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Mainstreaming does not mean leaving the agenda to others – the CBD must take a lead on land use

Friedrich Wülf – Friends of the Earth Europe

A key issue of this SBSTTA and the upcoming COP 13 is mainstreaming biodiversity into other sectors. As the Executive secretary states in the latest edition of [square brackets], the time for this is NOW. Hopes are high that the newly-adopted Agenda 2030, also known as the Sustainable development goals (SDGs), will create new momentum in helping the CBD to “green” other policies. While indeed the adoption of this agenda has rekindled discussions on sustainable development, it is all but settled that this will make a tangible difference on the ground. There are a number of caveats:

The Agenda 2030 is not coherent in itself. Its Goal 8 still asks for infinite growth on finite planet whose boundaries already have been exceeded – creating more pressure on environment and resources and thus reducing the likeliness that other SDGs can be achieved

Biodiversity is enshrined, but at a more general level than in the CBD.

There is a danger of distraction. The work of CBD may be ignored as everyone focusses on SDGs. An important example are the SDG indicators which are being developed now, which are fewer and less precise than those of the CBD – apart from the fact that the key indicator for both on halting habitat loss (Aichi target 5) is the one looking at forest area development, which, given the fact that there is no distinction between natural forests and plantations, will be basis for entirely wrong conclusions on the state of biodiversity.

It remains yet to be seen if the inclusion of biodiversity concerns in the global Agenda will lead to real changes in national policies and results on the ground. Examples from Europe so far give little reason for hope – biodiversity is mentioned in development and sustainable development agendas, but does not entail any increased action.

Regarding this SBSTTA, document SBSTTA/20/15 contains a number of suggestions on agriculture, forestry and fisheries. Let’s bear in mind that the problems in agriculture are very real – in many parts of the industrialized world, fertilizer use is in excess 10-20 times of what the soil can digest, thus negatively impacting waters and the diversity of terrestrial habitats. Recent reports on EU’s nature policies show that agriculture is one of the three main reasons for not achieving its biodiversity targets. Species living there are worst off compared to other habitats. Agricultural land is really important, covering nearly 40% of the Earth’s surface. 31% are covered by forests.

Given the importance of this in terms of land use and biodiversity, the suggestions provided in the recommendations of SBSTTA 20/15 are hugely disappointing. The suggestions made are much too general and cannot be measured in any way. There are many references to other processes (FAO, CGRFA, the CPF and the new UNFF strategic plan) who deal with this. While it is important to engage here and call these fora to improve their policies, the CBD needs to tell them what is exactly needed. Aichi target 7 needs further specification what

mainstreaming biodiversity into these sectors mean. We need targets, actions and indicators to achieve progress, both at global and at national level. Some Examples:

- A proper definition of forests and the level of fertilizers that can safely be used.
- To reframe agricultural subsidies so they do not exert pressure on small-scale farmers and on biodiversity.
- Install incentives that support the maintenance of diverse structures in the agricultural landscape and the use of traditional and local food crops,
- Establish a set of agriculture-specific indicator species and a feedback/review mechanism so policies can be corrected.
- Cross-references to the programmes of work on agriculture and forestry, which the CBD has long established, must be made, as well as linkages to the IPBES assessment on pollinators.

The experience and competence of SBSTTA is direly needed to prep up this basic text.

If CBD delegates the competence for land use to other fora without telling them what is needed from them from a biodiversity perspective, this is giving up on working on these issues and it would be better not to say anything.

Rumor has it that at the high-level segment of the upcoming COP, Agriculture Ministers will join for a group picture and tell us tales on how important agriculture is for biodiversity rather than presenting concrete actions to make agriculture and biodiversity conservation more compatible with each other. What ECO doesn't want is Sunday speeches, we want concrete actions and real change to make the land use practices that shape our planet's surface sustainable.

Backing Plan A for Syn-Bio Oversight

Jim Thomas – ETC Group

Protecting biodiversity means getting Syn Bio oversight right. At SBSTTA 20 the stakes are high. Synthetic Biology describes a next generation of genetic engineering techniques that fundamentally remake nature for industrial purposes. The CBD is the only international body addressing governance over this technological frontier and tracking the momentous implications it may unleash for ecosystems, life and livelihoods. Be under no illusion: a handful of parties harbouring domestic multi-billion-dollar biotech industries will this week attempt to swipe Syn-bio oversight under the table. They will argue that synthetic biology's powerful genome editing capability to (re)direct evolution should be of no concern to this convention or pretend that Syn-Bio is just a matter for lab scientists with good intentions. In fact Organisms, Components and Products (OCPs) of synthetic biology are already entering the market. They include engineered algae, biosynthesized fragrances, fuels, pharmaceuticals, textiles, chemicals, cosmetics and food ingredients, not to mention a new generation of synthetically engineered and gene-edited crops, insects and animals proliferating faster than you can say CRISPR.

The outcome of the 2015 online forum and AHTEG (Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group) on Syn-bio is clear – synthetic biology is relevant to (and maybe threatens) all 3 objectives of the convention. Parties to SBSTTA and CBD must now develop a clear precautionary governance framework with an ongoing mechanism to address several issues: this is PLAN A. Based on the fundamental findings of the AHTEG report, the ETC Group propose a seven step strategy towards securing the right recommendations for COP13.

1. **Affirm** precaution: At COP 12 a landmark decision on Synthetic Biology (XII/24) emphasized the need for precaution and regulation. As more OCPs of syn bio are developed uncertainties and risks remain critical.
2. **Accept** the definition: The operational definition of synthetic biology from the AHTEG is peer reviewed and appropriate.
3. **Annex** a list of techniques: Synthetic biology is characterized by a number of key techniques, including genome editing techniques, these should be spelt out.
4. **Arrangements** must be made for a mechanism or process providing continuous oversight, assessment and governance of organisms, components and products resulting from synthetic biology techniques.
5. **Address** the gaps in CBD governance to ensure that the serious socio-economic consequences and indirect impacts of components and products are not overlooked.
6. **Arrest** gene drive releases. Gene drives are engineered genetic elements that 'drive' a trait through an entire population. Such population-level engineering is highly experimental and extremely risky to ecological and social-systems. In line with the precautionary principle a moratorium should be placed on the release of gene drives.
7. **Ask** the Nagoya Protocol to address digital genetic sequences. The Nagoya Protocol risks failing its objective, as synthetic biology corporations move to sourcing raw material from digital gene banks, leveraging genome editing and DNA synthesis to carry out digital biopiracy.

The biotech industry's preferred plan is plan B - bioengineer everything - and that involves plan C - Circumvent oversight and Curtail discussion. They have been boldly maneuvering in Brussels, Washington and other corridors of influence to prevent governance and regulatory oversight of the new syn bio techniques, especially when it comes to the 2 surging areas of commercial activity: 1) the artificial biosynthesis of foods, flavours, fragrances in large vats of sugar or methane and 2) the use of fast, flexible genome editing technology to reengineer plants, animals and insects, now ushering in a new era of GMO's 2.0. According to freedom of information documents made public this week by Corporate Europe Observatory the US, acting on behalf of the biotechnology industry, exerted pressure on European regulators to not publish a legal opinion on the oversight of genome editing techniques.

This is a crucial moment for parties to insist that the CBD is the right place - to enact oversight - to look out for diverse agro-ecosystems (conservation), the livelihoods of tens of millions of farmers who will be affected (sustainable use), and defend the precautionary principle. The lobby to re-engineer life may be turning powerful, widespread and disruptive but the biotech industry and corporations driving it should not escape all oversight and responsibility. Keeping Syn-bio threats in check requires parties to keep with PLAN A and secure a future that represents it's core values of a life in "harmony with Nature".

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Mainstreaming problems away

Contentious Agricultural Biodiversity Decisions Drowned Out

Patrick Mulvany

“Through the present mode of mainstreaming biodiversity, the CBD gives leverage and power to the private sector and the market forces for utilising the natural resources only for their profits. Everything connected with nature is being commodified, putting at risk the livelihoods of indigenous and local people, and of common goods... Bolivia considers that the way to effectively mainstreaming biodiversity into economic and social planning processes is through the recognition of the rights of Mother Earth... a sacred living system.”

Diego Pacheco, Bolivia

The ‘mainstreaming’ agenda is potentially damaging to biodiversity. It is an opportunity to dribble away the implementation of the contentious but vital decisions on sustaining the Agricultural Biodiversity of the many into a torrent of corporate avarice that fills the private pockets of the few.

Yes, a few Best Practices can be highlighted, but the systemic social and economic changes needed to support the regeneration of Agricultural Biodiversity can be easily drowned out by the inertia of mainstreamed financially-driven industrial commodity production. The CBD’s commitment to implement its Decisions that address the underlying drivers of loss of Agricultural Biodiversity, including perverse incentives for agribusiness and land and water grabs, skewed research priorities producing proprietary and biodiversity-reducing resources and processes, and the dangers of increased concentration of power in the commodity production system, will be diluted to extinction.

The crucial emphasis needed, if the Aichi targets are to be realized, is a priority focus on the human-managed environment and its custodians - the small-scale food providers, who are essential for regenerating biodiversity, in particular the agricultural biodiversity which is used for human well-being and for sustaining ecosystem functions.

The CBD has a distinguished history of focusing on the real issues that underpin the loss as well as the regeneration of agricultural biodiversity, as summarized in the landmark 1996 Decision on Agricultural Biodiversity (III/11) and especially its Annex 1. It has the opportunity to build upon this and subsequent Decisions by engaging the commitment of the small-scale food providers who produce food for the majority in ways that conserve agricultural biodiversity. Succumbing to the lure of the corporate-dominated commodity production system cannot realise the CBD’s objectives.

Arguments for mainstreaming depend on who and what is 'mainstreamed' and who and what is 'drowned out' in the process, and to what extent. The CBD is sliding into the maw of the corporate mainstream.

The CBD should resist being engulfed by this corporate-driven agenda and defending the interests of the economically and biodiversity-destroying powerful. If it were true to its mandate, the CBD would, as a priority, recognize and defend the biodiversity-enhancing small-scale food providers as the custodians of agricultural biodiversity and prevent them from being drowned out by the corporate mainstream. If not, the regenerative and dynamic management of their agricultural biodiversity will cease and biodiversity will continue to be lost. It’s peasants who give life to biodiversity.