

The Cansiglio Declaration

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Advancing a common 'Charter of Values' for the mutual benefit and well-being of living communities along the New Silk Roads

Drafted by:

Daniele Brombal, Marc Foggin, Yun Gao, Stefan Gruber, Shekhar Kolipaka, Nicholas Temple

Preamble

The Silk Roads have for centuries connected people and societies dispersed widely across the Eurasian continent, with the exchange of material goods, cultural practices, and philosophical and religious perspectives and understandings. All parties have been mutually influenced by each other through such long-term, multi-faceted exchanges, and largely have been enriched with new opportunities and broadened horizons.

In the present time, following decades of stagnation with limited socio-cultural exchanges due to restrictive borders in the 19th and 20th centuries, a "New Silk Roads" is emerging; enabled *inter alia* by improved transportation and communications, along with increasing geopolitical will to enhance connectivity at global scale. Launched in 2013, China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) is at the forefront of such major developments, now including formal partnerships with over 70 countries and encompassing around two-thirds of the world's population and half of the global economy. In light of this, while recognizing many potential benefits arising from such processes, we the participants in the study retreat organized by the *Marco Polo Centre for Global Europe-Asia Connections* (Ca' Foscari University Venice) in the Cansiglio Forest on 16-18 September 2019 also remain concerned that action should be *preceded* by clearly stated aims and intents based on *fundamental values*. These values should be explicit, agreed and shared amongst all partners in bilateral and multinational endeavours. In particular, large-scale infrastructure projects (as are now being promoted under the BRI and through other related international development programs and financing systems) will certainly have deep and lasting impacts on the social-ecological systems in the geographically affected areas, and these must be explicitly considered and addressed, including clear recognition of the potential impacts on both human societies and the natural environments in which human societies are integrally embedded.

This document is the first outcome of the Cansiglio gathering of academics, environmental experts and practitioners. The idea for this meeting originated from a collective anxiety about emerging or anticipated risks posed by the BRI for socio-ecological communities around the world. Considered to be the world's largest infrastructural project comprising a vast array of interconnected land and sea transportation routes, the BRI raises profound questions *about the preservation of biodiversity and cultural heritage*. New mega-projects that fail to duly consider and address bio-cultural risks and impacts are likely to further aggravate some already recognized challenges surrounding globalization, especially in regard to the search for resilient, sustainable food systems in an age of climate crisis.

Our collective concern was further coupled with clear awareness that the BRI opens potential windows of opportunity, even as these are contingent upon decisions made based on *the kind of progress we want* for the future of all humanity. Fundamentally, we must ask ourselves: Does it suffice to do business as usual? Or are we rather called to embark upon a radical, systemic transformation? The following section of the document summarizes core values and pathways of action that we believe should orient individual, societal, and scientific engagement to ensure a longer-range future for socio-ecological communities and their coexistence along the BRI routes.



Declaration

- This Declaration is inspired by a **sense of belonging** among and within **living communities** along the routes of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in the awareness of **ecological inter-connections and dependencies** throughout the living world.
- The purpose of this Declaration is **to promote coexistence, regeneration of relations and improved wellbeing** within the integrated social-ecological systems living along the BRI.
- We recognize **intrinsic value to biological and cultural diversity** and endorse the need to protect and nurture it based on **principles of humility and deep environmental and social justice**.
- We deem **caring and compassionate pathways of action** to be fundamental for achieving this goal.
- The **practice of temperance** should guide governance and management of resources, based on a responsible care for human and non-human life and on a principle of **equitable distribution of benefits**.
- We recognize that a **realignment of ethical frames and scientific knowledge is needed** to sustain any meaningful change in socio-ecological relations. This must be supported by a broadening of **scientific literacy** and **transdisciplinary knowledge**, inclusive of local and indigenous traditions and practices.
- We realize that **the change we call for in this Declaration is unprecedented**. It will require the establishment of **major support structures** to foster cooperation and to bridge a wide range of values and epistemological approaches amongst societal actors and stakeholders.

Our Commitment to Change

It is our aim that the Cansiglio Declaration, as outlined above, will (a) inform and guide scientific work on themes relevant to the BRI, including human, social, and natural sciences; (b) constitute a basis for enlarging a network of like-minded actors (both individuals, and private and public organizations) who wish to engage in related research and practice in collaborative ways; and (c) strengthen and enable broadened, enriched dialogue between diverse parties, spanning from local to global interests and crossing traditional divides – thus leading to novel, innovative developments in research, policy and practice, based on a “sense of belonging” and shared fundamental values regarding bio-cultural diversity and a commitment to others-centred pathways of action.

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