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Indigenous and non-human voices: the systematically missing actors in spatial planning for biodiversity in Chile

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Spatial planning can regulate land-use change and play an essential role in addressing biodiversity loss. However, spatial plans alone have limited capacity to respond to the many needs and dynamics of a territory. Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a complementary tool that supports the integration of sustainability considerations into planning, with a strong participatory component.

This study examines how plural knowledge and interests are included in spatial planning in Chile to support transformative actions for biodiversity. A set of key just-transformative planning principles was identified, covering views, structures, practices, multi-actor engagement, and diverse forms of justice. SEA environmental reports from more than 100 spatial plans were reviewed, and their components were coded according to the key principles and biodiversity realms. The analysis involved environmental elements, problems, conflicts, objectives, governability and policy landscapes, sustainability criteria and priority issues, and management and governance guidelines. Selected cases in different geographical and cultural contexts were studied in depth to observe the practical implementation of the actions.

Preliminary results show that the plans are co-created with diverse actors, mainly community-based organisations, NGOs, businesses, and civil security. Representatives of the transport, energy, public works, social development and housing ministries, and the tourism authority, are the most active public actors. A major gap is observed in the participation of Indigenous peoples. Although they are consulted in an initial stage, they are often not included in the broader participatory process. Thus, their knowledge, needs and governance roles are rarely reflected in the plans. In areas of high ecological value, nature and biodiversity are recognised, but from an instrumental perspective, which means that non-human interests remain absent.

Community-led actions appear particularly relevant for achieving biodiversity-positive outcomes. However, multi-level coordinated governance, capacity-building and financial support are essential. Sustainability criteria and management and governance guidelines show the strongest transformative potential, but their implementation depends on intersectoral collaboration, the management of socio-environmental conflicts, and the priorities of the government in power.

SEA supports plurality in spatial planning from an environmental perspective, but important gaps remain. This work contributes to identifying opportunities to strengthen actionable and just spatial planning for biodiversity.