

Toward full implementation of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety: Monitoring CARICOM's progress

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In celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the entry into force of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (CPB), the opportunity lends itself for us in the CARICOM region to reflect on what has been achieved, where we stand, and what remains outstanding as it relates to this instrument.

As signatories to the CPB, countries within CARICOM have been beneficiaries of two UNEP-GEF projects, both of which were aimed at assisting them toward its full implementation. The first initiative, which was the project on *Development of National Biosafety Frameworks (NBFs)*, began in 2001, and enabled countries to develop their draft national biosafety policies and draft biosafety legislation. This was followed by the *Regional Project for Implementing National Biosafety Frameworks in the Caribbean Sub-Region (2012-2018)*, which comprised both national and regional components. Outputs were produced in areas such as national legal frameworks, upgrading the resource base and institutional capacities, capacity building and biosafety information management. A regional biosafety policy and model legislation were also developed, to address the issue of harmonisation.

In light of the recommendations emanating from the terminal evaluation of the implementation project, a number of key actions were identified as being critical to move biosafety forward in the Region. These are:

- 1) A need for greater involvement of regional entities to assist in taking the process forward
- 2) Clustering countries based on strategic interests relevant to their national development objectives related to management of food production, agricultural and ecosystems health
- 3) Development of a strategic plan to chart the way forward for biosafety management at a regional level
- 4) Development of a follow-up project to address existing gaps

Aspects 1 and 2 were addressed at a meeting of regional biosafety stakeholders held in January 2022 in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Outputs from this meeting were then channeled into the Strategic Outlook for Biosafety in the CARICOM Region, which was circulated to countries.

The proposed follow-up project is regarded as the vehicle via which many of the outstanding gaps identified in the following key areas can be addressed. These include:

- regulatory framework
- capacity building
- funding
- public education and outreach
- laboratory detection infrastructure
- roster of experts
- mainstreaming of biosafety and the BCH

The success of this new initiative can however only be guaranteed if it obtains the requisite support from countries. Steps taken to garner this have included:

- a) a presentation of the draft project indicative framework to the Caribbean Biodiversity Focal Points during the COP 15 in December 2022,
- b) hosting of a virtual meeting of Caribbean Biosafety Focal Points and GEF Operational Focal Points in April 2023, and
- c) continued engagement of the National Biosafety and GEF Focal Points

Twenty years is indeed a milestone to be celebrated! While we in the Region have made small steps toward full implementation of the CPB, much more is required, especially as we have obligations that must be fulfilled. Any collective action that therefore helps us all move forward can certainly assist in the effective achievement of this goal.