

Biological Diversity – More Debate than Action?

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The legally-binding UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was signed in 1992 in the wake of the UN Conference on Environment and Development. To date 177 countries, as well as the European Union, have ratified it (the USA is a notable exception). The CBD encompasses a challenging agenda and one that has gone far in recognising developing countries' concerns. However, it remains to be seen whether the sophisticated debate around the CBD will ever materialise into concrete action or be incorporated in mainstream policy and decision-making.

What is biological diversity?

Variety, they say, is the spice of life. How dull it would be if every day were like the last, how distasteful if we were to eat the same food every day. We hear the word *biodiversity* often, but rarely do we think of what it means. Biological diversity, strictly defined, is the sum total of the variety and variability of life on earth. It is the existence of genetic and ecosystem diversity that offers *variability*, which in turn provides scope for the evolution of life on earth. In urban centres, we feel far divorced from biodiversity, yet the foods we eat, our medicines and the gardens we enjoy would not exist without it. In fact, life on earth is entirely based on biodiversity's continued existence.

Yet biological diversity is often equated with biological resources. The introductory paragraphs of Chapter 15 of Agenda 21 on Biological Diversity use the terms 'biological resources' and 'biological diversity' interchangeably. Biological resources are part of, but not synonymous with, biodiversity – the values they hold are not necessarily the same. For example, biological resources are often valued on the basis of their contribution to subsistence or markets. By contrast, biodiversity's variety and variability provide people with choice, now and into the future. Hence its added value lies in the 'options' it holds.

Thus we need to ensure that conservation actions focus on protecting the range of values biodiversity holds, such as our capacity to make choices or to have alternatives to fall back on. However, given our limited knowledge of biodiversity, the difficulties we face in predicting what we might need in the future and the lack of resources available for conservation, this is not an easy task.

Agricultural biodiversity should also be considered as part of the whole biodiversity agenda. Initially a neglected issue, the CBD has taken several recent steps to ensure that 'agribiodiversity' is not overlooked. Domesticated plant and animal species, and the *manipulated* systems that sustain them, are equally important to the natural evolution of life on earth, especially human evolution, and deserve equal attention. Furthermore, many of the root causes of agricultural biodiversity loss are the same as those facing wild biodiversity.

International instruments and their effectiveness

The central outcome of the Rio Summit with regards to biodiversity was the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The three main objectives of the CBD are: *"The conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the*

KEY CHALLENGES:

- **Develop the tools and mechanisms that will enable more effective and efficient mainstreaming of biodiversity objectives in sectoral policy and practice**
- **Take steps towards strengthening coherence between CBD and the range of international instruments and other biodiversity related conventions**
- **Focus efforts on resolving complexities surrounding technology transfer and access and benefit sharing objectives**
- **Invest in awareness and capacity building activities in North and South**

fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilisation of genetic resources". These objectives were set against the universal recognition that biodiversity is the basis of life on earth, and holds various ecological and social values. However, it is increasingly being threatened both by economic development and poverty.

A recent assessment of CBD's effectiveness, conducted by the CBD Secretariat, concludes that the CBD has proven to be a useful policy-setting forum. The plan for the future is to ensure these policies get implemented. It is the state that is considered to be the main executor of the CBD, as the CBD espouses principles of sovereignty over its biological resources. A key area of focus in implementation has therefore been in ensuring Parties develop national biodiversity action plans (NBSAPs). These NBSAPs are now being developed in many countries across the world, a significant step forward in the implementation of the CBD. However, questions of wider citizen participation still need to be addressed in many of these NBSAPs. Furthermore, it is questionable whether they will ever have wider influence on other mainstream sectors and whether there is sufficient commitment towards providing resources and political underpinning necessary for successful implementation.

Progress with the third objective of the CBD "*the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources*", has been slow. Expert groups have been set up on issues such as access and benefit sharing and the role of indigenous communities, but they remain contentious, as does the sharing of scientific information and technology transfer between nations.

The CBD has helped advance ecosystem-related thinking on biodiversity and on how to tackle cross-cutting issues (such as the use of indicators). Adoption of the Biosafety Protocol, a piece of precautionary legislation dealing with biotechnology and ramifications for countries' biodiversity, is also a major step forward. The issue of indigenous peoples' rights in conservation has also received exposure under the CBD.

What remains to be done?

There are huge challenges that lie ahead. The CBD's relationships with organisations such as the World Intellectual Property Organisation and World Trade Organisation (WTO) need be clarified if there is to be further progress on the "*fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources*". In relation to 'agricultural' biodiversity, the CBD also needs to strengthen the linkages and co-ordination with institutions such as the WTO and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation even further. As regards 'wild' biodiversity, many other international conventions exist, but the co-ordination of activities under these various conventions could be improved. Memoranda of Co-operation with Secretariats of other conventions have been signed, but synergies in action are still being defined and are yet to be operationalised.

Biodiversity issues are often compartmentalised. They are rarely seen to bear any relevance to mainstream policy and decision-making. There are, however, many instances where ignoring biodiversity issues can lead to increased liability or extra costs where human conflicts have arisen around a conservation area. There is a real need to develop and experiment with tools and mechanisms that can help mainstream biodiversity issues within international and national policies and processes. The CBD itself admits the lack of such tools and mechanisms as one of its shortcomings. Only a handful of countries have so far evolved methods to mainstream biodiversity into other sectors as part of their NBSAPs.

There are also concerns around governance and participation in biodiversity conservation. The CBD does not really give adequate consideration to the rights, roles, relationships and responsibilities of local communities in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. Instead, biodiversity is often seen as an entity that is managed in isolation – to be kept pristine at all costs. Local peoples' dependency on biodiversity is often ignored in the interests of preserving such biodiversity. As a result, conservation has often damaged local communities' interests and undermined their livelihoods. Methods for incorporating local communities' interests into the CBD, and its implementation processes, need to be considered much more seriously by the CBD and in the follow up to the Rio Summit. This may include developing new conservation management models, where local communities, NGOs and the private sector team up in joint management partnerships with governments or, indeed, more thinking on how to conserve that biodiversity residing outside conservation areas.

In conclusion, sharing scientific and technical information across nations, especially North–South and South–South was one of the main aims of the CBD, but progress on this front has been nowhere near satisfactory. Can the Johannesburg Summit help steer us into positions where solutions to many of these contentious issues are easier to find? ●