

Key points

Biodiversity loss and nature degradation are largely driven by unsustainable consumption in the global North, with disproportionate impacts felt in the global South, particularly by vulnerable communities.

Just as losses and damages associated with climate change are now formally recognised, it is important to acknowledge and address the loss and damage of nature linked to non-climatic drivers, the role played by overconsumption in the global North and the current and historical injustices that have enabled it.

Communities in the global South need financial, technical and political support to rehabilitate ecosystems, fulfil their crucial role as stewards and defenders of nature, and be able to resist undesirable investor relations.

Societies and economic systems in the global North need to prioritise sustainability and adopt responsible consumption patterns to address environmental breakdown.

Loss and damage of nature and biodiversity: a tale of consumption, colonialism and communities

With biodiversity being lost at an unprecedented rate, the world faces a nature — as well as a climate — emergency. Tracing the story behind loss and damage in ecosystems and biodiversity, this briefing looks at the role of consumption in global North countries, particularly in the context of colonial legacies and international trade and production practices, highlighting the disproportionate burden placed on vulnerable communities and the need to take action to address this.

The nature and climate emergencies are linked, as climate change undoubtedly poses significant threats to ecosystems and biodiversity worldwide. But overexploitation and land/sea use change have been named as the two most significant drivers of biodiversity loss.¹ And just as emissions from the global North drive climate change, biodiversity loss and nature degradation are largely fuelled by the demand for commodities in these countries.

The impacts of both emergencies are felt most severely in the global South, particularly by more marginalised or nature-dependent communities. Nature loss can have profound impacts, reducing crop productivity and bio-trade opportunities, diminishing food and nutritional security, eroding cultural values and traditional knowledge, and increasing vulnerability to disease, illness, and climate change.

As the loss and damage of nature often stems from trade and development agreements voluntarily negotiated between global North and South countries, it could be considered a no-fault situation. But this overlooks the deep-seated injustices and power dynamics that shape trade agreements, favouring rich nations and their commercial interests while leaving poorer

countries and their poorest populations at a systemic disadvantage.

A closer examination of this issue reveals a recurring story of colonisation, inequitable international trade relations, overconsumption, the loss and damage of nature, and deleterious impacts on local communities (Figure 1). Whether it is beef production in Brazil, fishing off the West African coast, or palm oil production in Indonesia, the story remains the same. Acknowledging that there is vast scholarship on these issues, this briefing seeks to simplify this complex, nuanced, context-specific story and illustrate the narrative in an accessible way.

Colonialism

From the late 18th to the early 20th century, industrialising nations needed large quantities of raw materials to power their industries and supply their markets. They sought these in regions that were rich in natural wealth, particularly Africa and Asia. European powers were also driven by geopolitical competition, a desire for territorial expansion, and a belief in their own cultural superiority.

Colonised and occupied territories began to gain independence after World War II and, in 1960, the

There is an urgent need for equitable solutions that address the drivers of biodiversity loss

UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples laid out the path that the General Assembly expected colonial powers to follow. But colonisation left behind a

legacy that included political instability, weak institutions, and the inheritance of colonial administration. Despite their independence, many post-colonial countries entered into a state of financial and political dependency on the global

North — a situation known as neo-colonialism.²

These global power imbalances influenced international relations for decades to come.

Many newly independent countries had also inherited debts from their colonial rulers; in addition, the low prices of the raw materials they produced made their already weak post-colonial economic models unsustainable.³ The need and desire to 'develop' and meet the needs of their citizens in an increasingly unequal global economy led them to borrow more from their former colonial powers,⁴ increasing their debts. In response, in the 1980s and 90s, Northern financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, imposed economic policies and reforms, known as structural adjustment programmes — which included reduced government spending, privatisation, deregulation, trade liberalisation and currency devaluation — as a condition for financial aid or debt relief.

Skewed trade relations

Many global South countries were still rich in the natural resources and raw materials the global North needed, sustaining the view of nature as a valuable asset. Despite their low prices, trading in these commodities could support economic development and as a result, global South countries entered voluntarily into nature-based trade agreements with countries in the global North. But the historical injustices described above resulted in trade agreements that favour more powerful nations and their commercial interests,⁵ and many countries were forced to export raw materials at low cost and barred from imposing export restrictions.⁶ As one commentator observed, "Africa's deepening integration into the world economy has typically generated not wealth but the outflow of wealth".⁷ This pattern of unequal power relations continues today, with the European Union (EU) "regularly criticised for using its trade policies to arm-twist other countries into agreeing to supply European factories with raw materials".⁶

It is also important to note that international trade agreements often favour investors over the state, allowing them to sue governments that implement environmental policies, restrictions to benefit domestic economies, or regulations that protect

their citizens if these impact the value of their investment. Cases brought to the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes — such as the one by Ecuador against US oil company Chevron in 1993 — are salient examples of legal mechanisms that prioritise the rights and interests of investors over environmental or human rights.⁸ This raises questions about the balance between a state's right to regulate in the public interest and the protections granted to foreign investors.

It is often the poorest communities, who depend on access to nature and natural resources for their livelihoods, that are most impacted by these skewed trade relations. This is also the case in the global shift towards green energy and technology, which has led to a surge in mineral extraction in the global South, particularly Latin America.⁹ The global demand for tantalum, for example, driven by high-tech industries, has created significant social and environmental impacts, particularly for Indigenous communities in Bolivia. Here, informal or illegal mining operations supply the mineral to intermediaries in Brazil, who sell them on the international market.¹⁰ Similarly, in Indonesia, the expansion of nickel mining has caused deforestation and pollution, and displaced Indigenous communities.⁹

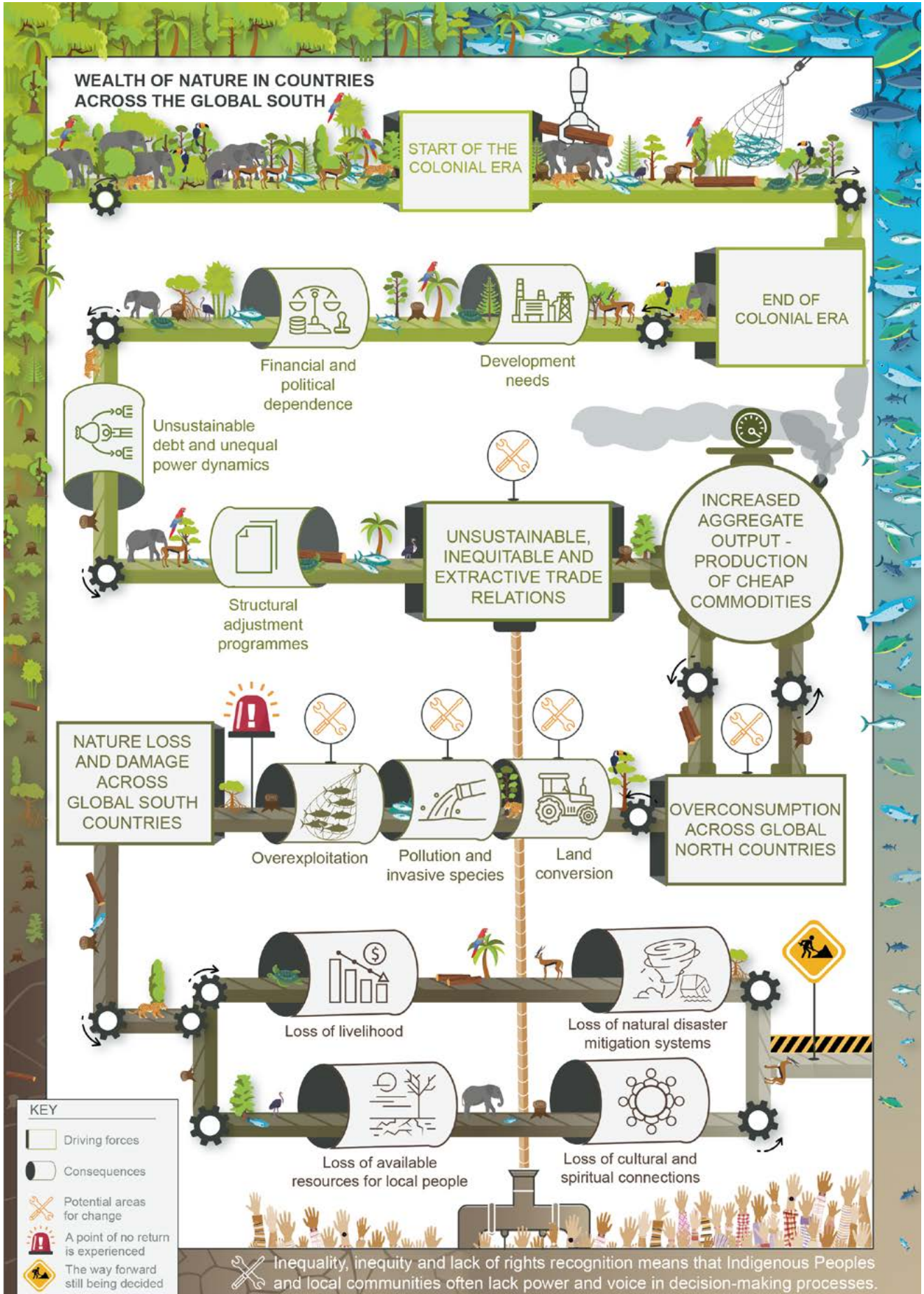
Overconsumption and tipping points

Much of the biodiversity loss and environmental degradation in the global South is driven by exports, not local consumption needs. Indeed, low-income countries consume six times fewer materials than inhabitants in high-income countries.¹¹ Access to cheap raw materials, coupled with technological advancements, have increased aggregate output and the mass production of cheap commodities, allowing countries with high purchasing power to increase resource consumption beyond their own national resource capacities. At the same time, changes in consumer culture, e-commerce, growth-oriented economic systems, the availability of credit and other factors have led to ever-increasing levels of consumption in the global North.

It is important to note that income is strongly linked to consumption, and affluence plays a role in the level of per capita consumption and overconsumption.¹² Additionally, multiple actors bear responsibility for overconsumption, and individual consumers alone are not to blame.

The production of meat, coffee, cocoa, palm oil, coconut, timber, wood and rubber in the global South — mainly bound for Europe, North America and East Asia — has also been linked, among other things, to vast land use and transformation.^{13,14} For example, UK consumption of certain commodities in a single year equates to

Figure 1. The driving forces of nature loss and damage in the global South



approximately 35,977 hectares of tropical deforestation,¹⁵ while the overexploitation of aquatic ecosystems off the West African coast, driven by EU consumer demand, has depleted fish stocks and caused significant biodiversity loss.¹⁶

Although overconsumption in the global North is not solely responsible for nature loss, it is and has been the driving force for decades (Figure 1). Historical biodiversity loss and environmental degradation across the globe have exacerbated the strain on natural environments and diminished the resilience of ecosystems to cope with modern pressures.

In the context of climate change, loss and damage is connected to reaching the limits of human adaptation, where impacts exceed what people can cope with. The same is true for nature, as ecosystems face their own limits, or tipping points, in the face of continuing degradation. And when they reach these points of no return, they experience irreversible losses and damages. Beyond the intrinsic value of nature and its crucial role in global ecosystem services, these losses and damages profoundly affect local communities in the global South, threatening livelihoods, food security, and cultural heritage, and trapping them in a vicious spiral of decline. This is evident in West African coastal communities that rely on fish for income and food, where overfishing by EU fishing fleets has increased poverty, unemployment and social stress, and damaged health.¹⁷

Equitable solutions for meaningful change

This depressing tale of commodities, overconsumption and communities highlights the urgent need for equitable solutions that address the drivers of biodiversity loss and acknowledge the disproportionate burden placed on vulnerable communities. Illustrated by the spanners in Figure 1, meaningful change can take place by:

- Rehabilitating ecosystems and empowering communities to effectively fulfil their crucial role as stewards and defenders of nature

Notes

¹ IPBES (2019) Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. / ² Alemazung, JA (2010) Post-colonial colonialism: an analysis of international factors and actors marring African socio-economic and political development. *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 3(10). / ³ Mallard, G (2021) We owe you nothing: Decolonization and sovereign debt obligations in international public law. In: Penet, P and Zendejas, JF (eds). *Sovereign debt diplomacies: Rethinking sovereign debt from colonial empires to hegemony*. Oxford University Press. / ⁴ Woolfenden, T (2023) The colonial roots of global south debt: A tale of plunder, exploitation, and resistance. Debt Justice, London, UK. / ⁵ Euractive (3 March 2011) Raw materials: Towards a global resource war? / ⁶ Crochet, V (2022) Trade defence instruments: A new tool for the European Union's extractivism. *European Journal of International Law* 33(2) 381–410. / ⁷ Bond, P (2006) Resource extraction and African underdevelopment. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 17(2) 5–25. / ⁸ Pellegrini, L, Arsel, M, Orta-Martínez, M, and Mena, CF (2020) International investment agreements, human rights, and environmental justice: The Texaco/Chevron case from the Ecuadorian Amazon. *Journal of International Economic Law* 23(2) 455–468. / ⁹ Hertanti, R (2023) Between a mineral and a hard place: Indonesia's export ban on raw minerals. Transnational Institute. / ¹⁰ Küblböck, K, Radhuber, I and Rodríguez, GH (2016) Unfair connections? Tantalum for the high-tech-industries and the consequences of its extraction in Bolivia. DKA Austria. / ¹¹ UNEP (1 March 2024) Rich countries use six times more resources, generate 10 times the climate impacts than low-income ones. / ¹² Teixidó-Figueras, J, Steinberger, JK, Krausmann, F, Haberl, H, Wiedmann, T, Peters, GP, Duro, JA and Kastner, T (2016) International inequality of environmental pressures: Decomposition and comparative analysis. *Ecological Indicators* 62, 163–173. / ¹³ Crenna, E, Sinkko, T and Sala, S (2019) Biodiversity impacts due to food consumption in Europe. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 227, 378–391. / ¹⁴ Lenzen, M, Moran, D, Kanemoto, K, Foran, B, Lobefaro, L and Geschke, A (2012) International trade drives biodiversity threats in developing nations. *Nature* 486, 109–112. / ¹⁵ UK Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs (2024) 17 Global impacts of UK consumption. / ¹⁶ Heal, A, Rodgers, L, Williams, J, de la Torre Arenas, I and Clark, D (30 January 2024) The hidden cost of your supermarket salmon. *Financial Times*. / ¹⁷ Jönsson, JH (2019) Overfishing, social problems, and ecosocial sustainability in Senegalese fishing communities. *Journal of Community Practice* 27(3–4) 213–230.

- Minimising environmental damage along supply chains and enhancing transparency to empower consumers to make more sustainable purchasing decisions
- Shifting societal values and economic systems to prioritise sustainability, reduce waste, and foster responsible consumption patterns. Addressing environmental breakdown may require a direct downscaling of economic production and consumption in the wealthiest countries and the consideration of regulations, taxes and nudges to reflect the true cost of resources in the structure of the economy
- Embracing technological advancements, extending the lifespan of goods and encouraging sharing, repairing and recycling to reduce the need for excessive consumption
- Forming regional coalitions among global South countries to strengthen resistance against undesirable investor relations, and
- Providing financial recompense to local communities for lasting losses and damages that cannot be mitigated by any of the above.

At the heart of this is the need to recognise the injustice in our consumption and its impacts on nature. The global trade system helps support substantial inequalities in the distribution of natural resource use, and it is important for international discourse and platforms to acknowledge and address this. Having a serious debate of these issues and acknowledging that the environmental degradation that accompanies natural resource extraction is disproportionately felt by Indigenous Peoples and the world's poorest communities is a good place to start. Establishing a fund to support communities who are already facing the consequences of the loss and damage of nature linked to non-climatic drivers is also an important step.

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