Patenting biodiversity : Philippine Experience

As early as 1992 multinational companies from Japan and the U.S. started patenting extracts of Filipino natural resources. A Japanese multinational company had bribed a Filipino scientist connected with the Department of Science and Technology for U.S.$5 million to patent a banaba extract (banaba is a tree) used for curing diabetes.

This information was made public by Dr Romy Quijano chair of the Philippine Health Alliance for Democracy on September 28, 1994 when protesters gathered at the Philippine Senate to rally against Philippine ratification of GATT, warning that it will lead to patents that will virtually kill Philippine efforts to extract medicines from herbs and other plants. Dr Quijano cautioned that foreign multinational companies will control the Philippine drug industry once GATT is ratified.

He related the attempt by the U.S. National Cancer Institute and National Institute of Health to provide Filipino scientists, including himself, with U.S.$5 million to conduct research on the possibility of making extracts from herbal plants. However, Dr Quijano said the two U.S. institutions asked that in exchange for the money, they would be assured that the products of the research would be patented by them. They wanted the researchers to give them the patents of extracts from lagunday (for asthma), sambong (for kidney problems) and tsaang gubat (for abdominal pains).

Source: 'GATT foes hit Filipino Scientists', Philippine Daily Inquirer, p.7, September 29, 1994.

Biodiversity and Gender Issues: Recognizing Common Ground

Janet Abramovitz

'In Indonesia, 1,500 local rice varieties have become extinct in the last 15 years alone, (Government of Indonesia, 1989), and, a recent survey of fruit and vegetable varieties in the United States revealed that up to 96 percent of the commercial vegetable varieties listed by the US Department of Agriculture in 1903 are now extinct.'

This information is presented in a chapter titled **'Biodiversity and Gender Issues: Recognizing Common Ground'** by Janet Abramovitz. Her chapter discusses the 'role women play in understanding and managing the living diversity of their surroundings, and the importance of that diversity to sustaining women and the families they support'. We present excerpts from her chapter in the recent Zed Books publication titled, Feminist Perspectives on Sustainable Development, edited by Wendy Harcourt.

What is biodiversity?

'Biological diversity - biodiversity - is the sum of genes, species and ecosystems coexisting on Earth. As part of the evolving world, human beings are continually shaping their environment, for good or ill. Nature shapes humanity too. The struggle to survive in a particular setting has put nature's stamp on culture, giving rise to varied cultural forms - from social structure, diet and language, to land management practices such as nomadism, crop selection or shifting cultivation.

The term biodiversity was coined as part of a broad effort to shift the understanding of, and interest in, the environment away from single-species perspectives. By using biodiversity as an organizing concept one could look at systems, how they function, what influences them, how they can be maintained, and where humans and their needs and interactions fit within these systems, it was part of an evolution to a more holistic approach. In essence, biodiversity conservation shifts from a defensive posture - that is, protecting nature from the impacts of development - to an offensive/proactive position seeking to meet people's needs from biological resources while ensuring the long-term sustainability of Earth's biotic wealth. (WRI/IUCN/UNEP, 1992)

Losing biodiversity

Yet these resources are in jeopardy, and many of the reasons why biodiversity is in decline are also responsible for the decline in people's ability to achieve reasonable standards of living. While loss of habitats such as the tropical rainforest has gained widespread attention, other less glamorous areas are under much greater threat. For example, less than half of the temperate rainforests remain today, and they covered a very limited area to begin with - only 4 percent of today's tropical forest area. (Weigand, 1991; Haisla Nation and Ecotrust, 1991) Mediterranean climate areas, coral reefs, coastal fisheries and freshwater lakes are also in serious decline.

Loss of genetic diversity, especially apparent among crop varieties, has equally severe implications. Thousands of species (and innumerable subspecies) have been cultivated since the development of agriculture 12,000 years ago (Fowler and