

## Local knowledge power

**A workshop in March led to a declaration on community rights and access to biological resources in Africa**

The task force of the Scientific, Technical and Research Commission of the Organization of African Unity (OAU/STRC) on community rights and access to biological resources met in Addis Ababa from 20 to 23 March 1998. The objective of the meeting was to develop a draft model legislation on community rights and access to biological resources to ensure the continuing control by local communities of their natural resources, knowledge and technologies, as well as to develop a draft African Convention on the same.

After national review and discussions, the model legislation would be expected to form the basis for African nations to develop national legislation on community rights and access to biological resources, community knowledge and technologies. It is expected that an African convention would create coherence among the different pieces of national legislation.

Natural resources and indigenous knowledge and technologies are a legacy humanity owes to local communities. The task force understood a local community as a section of society in a given area whose means of livelihood are based on the natural resources, knowledge and technologies of, and related to, its immediate ecosystems. The local community keeps adapting, generating and regenerating those natural resources, knowledge and technologies as its preceding generations had done and, if spared disruption by external forces, as its succeeding generations will do.

The essential role of the community in the conservation of biological diversity, on which the very survival of planet earth is dependent, is recognized by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD),

created by a large part of humanity, represented by 150 states, in 1992.

A smaller part of humanity, represented by 40 states, concluded the negotiations for the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1994. The objectives of win are global and concern the movement of goods and services throughout the world to ease international trade.

It is the conviction of the task force that the WTO-based approach is predatory in nature and runs counter to the aspirations (It communities which are closely linked to the biodiversity so necessary for the survival of the planet. The task force believes that the privatization of life forms through any intellectual property rights (IPR) regime violates the basic right to life.

The task force, therefore, strongly recommends that OAU /AEC member states urgently make legislation to regulate access to biological resources, knowledge and technologies so that such access shall be allowed only with the prior informed consent of the local communities and the state, and shall benefit them, and to recognize community rights in order to protect the heritage of the people of Africa. The task force commits itself to the achievement of the noble objectives of this proposed legislation and this draft convention on community rights and access to biological resources.

This piece is based on a posting by Kristin Dawkins of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Minneapolis, us, on the Fishfolk mailing list.