

Civil society and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety: 20 Years of Precautionary Progress

The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety has been a cornerstone in the international effort to ensure safe handling, transport, and use of living modified organisms (LMOs) that may have adverse effects on biodiversity and human health. Over the last two decades, civil society worldwide has played a vital role in its implementation, supporting Parties and actively championing the precautionary approach embedded within the Protocol.

Embracing the Precautionary Approach

By anticipating potential risks and addressing them proactively in the absence of complete scientific understanding, the precautionary approach seeks to safeguard biodiversity and human health from the potential adverse effects of biotechnology.

Civil society organisations, with their on-ground experience and close community ties, have been instrumental in translating this principle into action. From conducting awareness campaigns to filing lawsuits, NGOs have constantly prioritised environmental and human safety over rushed and irresponsible deployment of new technologies. Their efforts emphasise the interconnectedness of our global ecosystems and the profound responsibilities that come with altering it.

The Protocol's Continued Relevance

The importance of the precautionary principle becomes even more evident in the face of new and potentially harmful biotechnologies, such as gene drives. Gene drives are genetic systems that increase the likelihood of a particular trait passing from parent to offspring, overriding the natural laws of inheritance. They could alter the genetic makeup of entire populations or even species as well as eradicate them. Their promises (e.g. for vector control of diseases), come with significant risks such as irreversibility, disruption of ecosystems, and uncontrollable cross-border movements, among others.

Despite the clear need for precaution, some view the precautionary principle and the Cartagena Protocol as roadblocks to technological advancement and innovation marketing. There is a growing concern among NGOs, scientists and Parties that profit-driven motives and private agendas could undermine the Protocol's spirit and efficiency. In an era where the balance between technological progress and safety is delicate, the Protocol's principles, reinforced by civil society vigilance, are more critical than ever.

The Protocol stands as a safeguard, underscoring the importance of risk assessment, informed decision-making, and the right of countries as well as indigenous and local communities to refuse the introduction of certain LMOs on their territories. In this context, civil society organisations have continuously advocated for rigorous assessments and public consultations and participatory decision making, taking forward the principles enshrined in the Protocol.

In recent years, various NGOs have collaborated to increase international awareness of new technologies. Demanding transparency and multidisciplinary research and advocating for indigenous peoples and local communities' rights to be part of decision-making processes.

Precaution as a mandate

New opportunities and challenges emerge from technological breakthroughs such as CRISPR-Cas, artificial intelligence, progress in 'omics' and RNA based technologies. As we stand on the cusp of unprecedented biotechnological innovations, the Cartagena protocol has never been more relevant in guiding us. In the realm of biosafety, precaution is not just a principle—it is a mandate.