

Support for the African Union on Issues of Biosafety

The biosafety project of the African Union (AU) was developed on the basis of an analysis of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety adopted in January 2000. The project's main concern is to build biosafety capacity in African countries. As a protocol to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Cartagena Protocol sets minimum standards for regulating certain aspects of the safe transfer, handling and use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) with a special focus on the import and export of GMOs.

The following activities are not fully covered by the Protocol and therefore need to be regulated additionally in national biosafety systems:

- domestic development of GMOs;
- use of GMOs in contained systems, e.g. research laboratories and industrial facilities;
- approval of deliberate releases into the environment;
- approval of food consisting of or derived from GMOs;
- labelling of food consisting of or derived from GMOs.

Based on its awareness of the challenges of implementing the Protocol and dealing with its gaps, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) decided to develop a regional model law to support its Member States in matters of biosafety. This model law, finalised by an OAU working group in May 2001, was endorsed by the OAU Council of Ministers in July 2001. The aim of the Model Law was to assist Member States to develop comprehensive national biosafety frameworks taking account of the sovereignty of States to regulate GMO issues but also their relevant international obligations.

At the Maputo Meeting of the AU Executive Council in July 2003, the AU Commission presented the agenda item »The Africa-wide Capacity Building in Biosafety«. After considering the item, the Council adopted Decision EX/CL/Dec.26(III) that »requests the chairperson of the commission to convene a meeting of experts and civil society organisations to give further consideration to this issue and come out with proposals for an African common position for adoption by the policy organs of the African Union«. The Member States are further urged to use the African Model Law on Safety in Biotechnology as a basis for drafting their national legal instruments in biosafety.



Photo: Meyer

To equip the AU with the necessary capacity and effective instruments to support its Member States in implementing the Cartagena Protocol and using the African Model Law, the project »Capacity Building for an Africa-wide Biosafety System« has been developed between the AU and German Development Cooperation. The project is being implemented jointly by the AU and German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and is part of the broad AU-German cooperation. Since the AU has no legal means to enforce its policies and decisions in Member States, the aim of the current project is to mainstream biosafety issues in the political and institutional framework of the AU and in its support services for the Member States.

The first activities of the project included the establishment of a biosafety office at the seat of the AU Commission in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Since late 2005, two African experts with knowledge in biosafety-relevant sciences and environmental law and an Administrative Assistant have been working for the project, which is hosted by the AU Directorate for Human Resources, Science and Technology.

Project activities:

● **Development of an AU Strategy to implement the provisions of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and the African Model Law on Safety in Biotechnology and its application on national and regional levels.**

An African strategy for long-term biosafety capacity building has been worked out with the Member States, which includes the following elements:

- Establishing and strengthening institutional frameworks
- Awareness-raising and biosafety information exchange
- Capacity building and preparation for international negotiations
- Policy and legal frameworks
- International cooperation
- Sustainability mechanisms

The African model law is currently being revised and, on the basis of the decision adopted by the AU Executive Council in February 2008, is being transmitted to all relevant institutions in the Member States with the request to make comments. The project is carrying out four regional workshops in 2008 in order to debate how the strategy can be implemented in practice and which changes should be made to the model law.

● **A network for continuous information exchange between the AU biosafety unit and the National Biosafety Focal Points will be maintained.**

The network was established during the preparatory workshop before MOP 3. It will be used throughout the project to ensure continuous communication and exchange of experiences between the AU and the Focal Points.

● **The project provides strategic options to strengthen the existing technical and laboratory capacities on regional, sub-regional and national levels to identify GMOs and products thereof.**

Two studies are currently under way that concentrate on the options for identifying GMOs and laboratory capacities in Africa and the importation of commodities containing GMOs in Africa. The outcomes of these studies will provide a basis for developing strategic options for a coordinated African approach with regard to regional networks for GMO detection and monitoring.

In addition, the AU is helping to prepare the African delegates for the Cartagena Protocol negotiations by offering 2-day preparatory workshops in cooperation with the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, at which delegates have the opportunity to discuss and form a joint African position.

Another important component of the AU's work is to provide information material on different aspects of biosafety in the four official AU languages of English, French, Arabic and Portuguese. This is necessary because most of the biosafety-relevant information is currently only available in English. A homepage for the project is further facilitating access to information.

The biosafety office is currently working out a 5-year biosafety strategy, which will define the AU's objectives and activities for the coming years.

Further information

African Union:
www.african-union.org

Homepage of the Biosafety Protocol: www.cbd.int/biosafety

Homepage of the Biosafety Clearing House Mechanism:
<http://bch.cbd.int/>

Third World Network Biosafety Information Centre:
www.biosafety-info.net/

International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology:
www.icgeb.trieste.it/

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