones, of gene drives and that their use would require public participation. Warning that present work on modified mosquitoes has been a "failure," the AFRICAN CENTRE FOR BIODIVERSITY called for a global moratorium on the release of LMOs with gene drives. The OUTREACH NETWORK FOR GENE DRIVE RESEARCH reported guidance

for "responsible" gene drive research has progressed, with the World Health Organization updating its guidance framework on genetically modified mosquitoes. IIFB warned against the adverse effects of LMOs with gene drives can have on biodiversity, Indigenous food systems and traditional knowledge. Together with the CBD ALLIANCE, she supported the establishment of an AHTEG to develop further guidance on LMOs with gene drives and called for the full and effective participation of Indigenous peoples, with GYBN adding women and youth.

GYBN said living modified fish can have next generation effects due to gene flow into wild species. The CBD WOMEN'S CAUCUS stressed the need to consider the socio-cultural impacts of living modified fish, arguing for clear guidance on risk assessment given that fish cross national borders. The CBD ALLIANCE spoke to the fundamental challenges posed by living modified fish, including the potential for next generation effects, and agreed with the AHTEG members who recommended guidance on living modified fish.

Marine and Coastal Biodiversity

SBSTTA Bureau Member Marie-May Muzungaile (Seychelles) chaired this discussion, which took place on Wednesday and Thursday, 24-25 February. The Secretariat introduced the relevant document (CBD/SBSTTA/24/6).

Regarding the document and annexes relating options for modifying descriptions of ecologically or biologically significant marine areas (EBSAs) and for describing new areas, South Africa, for the AFRICAN GROUP, MEXICO, MOROCCO, and NEW ZEALAND supported extending the term of the informal advisory group on EBSAs. Ukraine for CEE, MEXICO, and MOROCCO supported a "relevant expert advisory body" to inform modalities for modifying descriptions of, or creating new, EBSAs.

CHILE urged parties to integrate EBSAs into national legislation to enable the effectiveness of newly created EBSAs. GERMANY supported the proposed criteria for determining new EBSAs. He encouraged all parties to take into account the scientific aspects of determining EBSAs in the negotiations of an international legally binding instrument under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ).

CANADA urged use of traditional knowledge and consent and, with NEW ZEALAND, supported the work on description and modification of EBSAs or new ones, including the proposed methodologies. COLOMBIA did not agree with the modification criteria, and recommended against modifying existing EBSAs. CANADA recommended stipulating that, in EBSAs in areas under national jurisdiction, parties can choose to use the CBD methodology, and that further peer review should be optional for parties who request it. CEE supported the development of voluntary guidelines on peer-review processes to identify areas meeting the EBSA criteria and other complementary scientific criteria. ISRAEL encouraged all parties to contribute to the protection of all EBSAs once listed. The Philippines, for ASEAN, noted that the options for modalities will help strengthen EBSAs. IIFB asked to take into account Indigenous knowledge provided with their free, prior, and informed consent and related indicators in the development of EBSAs. JAPAN recommended consolidating certain annexes, noting there was no clear difference between the modification of existing EBSAs or creation of new ones, while it seems reasonable to distinguish between those in and beyond national jurisdiction. CHINA welcomed that there is more detail in the modalities, and urged the CBD not to address issues such as national sovereignty. Underling that states have sovereign rights within their exclusive economic zones, the EU clarified that the outcome of the modification of EBSAs should not prejudice these. BRAZIL said the CBD mandate does not cover areas with biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction, noting that the work on EBSAs there is not the same as for EBSAs where the affected party has national jurisdiction and therefore should have input. COLOMBIA asked to note that none of the references should be interpreted as tacit acceptance of UNCLOS, to which it is not a party. ARGENTINA proposed to include a preambular paragraph that processes for EBSAs should be without prejudice to sovereignty disputes, and to make reference to UNCLOS as the instrument that deals with the protection of the marine environment to which the CBD contributes through designation of EBSAs.

The EU, FINLAND, GERMANY, and DENMARK recommended splitting the draft into two recommendations: one on EBSAs and one on conservation of coastal and marine biodiversity. GERMANY and FINLAND asked to make marine biodiversity more prominent in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. The EU, EGYPT, DENMARK, FINLAND, FRANCE, SPAIN, CANADA, and CHILE stressed the importance of the marine-related aspect of the second target of the draft post-2020 global biodiversity framework to protect 30% of oceans by 2030. SENEGAL urged parties to protect 50% of oceans. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION said the target was unrealistic, and that studies should be undertaken on a more feasible goal.

Parties discussed other marine and coastal issues that should be considered, including marine debris, microplastics, coral bleaching, and anthropogenic underwater noise. BRAZIL urged that future work consider knowledge gaps on the multiple drivers of marine biodiversity loss, efforts to address over-exploitation, and recovery plans and efforts. PORTUGAL urged addressing emerging pressures, including marine debris and microplastics in line with United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) decisions, anthropogenic underwater noise, deep-sea mining, and renewable energy production. MOROCCO stressed that marine debris, litter, and microplastics are a worsening phenomenon globally that must be mitigated. CANADA said it was critical to better understand the stressors on marine and coastal biodiversity, especially on coral reefs, and cumulative effects, based on robust scientific information. SWEDEN asked to clarify the links between climate change and marine biodiversity, urging conservation and restoration of carbon-rich areas including reefs and mangroves. ISRAEL pointed to a wide range of anthropogenic impacts, including oil spills. South Africa, for the AFRICAN GROUP, pointed out the negative impacts of coral bleaching in the Indian Ocean. SPAIN urged the post-2020 framework to consider the protection and restoration of marine ecosystems and to address pressures such as plastics, underwater noise, and the impact of fishing on marine biodiversity. FRANCE urged redirecting financial flows to restoring ecosystems such as coral reefs, mangroves, and seagrass. The UK asked to reflect the need for oceans to be sustainably managed in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, expressing concern that oceans remain underrepresented. EGYPT called for financial resources and capacity building. A number of delegates stressed the importance of marine spatial planning. INDIA said it could help address challenges such as unsustainable fishing, ghost fishing gear, and other marine debris.

ITALY encouraged further discussion of difficult issues like deep sea mining and illegal fishing. THAILAND said regional efforts, such as those among ASEAN members, should be prioritized and

can be a model for protecting marine biodiversity. Noting that protection of marine biodiversity leads to ecosystem services, the PHILIPPINES advocated for vulnerability assessments of marine and coastal ecosystems and against unsustainable exploitation and conversions that lead to biodiversity loss. JORDAN stressed the need to address environmental disasters such as oil spills from ships. Noting the ecosystem services and functions they provide, INDIA called for commitments to protect marine areas with the involvement of local communities. FINLAND, ASEAN, and INDIA urged updating the work programme on marine and coastal biodiversity in line with the post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

DENMARK said this discussion should complement work under UNEA and the UNFCCC, and underlined the importance of including marine indicators in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. FINLAND stressed the importance of cooperation with other conventions. PORTUGAL and ITALY said current scientific conclusions by IPBES and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are alarming and should inspire a strong sense of urgency. COLOMBIA urged stronger connections with other international processes to achieve clean and healthy oceans, deliver climate change mitigation, and ensure effective participation of IPLCs. SWEDEN urged addressing emerging threats such as deep sea mining; increasing cooperation with international bodies such as the International Seabed Authority, FAO, and other fisheries management organizations; and developing voluntary guidelines on fisheries. Urging increased cooperation with other international organizations working in areas beyond national jurisdiction, SPAIN asked to include an operative paragraph to encourage the development of a global agreement on marine litter and microplastics under UNEA. SPAIN supported this, along with references to the BBNJ negotiations.

FAO stressed the benefits of marine spatial planning, ecosystem-based approaches, and global monitoring of indicators. The UN DIVISION FOR OCEAN AFFAIRS AND THE LAW OF THE SEA, also serving as the Secretariat for the BBNJ negotiations, urged uniform and consistent applications of standards under the CBD and UNCLOS. The Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO underscored the importance of its Global Oceans Observance System and promised continued involvement in development of a sustainable blue economy. The INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR CONSERVATION OF NATURE (IUCN) urged greater mainstreaming of biodiversity with regard to fisheries. The GROUP ON EARTH OBSERVATIONS BIODIVERSITY OBSERVATION NETWORK (GEO BON) pointed to long delays in biodiversity-related data getting published, making it too late to show trends and take them into account. The GLOBAL OCEAN BIODIVERSITY INITIATIVE invited utilizing new data on marine biodiversity collected by IPBES. The INTERNATIONAL WHALING COMMISSION said bycatch and entanglement constitute the single greatest threat to cetaceans and urged inclusion of specific references to non-target bycatch. The SECRETARIAT OF THE PACIFIC REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME (SPREP) called for making more explicit linkages to climate change in the documents on EBSAs and supported their peer review. The WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY pointed out that underwater anthropogenic noise was no longer addressed in the monitoring framework despite positive peer review recommending its inclusion.

IIFB said Indigenous food sovereignty is closely linked to marine areas, which are often food gathering areas, and asked to recognize such as culturally significant areas. She asked to include islands within the Arctic and cold-water areas under the jurisdictional scope of the CBD. The CBD WOMEN'S CAUCUS urged inclusion of an inclusive, equitable, and meaningful gender perspective; and, with the CBD ALLIANCE, special consideration for small scale fishers. Both expressed the need for a human rights-based approach to conservation that guarantees tenure to Indigenous peoples and implements Indigenous conservation areas and co-management arrangements. The CBD ALLIANCE urged a moratorium on marine geo-engineering and, with the CBD WOMEN'S CAUCUS and GYBN, called it an "unmeasurable threat." GYBN urged that decisions on EBSAs be taken with the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous peoples and in consultation with women, youth, and relevant rights holders. BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL suggested strengthened scientific processes for the designation of EBSAs, taking into account cumulative effects on marine biodiversity.

Biodiversity and Agriculture

SBSTTA Bureau Member Adams Toussaint (Saint Lucia), chaired this discussion, which took place Thursday and Friday, 25-26 February. The Secretariat introduced the relevant document (CBD/SBSTTA/24/7/Rev.1). Seychelles, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, discussed the contribution of biodiversity to food, shelter, medicine, pollination, and ecosystem services. MOLDOVA, for CEE, recommended the use of indigenous plant varieties in agriculture and food production, noting that local communities often develop innovative measures and provide sustenance and ecosystem services at the community level. ARGENTINA encouraged providing incentives for increasing productivity of agricultural systems through crop rotation, organic farming, and crop diversity.

MOROCCO said sustainable practices by farmers can greatly contribute to climate change mitigation. JAPAN recommended promoting sustainable agriculture based on national circumstances. THAILAND urged implementing ecosystem-based approaches according to national circumstances and addressing agricultural waste management and appropriate use of fertilizers. INDONESIA recommended promoting diversity of local and Indigenous food systems and building a global understanding of biodiversity for future generations. CHINA called for sufficient technology transfer and capacity building to help reduce burdens on developing country parties. Many welcomed international cooperation, with FRANCE asking to add reference to the UNFCCC and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration; and PORTUGAL requesting reference to the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and IPBES.

CEE said it was important to develop indicators on soil biodiversity and to monitor at a regional level by fostering interaction between governments and research organizations. PORTUGAL, MEXICO, THAILAND, and others expressed appreciation for the high quality of the FAO report on the State of Knowledge on Soil Biodiversity covering the status, challenges, and potentialities. SPAIN and PORTUGAL urged integrating soil biodiversity restoration and development of sustainable agricultural systems in the post 2020 global biodiversity framework. SWITZERLAND requested SBSTTA to integrate references to soil biodiversity in the post-2020 targets, goals, and indicators. COLOMBIA asked to promote synergies with the UNFCCC and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and, with SWITZERLAND, supported the draft plan of action 2020-2030 for the international initiative for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. AUSTRALIA urged involving industries, IPLCs, and

state and local governments in the implementation of the updated plan of action. The UK urged restoration of depleted soils by 2030 and recommended considering the issue at COP 17, not COP 16, to provide time to advance the work.

The EU recommended mainstreaming soil biodiversity into many sectors, not just agriculture; and safeguarding ecosystem services provided by soils. BELARUS decried the extinction of traditional crops and local plant varieties due to agricultural intensification and urged stronger cooperation with local communities to avoid their disappearance. GERMANY stressed the global importance of soil biodiversity and its contribution to agricultural production systems, and of monitoring the connection between above- and below-ground biodiversity. FRANCE underscored the importance of soil restoration and urged providing incentives for a diversity of soil systems. Youth representing the NETHERLANDS warned that soils around the world are headed for exhaustion and youth will have to deal with "the expiration date," and reminded delegates that aspects of agriculture are a root cause of biodiversity loss.

CHILE recommended conserving soil biota in other sectors, as well as the appropriate use of agro-fertilizers. Thailand, for ASEAN, asked to prioritize research, development cooperation, and funding to inform adaptive management to ensure long-term productivity of soils and achieve food security. SPAIN urged addressing loss of soil biodiversity, including through other sectors such as mining.

BELGIUM urged monitoring soil carbon content and preservation of soil organic carbon stocks. BRAZIL asked to prioritize building capacity to map soil differences in different climatic zones. He encouraged use of relevant traditional knowledge subject to fair and equitable benefit-sharing with the respective country or community of origin and to their prior informed consent. FINLAND urged development of indicators for soil biodiversity and monitoring of soils. MEXICO urged incentives for basic and applied research on the important role of soil biodiversity and data collection based on indicators and Indigenous knowledge. JORDAN, INDIA, and PARAGUAY highlighted the importance of soil biodiversity in ensuring human and environmental health. JORDAN noted the need to consider climate change and desertification as major factors in soil deterioration. PARAGUAY highlighted how changing from tilling-intensive systems to no-till systems has helped its agricultural industry conserve soil and increase soil carbon levels. GEORGIA and CHINA pressed for soil biodiversity to be better represented in national action plans.

NEW ZEALAND said a better understanding of soils is important to ensuring a good connection between agriculture and the natural world, and urged robust information collection. The DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO stressed the importance of awareness raising and knowledge transfer about soil to farmers and urged including a request for IPBES to do a global assessment on soil biodiversity. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION urged collection of more information on soil biodiversity and its inclusion in NBSAPs, and said protected areas should be included as a means to enhance soil biodiversity. Urging a focus on resource mobilization, PERU said the 2020/30 Plan of Action can only be fulfilled if the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and other donors provide technical and financial assistance. ITALY said the initiative on soils must go beyond agriculture and involve every sector, noting that the agricultural sector faces pressures from other sectors, including taking up of agricultural lands for development. Highlighting the work of its Global Soil Partnership, the FAO stressed the direct connection between above- and below-ground biodiversity and the need to protect both.

IIFB pointed to Indigenous world views that see the soil as a living being. He stressed the importance of traditional Indigenous food production systems and of Indigenous communities governing land under their own protocols. He recommended a trust fund for Indigenous peoples. GYBN spoke to the anthropogenic causes of soil biodiversity loss and to addressing obstacles to land tenure for women and IPLCs. Recognizing the unique role of women in agriculture and their knowledge on sustainable soil use, the CBD Women's Caucus called for reform of the food system to move away from concentration of power in the hands of multinational corporations and industrial monoculture farming that drives soil biodiversity loss. The CBD ALLIANCE said that focus should be on elimination of perverse incentives, especially for intensive livestock production systems, and to minimize or eliminate use of all pesticides and industrial fertilizers.

GEO BON and GBIF described their work to address the data gaps on soil organisms and urged parties to contribute their data. PRO NATURA and FRIENDS OF THE EARTH EUROPE said soils are the result of long-term processes that take centuries to build up, and supported spatial planning. Warning against ongoing promotion of industrial agriculture and monoculture increasing the vulnerability of food systems, the AFRICAN CENTRE for BIODIVERSITY stressed the need for a uniquely African food sovereignty system and ecosystem restoration that can contribute to economic and food security. AVAAZ urged tackling biodiversity loss and desertification and pointed to in situ conservation by IPLCs, urging their full and effective participation in restoration of productive areas. SPREP said some other drivers of diversity loss are beyond the control of specific nations and that Pacific islands are particularly vulnerable to loss of soil biodiversity.

Invasive Alien Species

SBSTTA Bureau Member Helena Brown (Antigua and Barbuda) chaired the discussion, which took place on Friday, 26 February. The Secretariat introduced the relevant document (CBD/SBSTTA/24/10).

Parties agreed that invasive alien species are a threat to biodiversity, which must be addressed at a global level, and invited the Open-ended Working Group on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework to take into account the negative impacts of invasive alien species in developing the post-2020 framework.

Many parties welcomed the work of the AHTEG on invasive alien species and its recommendations to the COP, along with the draft recommendation and detailed annexes containing information on different methods and additional advice and guidance. Some expressed reservations. GERMANY said that the proposed guidance should be brought in line with existing COP decisions and should provide a concise summary for policymakers. BELGIUM noted discrepancies between the AHTEG's terms of reference and advice provided in the annexes. SWEDEN requested further work on disease transmission through invasive alien species. The EU proposed that the document be changed to reflect that many of the proposed guidance elements have already been adopted by the COP. South Africa, for the AFRICAN GROUP, said the draft guidance cannot be implemented in its current form requiring work due to its complexity. MEXICO urged: strengthening early warning systems at entry points; the implementation of digital single windows alongside physical inspection for invasive alien species; and setting up platforms to look at future scenarios. CANADA said the guidance and the application of the methods are voluntary. The RUSSIAN

FEDERATION remarked that the AHTEG's work could be even more effective, urged a cost benefit analysis of the fight against invasive alien species, and proposed to develop a "top 100 list" of those that present the greatest global threat.

Indonesia, for ASEAN, noted that the region has consolidated its efforts in management of invasive alien species, resulting in an action plan to develop capacity, training, and knowledge exchange. Georgia, for CEE, said that further concrete actions on invasive alien species should be scheduled and implemented in coordination with other processes. PORTUGAL, SWEDEN, the EU, and SWITZERLAND urged the use of a precautionary approach in employing organisms with engineered gene drives to manage invasive alien species. CEE, the DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, and UGANDA called for further capacity building. CEE called for funding for implementation to be included in donor priorities.

The AFRICAN GROUP said invasive alien species continue to be one of greatest threats to African biodiversity, which is also exacerbated by climate change, land use change, and land degradation. He lamented that parties are inundated with guidance documents with little or no resources to support their implementation. The UK urged greater integration of work on invasive alien species with plant and human health issues, including links to infectious diseases. CHILE called for further inclusion of references to aquatic, marine, and island ecosystems. FRANCE and UGANDA supported including references to links to the impacts of invasive alien species on social and cultural diversity, with BRAZIL and ARGENTINA opposing and noting recommendations should be based in science. MEXICO welcomed the involvement of the World Customs Organization (WCO) in detecting invasive alien species. PERU noted that working with the Interagency Liaison Group and the WCO was key to preventing cross-border issues regarding invasive alien species.

CANADA, CHILE, MEXICO, MOROCCO, PERU, UGANDA, and CUBA supported establishing a globally harmonized labelling system for invasive alien species. BRAZIL demurred, pointing out that she could not welcome recommendations or proposals on labelling because trade is not within the CBD's mandate. JAPAN noted that invasive alien species such as fire ants can be transferred through shipping containers and industrial products, and called for further work on the subject.

CHINA called for strengthened cooperation across organizations to deal with invasion channels. He supported updating and including information on invasive species in NBSAPs.

NEW ZEALAND said IPBES identified invasive alien species as one of the five main drivers of biodiversity loss and urged addressing this as a cross-cutting issue. CHILE called for a preventative approach to invasive alien species related to tourism. SPAIN, with CHILE, suggested that states consider establishing a list of importable species rather than one of prohibited species, the latter of which could be circumvented easily by traffickers, and supported a call to cooperate with the tourism industry. FINLAND, ARGENTINA, and FRANCE called for work on measures to reduce risks related to invasive alien species introduced via e-commerce.

Closure of the Informal Meeting

CBD Executive Secretary Mrema welcomed the discussions on each agenda item, hoping they will help inform effective deliberations when the official SBSTTA meeting convenes. SBSTTA Chair Benitez reported that over 2,000 persons registered for the informal meeting, including 1,200 registrants from 132 parties and over 800 observers; and that over 260 statements were made. He expressed regrets that observer statements could not be heard on invasive alien species and that there was no time to hear more of their statements on synthetic biology. He said all statements will be made public and the online submission system has proven efficient. Chair Benitez explained that, since this was an informal meeting, only a brief procedural report would be prepared, but the discussions will inform SBSTTA's future work and in the development of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. He closed the informal meeting at 10:09 EST (GMT-5).

A Brief Analysis of the Meeting

2021 "feels a lot like 2020" is not only trending on Twitter these days. It also reflects the uncertainties about the starting point for international re-engagement on biodiversity. For the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), 2020 was supposed to be a "super year," culminating in the 15th meeting of the CBD Conference of the Parties (COP 15), originally scheduled for October 2020. 2020 was meant to bring about a new commitment to biodiversity in the form of a post-2020 global biodiversity framework. Yet the global COVID-19 pandemic effectively brought things to a halt: the last in-person negotiation under the CBD, the Second Meeting of the Open-ended Working Group on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, took place a year ago, in late February 2020. Thus, this informal meeting in preparation for the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) was convened with the objective of maintaining momentum. Although it was not a formal negotiating session, the informal meeting provided space to exchange ideas and move forward on some of the more intractable issues. What, if anything, did the informal meeting accomplish? What challenges remain to rebuilding momentum around biodiversity? This brief analysis will address these questions.

Summoning Substance

The informal meeting for SBSTTA 24 covered a dizzying array of topics over 18 hours of discussions, from synthetic biology to invasive alien species. While some more cynical participants did not expect much to emerge in such a compressed timeframe, others confessed some surprise at how prepared delegates had been upon arrival; and, consequently, how, in the words of one, "*most* interventions were actually quite meaningful."

Synthetic biology, for example, has long haunted SBSTTA, considering the contentious politics the issue brings to a technical advisory body. Some parties maintain that synthetic biology does not meet the threshold of being a "new and emerging issue," thus not warranting addition to the CBD agenda. The issue's persistent presence in discussions has led many to consider the debate moot, regardless of procedural quibbles about criteria that have gone on for years. "We're not in 2018 anymore," one delegate quipped. As parties and civil society debate the politics, what remains is that synthetic biology is squarely on the CBD agenda—if only *de facto*. The main question is no longer *whether* the item should be taken up in formal meetings, but *how* it will be substantively addressed.

Although most parties reiterated their well-known positions on most issues on the agenda, there was progress on a few issues. The echoes of other international negotiations clearly had a positive reverberation. For example, many delegates committed themselves to the "30x30" goal, pushed by a high ambition coalition aiming to protect 30% of land and oceans by 2030. Similarly, the need to address plastics pollution in oceans echoed UNEA's work towards a global agreement on marine littler and microplastics.

Despite signs of hope, critics warned that progress may be too little, too late. A number of civil society organizations warned against the siloing of issues in the draft of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. "Issues like Indigenous knowledge, which should be cross-cutting, are being given their own goals," one warned. "They need to be mainstreamed, not shoved into their own corner." Conversely, many asked for specific issues like soil biodiversity and invasive alien species to have more prominence in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. The real challenge, then, becomes how to implement a framework that is both holistic and specific. How to implement and monitor the proposed goals and targets continues to be a big question. Drawing comparisons to the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, some delegates worried that building a "bloated" framework would lead to the same pitfalls as the last decade. If not a single Aichi target could be met, some questioned, what guarantees that building new goals into the post-2020 framework will work at all?

The informal nature of discussions, which enabled parties to state certain things more openly, proved to be a double-edged sword. The positions parties shared were provisional and did not contribute to an outcome document. If delegates can avoid reiterating their positions and, instead, build on the momentum generated over the last two weeks with substantive discussion, SBSTTA 24 might be able to make real progress.

Re-building Connections

Beyond substantive issues, the informal meetings laid bare the persistent problems of access inequality that have plagued virtual meetings over the past year. A number of delegates from developing and developed countries alike experienced serious connectivity issues, leading to delays in statements. "Not all of us are in high-speed heaven," one participant complained. "We should at least be able to phone in from a landline." Such a back-up option has been made available at meetings under other multilateral environmental agreements, and proven effective when the Secretariat was able to call the respective delegate back. However, one aspect of this meeting that received a positive response was the creation of a publicly available repository of statements. The written statements arguably create an informal record, even when no official report or outcome document will be produced.

The short amount of time often led to curtailing the participation of NGOs and civil society—including one day when 20 NGOs were unable to speak on synthetic biology. It remains to be seen whether the informal meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Implementation (SBI), which will meet in early March 2021, will reflect any lessons learned by SBSTTA on how to balance the need to give substantive statements and the imperative to give an equitable stage to civil society.

Considering the inequalities in COVID-19 vaccine rollout, an in-person meeting at a COP-level scale seems increasingly unlikely until 2022. Some have floated the possibility of hybrid meetings in the interim now that there is some trust in informal virtual meetings. The question becomes essential in the lead-up to the next COP: there is a delicate balance between building trust in the process and engaging in negotiations in a virtual format, which is an entirely different challenge.

Staying on the Road

For all that the pandemic has wrought, some pointed out that virtual settings have created some unforeseen opportunities. For example, 2000 people participated in the informal dialogues over six days—significantly more than would have been present in the conference center in Montreal. The CBD's work is as much to remind the world of the value of biodiversity and the crises that humanity faces as it is to draft and enshrine new agreements. "Right now, we need to keep the trust of parties in the process," one seasoned delegate explained. "But we also need to connect with normal people. If people are showing up and taking these discussions seriously, then I'm optimistic about the future."

Despite the significant work so far on developing a new global biodiversity framework, the criticisms surrounding it—that it is nowhere near ambitious enough, or too complex to be executed, or too exacting of less developed countries—show that it will be important to resume actual negotiations as soon as possible so the framework can be adopted at COP 15. The fact that some delegates are optimistic is a good sign, if only because the work ahead will require it. The remaining question is whether SBSTTA can make enough genuine progress to address the seemingly intractable crisis of biodiversity loss. In other words, can CBD negotiations get back on the road and build up the momentum lost a year ago?

Upcoming Meetings

Informal Meeting for SBI 3: This virtual informal meeting will give participants an opportunity to comment on the agenda items in preparation for the third meeting of the CBD Subsidiary Body on Implementation (SBI 3). **dates:** 8-12 and 14 March 2021 **location:** virtual **www:** https://www.cbd.int/conferences/sbstta24-sbi3

For additional meetings, see https://sdg.iisd.org/

Glossary

AHTEG	*Ad hoc* Technical Expert Group
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BBNJ	Marine biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
COP	Conference of the Parties
EBSAs	Ecologically or biologically significant marine areas
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN
GBIF	Global Biodiversity Information Facility
GEO BON	Group on Earth Observations Biodiversity Observation Network
GYBN	Global Youth Biodiversity Network
IIFB	International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity
IPBES	Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services
IPLCs	Indigenous peoples and local communities
LMOs	Living modified organisms
NBSAPs	National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans
SBSTTA	Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice
SPREP	Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme
UNCLOS	UN Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNEA	UN Environment Assembly
UNESCO	UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFCCC	UN Framework Convention on Climate Change