

Traditional Knowledge and the Convention on Biological Diversity

What is traditional knowledge?

Traditional knowledge refers to the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities around the world. Developed from experience gained over the centuries and adapted to the local culture and environment, traditional knowledge is transmitted orally from generation to generation. It tends to be collectively owned and takes the form of stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language, and agricultural practices, including the development of plant species and animal breeds. Traditional knowledge is mainly of a practical nature, particularly in such fields as agriculture, fisheries, health, horticulture, and forestry.

Its role and value

There is today a growing appreciation of the value of traditional knowledge. This knowledge is valuable not only to those who depend on it in their daily lives, but to modern industry and agriculture as well. Many widely used products, such as plant-based medicines and cosmetics, are derived from traditional knowledge. Other valuable products based on traditional knowledge include agricultural and non-wood forest products as well as handicraft.

Traditional knowledge can make a significant contribution to sustainable development. Most indigenous and local communities are situated in areas where the vast majority of the world's plant genetic resources are found. Many of them have cultivated and used biological diversity in a sustainable way for thousands of years. However, the contribution of indigenous and local communities to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity goes far beyond their role as natural resource managers. Their skills and techniques provide valuable information to the global community and a useful model for biodiversity policies. Furthermore, as on-site communities with extensive knowledge of local environments, indigenous and local communities are most directly involved with conservation and sustainable use.

The Convention and indigenous and local communities

The international community has recognized the close and traditional dependence of many indigenous and local communities on biological resources, notably in the preamble to the Convention on Biological Diversity, which has been ratified by 178 countries. There is also a broad recognition of the contribution that traditional knowledge can make to both the conservation and the sustainable use of biological diversity, two fundamental objectives of the Convention.

The Conference of Parties has established a working group specifically to, address the implementation of Article 8(j) and related provisions of the Convention. This working group is open to all Parties, and, indigenous and local communities representatives play a full and active role in its work. Traditional knowledge is considered a "cross-cutting" issue that affects many aspects of biological diversity, so it will continue to be addressed by the Conference of Parties and by other working groups as well.

Article 8(j) states

"Each contracting Party shall, as far as possible and as appropriate:

Subject to national legislation, respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge innovations and practices"

Engaging indigenous and local communities

Indigenous and local communities attach considerable importance to the Convention, which they view as a key instrument for advancing the recognition, preservation and promotion of their traditional knowledge. Consequently, their representatives have been invited to

participate fully in the working group on traditional knowledge, including in the group's decision-making.

National measures

As a result of the Convention's adoption and the work being conducted under its auspices, Governments have already undertaken to facilitate the participation of indigenous and local communities in developing policies for the conservation and sustainable use of resources, access to genetic resources and the sharing of benefits, and the designation and management of protected areas.

Many Governments are now in the process of implementing Article 8(j) of the Convention through their national biodiversity action plans, strategies and programmes. A number of Governments have adopted specific laws, policies and administrative arrangements for protecting traditional knowledge, emphasizing that the prior informed consent of knowledge-holders must be attained before their knowledge can be used by others.

A growing respect for traditional knowledge has led modern science to adapt its procedures for assessing the impact of development projects on biological diversity; for monitoring of ecosystems, species, particular genetic resources and species at risk; for controlling alien species; and for promoting the in-situ conservation and sustainable management of biological diversity generally to identify but a few examples. Governments are also seeking to involve indigenous and local communities more actively, and to apply their knowledge and technologies, in the conservation and sustainable use of forests, agricultural biodiversity, inland waters, coastal and marine ecosystems, rangelands and eco-tourism.

The Convention Secretariat

The Secretariat is responsible for servicing meetings held under the Convention, including meetings of the Conference of the Parties, the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA), and the Working Group on the Implementation of Article 8(j) and Related Provisions. It is also tasked with preparing documents and draft decisions for these meetings based on information provided by Parties in the form of national reports, case

studies, reports of experts, and so on. Indigenous and local communities are particularly invited to contribute to the work of this process.

A programme officer in the Secretariat deals specifically with the implementation of Article 8(j), prepares documents for the relevant meetings, disseminates information, and monitors progress in the various thematic and sectoral areas dealt with under the Convention.

The Secretariat also cooperates with other UN agencies, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, World Intellectual Property Organization, World Trade Organization, UN Forum on Forests, Commission on Human Rights Working Group on Indigenous Populations, and the UN Conference on Trade and Development. This collaboration ensures that issues concerning the protection and application of traditional knowledge, innovations and practices, and the involvement of indigenous and local communities in biodiversity-related activities, are given the widest possible focus.

The Conference of the Parties (COP) - the supreme decision-making body of the Convention - meets every two years. Since December 1993, when the Convention entered into force, the Conference of the Parties has met five times on regular basis and has had one extraordinary meeting. Its main functions are to monitor progress and to agree on programmes of work to implement the Convention. The participation of observers is encouraged, and representatives of indigenous and local communities have attended the COP's meetings.

Future directions

As part of a programme of work addressing the commitments embodied in Article 8(j) and other provisions of the Convention dealing with traditional knowledge, Governments and Contracting Parties have undertaken:

- to establish mechanisms to ensure the effective participation of indigenous and local communities in decision-making and policy planning;

- to respect, preserve and maintain traditional knowledge relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity;
- to promote its wider application with the approval and involvement of the indigenous and local communities concerned; and
- to encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such traditional knowledge.

While these elements are equally important, the last one has taken on a special significance for indigenous and local communities. This is because traditional knowledge has often been used in recent years by modern industry to develop new products and techniques without the involvement and consent of the holders of such knowledge, who have also received none of the resulting benefits.

Governments and Contracting Parties have established a working group under the Convention with a mandate to make concrete proposals on how to translate all of these commitments into reality. The group's main tasks will include developing guidelines:

- to ensure that indigenous and local communities obtain a fair and equitable share of the benefits arising from the use and application of their traditional knowledge;
- to ensure that private and public institutions interested in using such knowledge obtain the prior informed approval of indigenous and local communities;
- to regulate how impact assessments are carried out regarding any proposed development on sacred sites or on land and waters occupied or used by indigenous and local communities; and
- to assist Governments in the development of legislation or other mechanisms to ensure that traditional knowledge, and its wider applications, is respected, preserved, and maintained.

The contribution of indigenous and local communities will remain crucial to the overall success of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Other international initiatives

In addition to the Convention, a number of international instruments and initiatives are of particular relevance to traditional knowledge. They include the following:

- Agenda 21: Principle 22 of the main document that came out of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro recognizes that indigenous peoples have a vital role to play in environmental management and development because of their traditional knowledge and practices;
- The International Labour Organization's Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples: This Convention calls for action to protect the rights of indigenous peoples;
- United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples: The Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations has established an open-ended, inter-sessional working group to elaborate a draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Work is in progress;
- The Inter-American Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: An Indigenous Peoples and Community Development Unit has been established under this Declaration and is currently drafting a strategy on indigenous peoples;
- The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Asian Development Bank and the African Development Bank: These Banks are committed to ensuring that the development process promotes indigenous peoples' participation;
- The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank: Both organizations have launched programmes to promote indigenous peoples' development and to ensure that the development process fosters the full respect for the dignity, human rights and uniqueness of indigenous peoples.