

POLICY BRIEF

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Addressing multiple values of biodiversity in development cooperation

Key messages

- *The ecosystem service concept and economic valuation of biodiversity currently form the dominant narrative on biodiversity in international environmental politics and development cooperation, mainly highlighting the utilitarian value of biodiversity to humans, as expressed in monetary terms.*
- *Such a narrow perspective on the economic value of biodiversity bears the risk that other valuable arguments for the protection of biodiversity addressing non-instrumental or intrinsic values of nature are neglected.*
- *Strengthening alternative narratives on biodiversity will be made easier if development cooperation embraces other, multidimensional understandings of development.*
- *Cooperation and communication strategies for biodiversity should acknowledge and make use of a wide range of narratives on biodiversity and its relation to human wellbeing, depending on the cultural and regional context of the target groups.*

1. The multiple values of biodiversity

Nature plays a central role in human life

Biodiversity provides diverse benefits for humans, which are of material and non-material nature. Material benefits or “services” for humans include, for example, clean air, food, medicinal plants, or firewood. Furthermore, biodiversity conservation is a field of work that provides jobs, such as managing protected areas or working in the eco-tourism industry. Non-material benefits provided by biodiversity can be understood by, for example, thinking of nature as a space where the urban population enjoys spending its free time or engaging in recreational activities, especially in developed countries. Yet, the immaterial values attributed to biodiversity extend far beyond this aspect, particularly for local or indigenous communities in the global South. Biodiversity or “nature” is often central to the culture, religion or

identity of these populations. Nature’s central place in people’s worldviews often stems from the fact that nature and biodiversity constitute a key part of people’s livelihoods and thus their material wellbeing. Other people – including in the industrialized world – can feel a deep spiritual or religious relationship with nature as a whole and assign an inherent value to it, even if they are not directly dependent on it for their livelihoods.

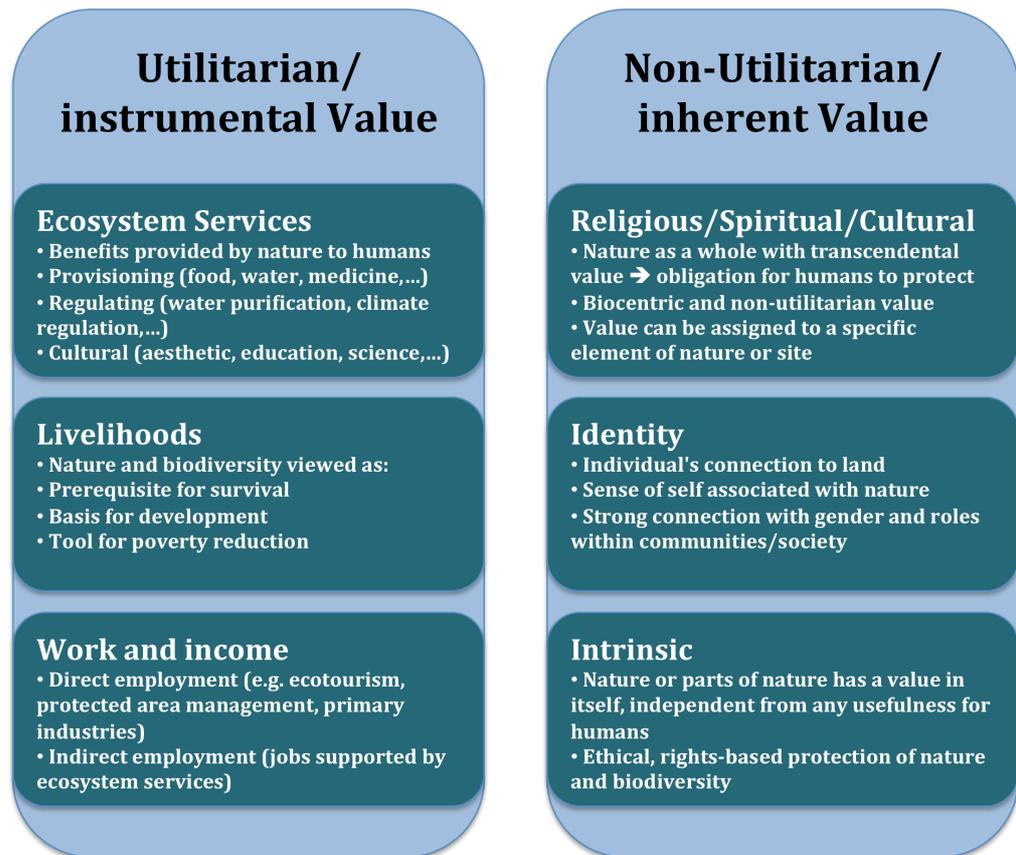


Figure 1: Dominant narratives of biodiversity and human wellbeing

Source: own creation

Discussion on biodiversity protection has become very technical

Over the last two decades, new approaches to biodiversity conservation have been developed, which build on the idea that biodiversity delivers material benefits that can and should be quantified in monetary terms. Currently, technical terms like “ecosystem services” or “habitat banking” prevail in strategic discussions and policies that aim to halt global biodiversity loss. The idea behind such technical terms is that once the monetary value of biodiversity is established and made visible, people will pay for the use and enjoyment of biodiversity; therewith, the likelihood of it being destroyed will be reduced and funds will become available for conservation efforts.

However, the value of biodiversity is not limited to material benefits in the eyes of many people. Instead, nature is viewed as having an inherent value or as being a part of individuals’ identities. Local or indigenous communities may oppose assigning a monetary value to e.g. a sacred mountain or a forest grove. In fact, some developing countries – including e.g. Bolivia and Ecuador – have adopted an official discourse that is critical of the “monetization” or “commodification” of nature.

2. Underrepresented: The non-economic values of biodiversity

Non-utilitarian narratives highlighting the cultural and spiritual value of biodiversity or an intrinsic value of nature are occasionally mentioned in the mainstream discourse on development and nature conservation, but are underrepresented in shaping development programs or strategies. This may be due to a variety of reasons:

The most dominant understanding of development does not leave enough room for different interpretations and ideas of wellbeing. A wide concept of wellbeing (as embraced e.g. by the capabilities approach) as the key aim of development opens a much wider perspective on the potential role of biodiversity in achieving development goals. This has already been recognized to some extent in more recent policy initiatives, such as the process concerning the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

Progress in development is more difficult to measure when a wider perspective of wellbeing is applied. A much broader basis of indicators would have to be used and adapted to regional contexts as values and conceptions of wellbeing differ considerably between regions and individuals. The enormous effort Bhutan has made to estimate progress in development with particular reference to 'happiness' is still the only example worldwide, where the idea of development has directly been linked to wellbeing.

Certain actors and power relations shape discourse on biodiversity

The international discourses on development, wellbeing and biodiversity are dominated by certain actors and players. The understanding of development as economic growth and the utilitarian perspective of nature are strongly promoted through scientific reports, political strategies and development frameworks. With few exceptions, these understandings are also adopted by national governments in the developing world.

3. How to practically align biodiversity protection with human wellbeing in development cooperation?

Bring human wellbeing to the core of development objectives rather than sticking to economic growth as the ultimate goal

Development is a long-term process with multiple objectives, which are likely to change or may be adjusted over time. Economic growth and the creation of jobs have long been key concerns for development efforts. This has often led to oversimplified strategies, which might have benefitted certain actor groups or sectors (in the short term), but rarely improved the situation of people in respect of their values and their environment. The example of Bhutan has shown that focusing on human wellbeing as it is understood by individuals or communities, when seeking (economic) development, opens opportunities for more holistic strategies, which are at the same time more decentralized and targeted to people. Looking at human wellbeing instead of economic growth may also raise the significance of natural assets such as biodiversity in decisions, which are no longer seen as a mere resource but also as a source of joy, recreation and believes.

Develop new sets of indicators for measuring human wellbeing at various levels. Ensure meaningful participation in such a process and accept diverging indicators between regions and people.

There are multiple values of biodiversity – how can indicators and measures be uniform?

Development projects need to include measures to verify if biodiversity policies and obligations are being fulfilled, if local and alternative views of nature/biodiversity are respected and if non-utilitarian values of biodiversity are being considered. For instance, making the beauty of the environment an important criterion could make an appreciable difference in planning processes, as this criterion would typically speak against the construction of roads or other infrastructure through ecologically valuable landscapes. Indicators or other measures for biodiversity protection in relation to human wellbeing should not be seen as technical and quantifiable measures alone, but be a result of continuous consultation of people living in a specific area. These measures or indicators should represent different values and the natural characteristics of their surrounding area. Involving local communities in the creation of indicators would also increase their relevance and acceptance.

Strengthen targeted biodiversity communication by taking into account existing values, perceptions and everyday activities. Avoid technical and scientific language.

Successful communication starts with listening

Development organizations should support national efforts to collect and distribute tailored, audience-specific information about biodiversity for both civil society (rural and urban populations) and policy makers and, in parallel, highlight the potential benefits that can be obtained by successfully implementing biodiversity-related projects. In this context, it is important to establish a two-way line of communication about biodiversity, providing information on the one hand and listening to other viewpoints and bearers of local knowledge on the other. In some cases, focusing on particular aspects of biodiversity rather than trying to address its overall complexity can also help strengthening communication and outreach on the subject. If the term biodiversity becomes too technical or polarizing, communication on biodiversity-related objectives can sometimes be better achieved indirectly by talking about associated issues such as health, spirituality, land management and agriculture and/or gender equality (depending on national priorities).

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Further information

<http://www.ecologic.eu/11518>