

Policy statement for the sustainable use of biodiversity and addressing TRIPs.

A. Gurib-Fakim

Mauritius has been one of the first countries to have ratified the Convention for Biological Diversity (CBD). The island of Mauritius, along with the surrounding islands, constitutes a hot spot in terms of biological diversity. Small islands states are waging a battle to safeguard their biodiversity and at the same time reconcile with sustainable development. Safeguarding biodiversity is crucial for the livelihood of humanity.

At another level, the search for new bioactive molecules for industry be it pharmaceutical, cosmetic, industry amongst others, is critical. Bio-prospection on the diverse flora and fauna found in countries of the south increase the chances of finding new lead molecules. Bio-diverse countries, after the Rio Conference of 1992 are calling more and more for benefit-sharing be it in monetary terms, transfer of technology and a recognition of their traditional knowledge in the realization of these developments.

Biodiversity-rich countries are therefore, engaging more and more into licensing agreements, contracts etc. It must also be pointed out that the laws prevailing in these countries may not be strong enough to protect their traditional knowledge or resources from being unlawfully exploited. It is also generally agreed that a strong legal cadre and financial resources are needed to invest for the protection of local knowledge and biological resources extremely difficult.

Being unable to afford same, the perverse effects are that countries are no longer willing to collaborate with the scientific community.

Implications of policy options on other topic areas.

1. Protection and sustainable use of biodiversity will have bearing on the economic pillars of the Mauritian Economy and one of them being tourism.
2. Promote the cultivation of eco-crops.
3. Validation of the local pharmacopeia will give rise to 'greener' medication.
4. Will impact on the tourism, agriculture and the health sectors
5. Promote regional cooperation through joint research projects

Policy recommendations.

1. Revision of parts of the law to make it TRIPs complaint.
2. Encourage partnership and licensing contracts with pharmaceutical companies.
3. Promote the cultivation of medicinal and aromatic plants as one of the avenues of diversification.

Validating ethno- medicines with a view to developing new drugs

Ameenah Gurib-Fakim and Anwar Hussein Subratty

Department of Chemistry and Department of Health Sciences, Faculty of Science, University of Mauritius, Reduit, Mauritius.

1. Critical Issues

During the past decade, traditional systems of medicine have become a topic of global importance. Current estimates suggest that, in many developing countries, a large proportion of the population relies heavily on traditional practitioners and medicinal plants to meet primary health care needs. Although modern medicine may be available in these countries, herbal medicines (phyto-medicines) have often maintained popularity for historical and cultural reasons. Concurrently, many people in developed countries even Mauritius have begun to turn to alternative or complementary therapies, including medicinal herbs.

In Mauritius:

- (1) few medicinal plant species have been scientifically evaluated for their possible medical application.
- (2) safety and efficacy data are not readily available for even a few plants, their extracts and their active ingredients, and the preparations containing them.
- (3) the herbal medicine market is poorly regulated
- (4) herbal products are often neither registered nor controlled.
- (5) both the general consumer and health-care professionals need up-to-date information on the safety and efficacy of medicinal plants.

2. Policy Options

- (1) Registration and control of the herbal medicine market is needed.
- (2) Screening studies are required to provide important baseline data regarding possible biological properties of the indigenous plants.
- (3) Assurance of safety, quality and efficacy of medicinal plants and herbal products are required.

3. Implications for other topic areas

- (1) integration of the fields of medicine, ethnobotany and ethnopharmacology.
- (2) understanding traditional botanical medicine of traditional healers.
- (3) recognize and evaluate the subtleties in the indigenous science of ethnomedicine.

- (4) link to historical public health efforts aimed at providing simple, non-expensive and an alternative mode of treatment/medicine to the community.

4. Policy Recommendations

- (1) documentation of plants used in local traditional medicine for diseases in Mauritius.
- (2) the need of standardization of traditional medicine through scientific investigation is essential.
- (3) highlight the risks of use or overuse or abuse of these plants
- (4) sensitivity to the ways that cultural politics affect health equity.
- (5) continuing effort and investment in the field of ethnopharmacology for the possible identification of further plants that could provide useful in the development of drugs from plants.
- (6) convene a workshop to bring together all the ethnobotanical healers, physicians and scientists to examine the approach of use of medicinal plants with a stand come up with immediate solutions.
- (7) both the general consumer and health-care professionals need up-to-date information on the safety and efficacy of medicinal plants.
- (8) assurance of safety, quality and efficacy of medicinal plants and herbal products are urgently needed..