
Tree plantations, GM trees and agrofuels: A call to CBD

The main aim of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is the conservation and sustainable use of the world's biological diversity. It would thus seem obvious that anything that threatens biodiversity should be adequately addressed by signatories to the convention.

Given that the Convention's Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) will be meeting in Paris at the beginning of July, we believe this can be a good opportunity for addressing the impacts of monoculture tree plantations, genetically modified trees and agrofuel development on biodiversity.

Regarding monoculture tree plantations, their expansion is heavily impacting on plant and animal diversity, particularly –though not only- in the biodiversity-rich tropics. In spite of that, official bodies continue defining them as “forests”, thus providing them with a positive image. We believe that the CBD should challenge –from the broader biodiversity perspective- the use of the terms “forest plantations” and “planted forests” in reference to monoculture tree plantations. In this respect, SBSTTA could provide scientific advice to the Conference of the Parties requesting it to clearly separate forests from monoculture tree plantations and to include the latter as a threat to biodiversity which needs to be adequately studied and addressed.

As respects to genetically modified (GM) trees the last Conference of the Parties (COP8) took an important and positive step (Decision VIII/19), recommending Parties “to take a precautionary approach when addressing the issue of genetically modified trees”. In a letter sent to the CBD secretariat in November 2006, a large number of NGOs provided analysis and information on the threat posed by GE trees and concluded that “GM trees have no role to play in the conservation of global forest biological diversity and, on the contrary, are likely to reduce forest biodiversity, with attendant social consequences”, adding that the “high risks indicated by the available though incomplete science show that the technology could result in the extinction of forest plant and animal species with severe negative impacts on biodiversity.” The letter urged the CBD “to move forward from the current recommendation to Parties to take a precautionary approach, to a mandatory decision declaring an immediate ban on the release of GM trees.” This is another issue where we believe that SBSTTA could play an important role, recommending such ban.

In reference to agrofuels, it is clear that agrofuel plantations are being strongly promoted throughout the world and particularly in the South. In most cases, such plantations will consist of large-scale monocultures of different agricultural crops (sugar cane, soya, corn and other), as well as tree and oil palm plantations. All these monocultures –in most cases accompanied by heavy use of agrochemicals- will impact on biodiversity. To make matters worse, in the case of tree plantations, research is being carried out to genetically modify trees for the production of ethanol. Here again SBSTTA could provide the CBD with relevant information about the impacts of agrofuel development on biodiversity.

All the above constitute major threats to biodiversity which have yet not received sufficient attention from the CBD. We therefore hope that SBSTTA will address them at its upcoming meeting and will

provide the necessary scientific advice to the Conference of the Parties.