

German Policies on Biosafety in Regard to the African Union

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The German development policy on cooperation in matters of biosafety in general has been formulated by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Co-operation and Development (BMZ) together with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) in 2000 after the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety was adopted.

A short history of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety

The Cartagena Protocol was negotiated from 1995 until 2000 within the framework of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. From the beginning, the Protocol was an issue of severe controversy between industrialized and developing countries. In contrast to many other international fora and contrary to the existing national policies and regulations, it were the industrialized countries including the EU who opposed an international binding regime on biosafety while some developing countries, notably Malaysia and Ethiopia, pushed for international rules in the context of environment and health protection. To the great surprise - and consternation - of industrialized countries it was the African Group, led by Dr. Tewolde, which in May 1997 at the UN negotiations presented the first consistent draft biosafety protocol. Since then, this draft text was basis for the negotiations. During the negotiations, the first GE crops were planted on larger and larger areas in three countries - the U.S., Canada and Argentina - which together with Australia, Uruguay and Chile formed the "Miami Group" dedicated to block any substantial progress in the deliberations. The composition of this group should represent the North and the South in equal numbers but it was clear from the beginning, that Uruguay and Chile merely were spectators in the fight between grain trade interests and environmental and health protection interests.

In early 1999, the U.S. caused the brake-down of the negotiations, which sent a shoke-wave through the international communities who cared about environment and health, GMOs and biosafety. During these decisive days in Cartagena in Colombia, all developing countries including China and Brazil who had great reservations against a protocol, joined the position of the African Group and formed the Like-Minded Group. The Cartagena debacle had also positive implications: the almost unknown negotiations immediately gained world-wide recognition. It was also in 1999 when the EU finally decided to fight for a strong biosafety protocol, driven by increasing public pressure against GMOs at home and the conviction that strong international rules might be very useful to defend the EU rules which also came under pressure by the U.S.. The next crucial date was the 1999 Ministerial Meeting of the WTO in Seattle were in some sort of coincident, Ministers and delegates of the developing countries could stop the negotiation round because of its unfair practices and the Environment Ministers of the EU could block the WTO attempt to overtake the international biosafety negotiations.

At the final meeting in January 2000, it was the EU with a massic presence of top politicians who could force the three GMO-planting countries to accept the Cartagena Protocol. The Like-Minded Group had done its work before and in the end agreed to the compromise which - if we would draw an hypothetical line of 50% fulfillment of the first proposal of 1997 - is located far below this mark.

But, the Cartagena Protocol could secure following points:

- States must be informed and agree before an import of GMOs for environmental use can be undertaken.
- States can base their decisions concerning the approval of these GMOs on a strong version of the Precautionary Principle.
- The Protocol initiated an international negotiation process on specific GMO liability. The German Genetech Act adopted just some weeks ago has already incorporated strong liability clauses.
- The Protocol initiated an international discussion on the inclusion of socio-economic issues in the decision-making. A concrete example in our country is the current discussion on co-existence between GE and conventional crops.

Overview about the German Biosafety Capacity Building Initiative

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Bilateral biosafety projects

This Biosafety Capacity Building Initiative is implemented by GTZ and is located in the sector project "Implementing the Biodiversity Convention". Up to now, we have received ten project proposals, out of which three have been approved. One project is located in China, beside India the most crucial developing country in GMO issues. The SEPA is supported in building a database on field trials, in translating and making known the EU laws in China and in building up public information and participation structures together with Greenpeace China - a very ambitious project. The second project is located in Algeria, where an environmental and rural NGO is supported in public information work in French and Arab language - work that is much neglected in the anglophone dominated biosafety landscape and which has an impact on other countries in North and West Africa. A third project is located in Peru where a legal NGO is producing information material in Spanish to influence the national biosafety debate.

Regional biosafety projects

Beside these projects the German technical cooperation also supports a much bigger project in the context of its Africa portfolio - the biosafety project of the African Union. The history of this project is almost as long and complicated as the biosafety negotiations. The first concept was handed over by Dr. Tewolde in December 2000, when GTZ presented its initiative at an international biosafety meeting.

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After our initial excitement about such an opportunity - a continent-wide capacity building project with a high-level political partner on a demanding topic - we got caught in the realities of development programmes and institutional cooperation. It was clear from the beginning that the biodiversity sector project would not be able to support such a project - first, it would exceed the budget by far and second, the project does not have the mandate to develop regional projects on itself. A cooperation with the Africa Group within GTZ was the only way to turn this proposal into a real project, actually the complete financial support for the project stems from their budget.

This cooperation between the Biodiversity and the Africa Group implied that a purely biosafety-orientated proposal had to be fitted into the German development policy concerning Africa. For Tewolde it was obvious how to undertake this exercise - for the German side it was a long process of informing and listening to each other until a mutual understanding how to integrate biosafety policy into the Africa policy was build up. Furthermore, the two GTZ sections are politically connected to their counterpart divisions in the Ministry. In the end four German bodies had to agree on how to develop a project together with the AU - you can imagine what this combination of German and African administration and bureaucracy meant for the people who were engaged in realizing the project.

Overview about the German Africa Policy

The German developmental policy supports governmental and non-governmental organisations that enage themselves in democratic development based on the human rights and fundamental values of democracy. Cooperations must aim at:

- reducing the current risks that challenge the efforts of people and Governments to choose their own ways to develop democracy, their societies and economies;
- securing the dignity and rights of the people;
- securing peace and security;
- alleviating poverty.

One of several sectorial areas of possible cooperation is the support of African efforts to stabilize and improve the status of agrarian and natural ecosystems. In that respect we have to know and to acknowledge that a precise distinction between the different ecosystems is not possible in most African regions. European-like agriculture and land planning administration is unknown in most parts of Africa. The frontier between ecosystems without human influence, with little influence and severe influence is gradual - which does not mean that there are no problems with overexploitation, degradation.

If you read the policy papers carefully, the agricultural sector seems to be absent from current development policies. In the context of current poverty-reduction policy, the approach to agriculture has changed in the last years from direct support of agricultural technology and plant breeding projects to awareness and capacity building activities for small-scale farmers - namely African women:

- more than 90% of basic food is produced by women;
- 70-80% of agricultural labor is done by women;
- their possibilities to get access to education, to determine the management of the family farm or small business, to enjoy land rights is limited, in many cases non-existent.

One of several existing approaches to institutional cooperation is the support of regional African organisations, first of all the AU. The two projects with the AU at that time were:

- Peace and Security
- Strengthening the Commission of the AU

The Peace and Security Project is planned as a nine-year-project with a budget of 18 mill EUR, one component is the contribution of 2 mill EUR for an UNDP-lead project on peace and security. The overall aim is to strengthen the organisation and work of the AU Commission and Council for Peace and Security.

The AU Commission Project is planned as an 11-year-project with a budget of 12 mill EUR. It aims at building an appropriate structure and capacity within the AU headquarters to enable the AU to fulfill its new mandate in the fields of peace and security, good governance and regional harmonisation.

The way how to combine German biosafety and Africa policies in development cooperation

The most obvious approach to combine both policies would be in the field of environment. But actually, neither the AU nor the BMZ sees environmental projects as a prime field of cooperation. A connection between the gender projects with a strong grass-root component and the AU biosafety proposal appeared to be unrealistic, the same was true for the activities in the field of peace and security. The only possible connection to run a biosafety project under the topics of regional harmonisation and good governance. With the task of the AU member states to implement the UN biosafety protocol and the still ongoing work of the AU to adopt a regional model law on safety in biotechnology a linkage could be built.

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The political dimension of the project

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For a general public, the rejection of food aid that contained GMOs by Zambia and other African countries in 2002 and the culmination of this conflict during the Johannesburg Summit in August 2002 formed the obvious events to demonstrate the conflicting interests in global policies on genetic engineering, also called modern biotechnology in the UN language. For the specialists amongst us, these conflicts of course were obvious since many more years. It was also in 2002, when the principal decision to support the AU proposal had to be taken in Germany. To our great surprise - but also somewhat predictable - BMZ and GTZ had to face serious efforts by national and international stakeholders who tried to influence the decision making process with the aim to substantially change the AU proposal. The African Biotechnology Stakeholder Forum, a lobby forum for industrial and professional interests in the introduction of GMOs in Africa, was informed about the December 2002 meeting at which a GTZ team planned to go to Addis to finalize the project proposal. The ABSF had a meeting with the AU just before the GTZ workshop but could not convince the AU to step back from their project ideas.

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In 2003, journalists became interested in the cooperation, one of them wrote an article about the different approaches between German and U.S. biosafety projects in Africa in the online forum Scidev.Net. This article came under immediate attack from the U.S. biosafety project and had to be changed due to this pressure. A more detailed version of the journalist's work - presenting the same facts as the online article - was published later in the scientific journal Nature. It is not known publically whether this publication was challenged as well. This Nature article describes quite precisely the problems Africa is facing when she embarks on the process to develop and implement own approaches and policies on biosafety which are not mere enabling activities to secure the quick introduction of GMOs but independent measures to ensure environment and health safety when African governments and societies have to decide about the introduction of GMOs.

We went through this long process, we have developed a very ambitious project and we see forward to the job application and talks with the African candidates that should run the project hopefully starting in summer 2005.