

Biological Diversity: Beyond Nassau

Context

At Rio, G-7 countries agreed to work in closer cooperation with developing countries to help ensure that life on the planet continues to flourish. The Rio commitments, embodied in Agenda 21 and the conventions on Climate Change and Biological Diversity, were the result of hard bargaining between north and south and signalled the beginning of a new relationship that recognizes environmental interdependence and that is to be built on cooperation, joint ventures, benefit sharing and capacity building.

The Convention on Biological Diversity exemplifies the new thinking. It contains three explicit objectives: conservation, sustainable resource use and equitable sharing of benefits. Specifically, developed countries agreed to share relevant knowledge and technology with developing countries; to exchange biological resources with developing countries under mutually agreed terms; to conduct joint research and technology development and to share equitably the benefits arising from the use of genetic resources.

At Rio, all G-7 countries supported this concept in the context of economic and environmental self-interest. Dependence on the environmental health of developing countries and the relationship between environment and development was explicitly acknowledged. It was realized that unless the poorer countries benefitted directly and sustainably from the wise management and use of their resource base, that base would continue to deteriorate with the attendant loss of its global benefit. It was also realized that generating those economic benefits in developing countries would require cooperation, including the private sector.

This new partnership has been received with enthusiasm. In little more than two years, the Biodiversity Convention has been ratified by over 106 nations. The first meeting of Parties to the Convention in Nassau in December, 1994, resolved most issues associated with the administration of the Convention and established a three year work plan to initiate the pursuit of its objectives. All G-7 countries were active, constructive players in the discussions, exemplifying the approach needed to give effect to the Rio commitments.

Nonetheless, some developing countries have been quietly questioning whether the stated resolve of the north is still strong enough to follow the Spirit of Rio. The second meeting of the Parties to the Biodiversity Convention will occur in November, 1995. This is where the concrete manifestation of the new ethic will begin to materialize in the context of biodiversity. G-7 countries will be expected to provide a signal that we are still committed to the deal struck at Rio.

Focus of Discussion

The theme of the discussion would be oriented toward benefit sharing and capacity building. As a starting point, G-7 countries have committed to contributing their fair share of financial resources to the Global Environment Facility as the intended operator of the Convention's financial mechanism.

The Convention itself offers many other avenues to follow. Each G-7 country will have its own sense of priority. Examples from the Convention for which policies and courses of action will need to be developed by G-7 countries include.

- cooperative education and training;
- cooperative research and sharing of results and benefits with developing countries;
- information and technology transfer to developing countries under favourable terms;
- cooperative technology development

It is not expected that every G-7 country will have public policies defined on each of the economics-focussed Convention provisions. Nor is it expected that the Hamilton discussion will address many of them explicitly. The discussion could, nevertheless, set out principles, directions and, possibly, examples of successes. These could guide preparatory work for the second meeting of the Parties to the Convention and stimulate compatible approaches among the G-7 for Convention implementation.

To help focus the discussion on benefit sharing and capacity building, the following issues could be addressed:

- Are national biodiversity (or sustainable development) strategies priority tools for capacity building in developing countries?
- What is the role of government in stimulating adherence to the "Spirit of Rio", given that, for G-7 countries, the greatest interaction with developing countries in the areas of technical cooperation and benefit sharing is via the private sector.?
- How should ODA programmes be adjusted to better contribute to the objectives of the Convention?
- Will the Convention's scientific and technical clearing house mechanism be sufficient to address the Convention's focus on technology sharing?

- What is the expected role of indigenous people, at both national and international levels of activity, in technology transfer and benefit sharing?
- Can we identify exemplary models of domestic response to be integrated into technology cooperation and capacity building efforts?
- Under what conditions would concessional technology transfer be appropriate?
- What is the potential role of economic incentives?

Since the Hamilton meeting falls immediately on the heels of the third session of the Commission for Sustainable Development in New York, Ministers could take stock of the atmosphere and results of those discussions and build upon them