

Ethical biotrade: a collaborative effort



Kalahari melon seed producers in Namibia

Rik Kutsch Lojenga of the Union for Ethical BioTrade describes this new partnership organization and some of the challenges facing its members.

The Union for Ethical BioTrade (UEBT) is a newly created association that promotes the ‘sourcing with respect’ of ingredients derived from native biodiversity. The UEBT brings together a wide variety of players including multinationals, small companies, producer communities, NGOs, international government organizations, and government agencies.

The UEBT’s Trading Members have committed to establishing, over a set timeline, sourcing practices that promote biodiversity conservation, respect traditional knowledge, and ensure an equitable sharing of benefits along the supply chain, from producers to final product manufacturers. Trading Members include collectors, farmers, processing companies, and manufacturers, of final products. The UEBT also has Affiliate Members which are not directly involved in trading activities but are supportive of the principles of ethical biotrade and seek to promote and facilitate such practices. These members include IUCN, the United Nations Foundation,

PhytoTrade Africa, and the national BioTrade programmes of Uganda and Peru.

A verification system guides members towards compliance with the Ethical BioTrade Principles and Criteria, which stem from the BioTrade Principles and Criteria developed by United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The verification system uses third-party auditors, including those that are FSC-accredited.

Wide recognition exists of the role of ethical biotrade as a sustainable development strategy. Governments in a number of biodiversity-rich regions have embedded the concept into national biodiversity strategies, national development plans, and regional agreements. In addition, some of the Affiliate Members of the UEBT actively seek to engage the private sector in the development efforts of biodiversity-rich countries or regions.

However there are a number of challenges still ahead. For instance, Trading Members

that take up the challenge to implement CBD practices related to biodiversity conservation or benefit sharing are often frustrated to find little legal clarity and an uneven playing field. Although, through the CBD, the basic principles of access and benefit sharing (ABS) have been recognized internationally, they remain largely unimplemented at the national level. Even in the few countries that have legislated ABS, the processes are often long and complex and the relevant government agencies lack capacity to put the legislation into full practice. In addition, some UEBT member cosmetics companies have found that natural ingredients are at times defined as genetic resources (thus falling under ABS rules), and at other times are considered to be biological resources, subject to a different legal regime.

Another challenge is the still limited consumer awareness of the importance of biodiversity. On joining the UEBT, small- and medium-sized enterprises from developing countries expect to gain access to new buyers for ethically sourced products. Recently, some of these smaller founding member companies resigned from the UEBT, as costs related to implementing membership commitments exceeded the financial benefits. Although there is an increased interest in botanicals in industry, there is still limited market recognition of biodiversity-related efforts and ABS issues.

To address all issues involved in ethical biotrade, different partners need to be brought on board at different stages of the supply chain. One area in which members of the UEBT would greatly benefit from additional support is in their efforts to develop practices in sustainable harvesting, monitoring and evaluation, and adaptive management. It is our hope that IUCN member organizations will join the UEBT to share their expertise and to support its members.

Clearly, ethical sourcing of biodiversity is a learning process for all organizations involved. In an interview for the CBD, Rodolfo Guttilla, Vice President of the Board of the UEBT and Executive Director of Natura Cosmetics SA noted in this respect that the UEBT was created “primarily because we are all venturing into new territory and we think the journey will be easier in the company of others”.

Contact: Rik Kutsch Lojenga, rik@ethicalbiotrade.org or visit www.ethicalbiotrade.org.