BIODIVERSITY MEETING CALLS FOR MORE SCIENCE-BASED INFORMATION

An international meeting on biodiversity has called for more science-based information, the closure of knowledge gaps, and increased precaution, in the emerging fields of synthetic biology and geoengineering (climate engineering).

Two decisions related to these areas were among a set of 34 decisions adopted at the 11th Conference of Parties (COP 11) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which took place in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad this month (819 October).

The meeting concluded with a pledge by developed countries to doublefinancial resources for biodiversity protection by 2015.

These funds would help developing nations achieve at least 75 per cent of progress in meeting the 20 global biodiversity targets for 20112020, established in the previous CBD meeting in 2010.

The road to reaching this decision was not straightforward, however. The conference ran over, amid frustrations expressed by several developing country delegates, who threatened to quit the negotiations when developed countries showed reluctance to make clear aid specifications.

The document on synthetic biology recognises the technologicaldevelopment associated with synthetic life, cells or genomes, and the scientific uncertainties of their potential impact of the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

It urges governments to take a precautionary approach when addressing the threats of significant reduction or loss of biological diversity posed by synthetic biology developments.

The document invites countries to synthesise information on synthetic biology, and consider possible gaps and overlaps with other provisions in the CBD.

The information is likely to be available for peer review and consideration by the UN Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTA) at the next CBD meeting in Korea in 2014.

The document addressing geoengineering also notes the lack of science-based, global, transparent and effective control and regulatory mechanisms for climate-related geoengineering, [and] the need for a precautionary approach.

It also notes that regulation may be most necessary for geoengineering activities with trans-boundary effects, and those deployed in areas beyond national jurisdiction and the atmosphere.

These decisions emerged against a backdrop of hard campaigning by nongovernmental organisations and activists to implement a complete moratorium on synthetic biology and geoengineering.

Several scientists countered that a complete ban would serve little purpose, as only further research would resolve uncertainties and knowledge gaps.

The two documents left civil society organisations partially satisfied.At least the documents are not a step backward, Silvia Ribeiro, Latin America director of the international ecology action group, ETC, told *SciDev.Net*.

A scientist involved in COP 11 and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety conference held earlier this month (15 October) said that although the text is weak, it is better than nothing.

Achim Steiner, executive director of the UN Environment Programme, said: Mobilising the necessary financial resources to [achieve] ... the 2020 targets remains a challenge but here in India, many nations, including developing economies, have signalled their determination and sense of urgency to seize the opportunities by providing much needed additional support.

Other key decisions included special attention to marine protected areas; new measures to streamline biodiversity assessments with development projects in marine and coastal areas; closer collaboration with UN agencies working on biodiversity and climate change to address issues of deforestation and degradation; and sustainable use and management of species hunted for bushmeat.

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