

Ensuring a return on one's investment

If countries of the South want to save their genetic heritage from plunder, they must introduce laws to protect them and draw up detailed files on their plants and other resources. Such documents have become important tools in negotiations with international companies wanting to exploit them.

Many African countries do not attach sufficient importance to the plants that grow in their environment. These are assets which should be protected at all costs from big foreign companies, especially those from the North. It is all too easy for these firms to take possession of such plants and develop products from them, including medicines, earning enormous profits which will never benefit the owner countries.

These companies come to our countries and ask us for a small piece of a plant. Happy to oblige, we give it to them freely as well as other wild plants whose potential has never been assessed. Some people think they are getting rid of weeds... In actual fact, they are offering their heritage, their patrimony to third parties who will use it to make money. And we, who have been cultivating some of these plants for generations, receive absolutely nothing. Worse still, we cannot even register the plant as belonging to us in the future, nor can we benefit from it. There needs to be more discussion of intellectual property rights and we need to put these rights into practice.

Documenting plants

The land, the soil, the air, the ocean and the sea that surrounds us are all part of a country's biodiversity. To use these, you must have the permission of the owners. Countries, especially African ones, need to create laws to protect this biodiversity and fight against the piracy of their natural assets and genetic heritage. They also need to document traditional knowledge of these plants. That is important for several reasons. First, to prevent others from illegally exploiting this patrimony. If you have documentation, you can take legal action and prove that this plant belongs to you.

Next, it is very important for the future exploitation of biodiversity, given that major multinational companies are now prospecting in a number of countries. Nowadays, these firms are actually working more with countries where biodiversity is well documented. In this respect, India and China are well ahead. They have already codified their plants and their uses in traditional medicine. If nothing is done, a country runs the risk of seeing its biodiversity exploited by 'pirates'. These can - and they have already done so - take one of your plants, introduce a gene, patent it, and legally, that plant no longer belongs to you. That explains why the world's largest plantation of Madagascar periwinkle (*Catharanthus roseus*), is in Texas, in the USA. This plant no longer belongs to the genetic heritage of Madagascar.

As a born optimist, I can also see the positive side of things. The speed with which information on dishonest attempts at plunder can be relayed via internet has had some effect in curbing this kind of practice. The big companies have changed tactics to avoid being branded as 'bio-pirates'. They now tend to work more with the countries where the plants are listed. My philosophy has always been this: "If you give everything, you will get nothing; if you give nothing, you will also get nothing; but if you give something, you can negotiate to obtain something. That way, you ensure a return on your investment."

National strategies

In Mauritius, I only documented medicinal plants. I did not work on algae or other marine plants. Lack of expertise means that no one knows what the ocean that surrounds us contains. We do not have the skills for this work. We also need to catalogue and document our flies, our mushrooms and our soil in order to understand their real characteristics and profiles.

Different countries within the same region can work together to identify and document plants, algae and other resources. A strategic regional alliance aimed at offering better protection to countries' genetic heritage is an excellent idea but very difficult to put into practice. The risk of failure is high. Take the example of the Mascareignes Archipelago in the Indian Ocean, which is an international hotspot for biodiversity. In this region, several countries, including Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles, have plants with similar characteristics. If the big multinational companies want to use them, one country may discuss the likely return on its investment before ceding its intellectual property rights, but others will not. These will have no problem in giving the plant to these companies without compensation. As a result, everyone will lose out.

The solution? A national initiative that highlights the quality of the product. Markets can be won with better quality products, working in harmony with the criteria required by the European and Japanese markets. I am working on it. It is good to dream!



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