

## **Convention Frequently Asked Questions**

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### **What is the Convention on Biological Diversity?**

The United Nations "Convention on Biological Diversity" is a legally-binding agreement between countries from all around the world. Its aims are to conserve biological diversity, to use its components in a sustainable way and to share fairly and equitably between all people the benefits that can arise from the use of genetic resources.

It is the first agreement to address all aspects of biological diversity (species, ecosystems and genetic resources) and has become one of the most widely ratified international treaties on environmental issues.

Unlike other international agreements that set strict concrete targets for action, the Convention on Biological Diversity is a framework agreement that takes a flexible approach to implementation, leaving it up to individual countries to determine how its provisions are to be implemented. Provisions are mostly expressed as goals and policies, rather than as precise obligations and targets. One of its greatest achievements so far has been to generate an enormous amount of interest in biodiversity at national level, both in developed and developing countries. Biodiversity is now seen as a critically important environment and development issue.

### **Why have a Convention?**

Our natural environment provides the basic conditions (oxygen, water, food, shelter, materials, etc.) without which we could not survive, and therefore biological resources are vital for the world's economic, social and cultural development. In addition, the richer the diversity of life, the greater the opportunity for medical discoveries and adaptive responses to new challenges such as climate change. Biological diversity is a global asset of tremendous value to present and future generations. At the same time, due to human activities, species and ecosystems are more threatened today than ever before in recorded history.

The growing concern over the unprecedented loss of biological diversity inspired negotiations for a legally-binding instrument aimed at reversing this alarming trend. As early as 1973, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) identified the "conservation of nature, wildlife and genetic resources as a priority area".

In the 1980's, it became clear that existing environmental legislations and conservation programmes were not sufficient. In 1988, UNEP asked experts to explore the need for an international convention on biodiversity. Soon after, in May 1989, it established a working group of technical and legal experts to prepare an international legal instrument for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

On 22 May 1992, in Nairobi (Kenya), the nations of the world adopted a draft for the Convention on Biological Diversity, the so-called "Nairobi Act". It was presented to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) in June 1992.

## **When did the Convention come into force?**

The Convention was opened for signature at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the "Earth Summit", in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) on 5 June 1992.

The Convention entered into force on 29 December 1993, 90 days after the 30th ratification as stated in its article 36. It has now been ratified by 180 parties (179 countries and the European Community).

## **What are the objectives of the Convention?**

The objectives of the Convention are expressed in its article 1 and are threefold:

- the conservation of biological diversity (articles 6-9, 11 and 14);
- the sustainable use of its components (articles 6, 10 and 14); and
- the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources, including by appropriate
  - o access to genetic resources (article 15), taking into account all rights over those resources,
  - o transfer of relevant technologies (articles 16 and 19), taking into account all rights over those resources and to technologies, and
  - o funding (articles 20 and 21).

The Convention is thus the first agreement to address all aspects of biological diversity: species, ecosystems and genetic resources. It is indeed the first time that genetic diversity is specifically covered in a binding global treaty.

The Convention also recognises - for the first time - that the conservation of biological diversity is "a common concern of humankind" and an integral part of the development process. In other words, the Convention recognises that all humanity has an interest ensuring the conservation of biological diversity, including poor nations, women and indigenous people, and that it needs to be addressed by concerted international action.

## **What is a COP?**

COP stands for "Conference of the Parties". It is the Convention's ultimate authority and assembles representatives of all Parties to the Convention as well as observers such as non-Party countries, UN agencies, international and non-governmental organisations.

Its basic function is to steer and supervise the entire process of implementing and further developing the Convention: it examines what progress has been made and sets work plans for future actions. The COP can also make amendments to the Convention and collaborate with other international treaties and processes.

The Conference of the Parties meets regularly to discuss important matters. There have already been 6 meetings and the 7th meeting, COP-7, will take place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in February 2004.

## **What is a SBSTTA?**

SBSTTA stands for "Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice". It is a committee composed of experts from member Parties as well as of observers from non-Party countries, UN agencies, international and non-governmental organisations. Its aims are to provide the Conference of the Parties with advice and recommendations on scientific, technical and technological matters. The SBSTTA acts under the authority of the Conference of the Parties and, therefore, must comply with the guidelines adopted by the Conference.

### **What is the Clearing-House Mechanism?**

The Clearing-House Mechanism (CHM) under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is an information sharing mechanism set up to facilitate the exchange of scientific and technical information related to the objectives of the Convention. It operates mainly, but not exclusively, via the Internet and is built up as a structurally decentralised and distributed network developed and managed by the CBD Secretariat, national and thematic focal points and other biodiversity actors.

The Clearing-House Mechanism, as defined by Article 18.3 of the Convention, reflects the recognition that cooperation and sharing of expertise among all communities is essential to the successful implementation of the Convention.

### **What is a National Focal Point?**

National Focal Points are set up by each member Party. They are bodies in charge of all the flow of information about the Convention. National Focal Points co-ordinate CBD-related activities at national level. They transmit information from the CBD Secretariat to their governmental bodies and, conversely, report to the Conference of Parties how their country is meeting its biodiversity goals.