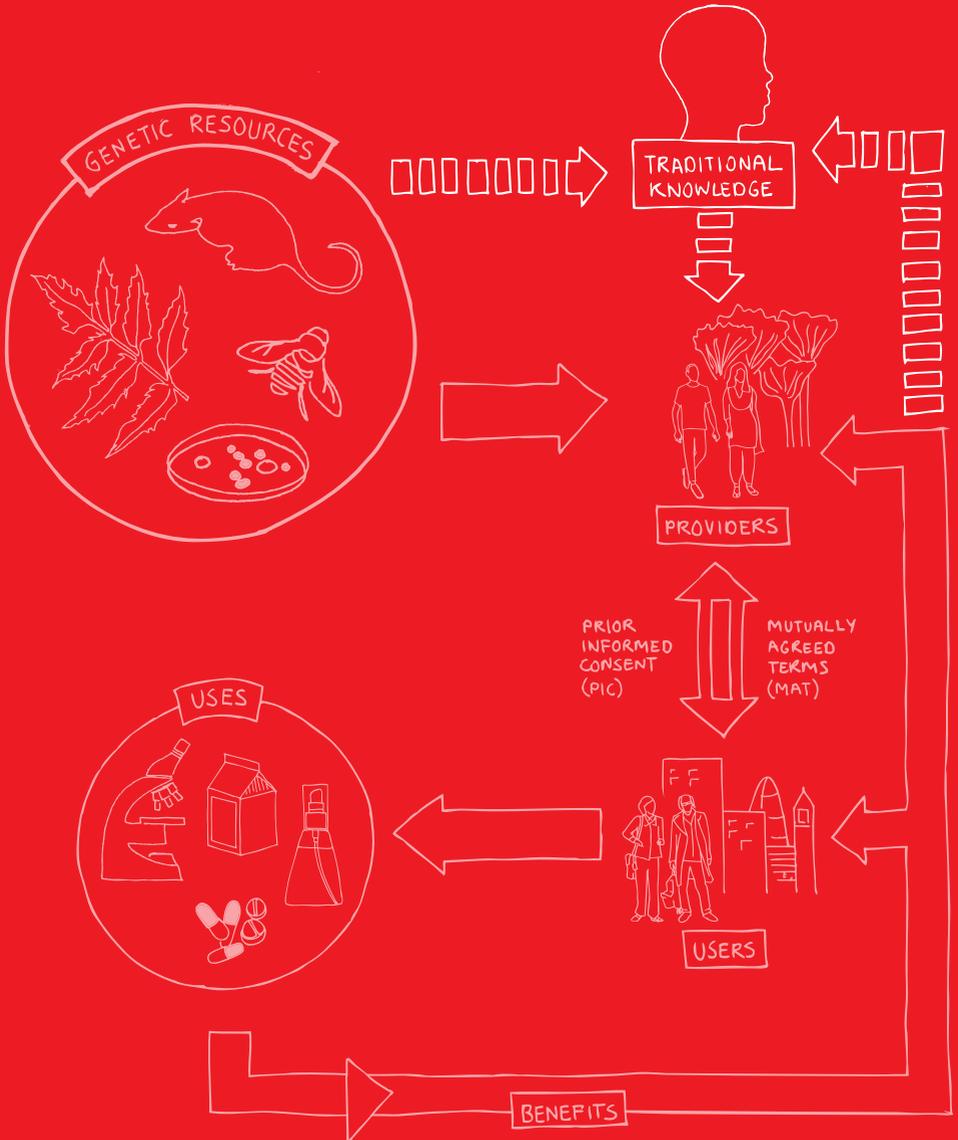


Convention on Biological Diversity: ABS

THEME

Traditional knowledge





For centuries, communities around the world have learned, used and passed on traditional knowledge about local biodiversity

Image copyright: Marsha Goldenberg/Shutterstock: Medicine woman mixing plant and herbs

What is traditional knowledge?

Despite rapid recent advances in the scientific study of genetics, it is important to recognize that knowledge of the properties and benefits of biological resources is not simply a modern phenomenon. For centuries, communities around the world have learned, used and passed on traditional knowledge about local biodiversity, and how it can be used for a range of important purposes. From food and medicine, clothing and shelter, to developing skills and practices for agriculture and animal husbandry.

In the context of access and benefit-sharing, traditional knowledge refers to the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities (ILCs) related to genetic resources. This traditional knowledge is developed through the experiences of communities over centuries, adapted to local needs, cultures and environments and passed down from generation to generation.

Why is traditional knowledge important?

Indigenous and local communities rely on biological resources for a variety of everyday purposes, and see themselves as custodians and protectors of biological diversity. In this way traditional knowledge has helped preserve, maintain and even increase essential biological diversity over centuries.

Today genetic resources have a wide range of commercial and non-commercial uses. In many cases the same properties that make them useful to ILCs are now used by industry to develop popular products. They are also used by researchers to better understand biodiversity and the intricate web of life on earth.

In both cases, traditional knowledge is a vital source of information for identifying uses of genetic resources that humanity as a whole can benefit from. This knowledge is particularly valuable for bioprospectors, or users of genetic resources, who use it to guide them to plants, animals and microbes that are already known to have useful properties. Without this knowledge many species currently used in research and commercialized products may never have been identified.

As a result, traditional knowledge has significant implications for access and benefit-sharing of genetic resources. It's essential that traditional knowledge is valued appropriately by those who use it. This means making sure that access to traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources is subject to the prior informed consent of the ILCs involved and that they obtain fair and equitable benefits arising from its use.

Who is traditional knowledge relevant for?

Indigenous and local communities (ILCs): ILCs have relied on biological resources in their everyday lives for centuries. It is through this interaction over generations that they have developed knowledge of the different properties of biological resources and their uses.

Users: Traditional knowledge is helpful for users seeking access to genetic resources for use in academic research or commercial product development. Traditional knowledge of species whose properties have been used for centuries provides useful leads for researchers.

Competent National Authorities (CNAs): CNAs within providing countries of genetic resources are tasked with helping to create a balance in negotiations between ILCs and users, if traditional knowledge has been used in research or product development.

Protecting traditional knowledge

The Convention on Biological Diversity

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has established a Working Group on Traditional Knowledge to direct and facilitate discussions between governments, ILCs and other interested parties about traditional knowledge. It provides indigenous and local community representatives with the opportunity to contribute their views and recommendations on related issues.

In Article 8(j) of the CBD, it states the need for governments to respect, preserve, maintain, and promote the wider application of traditional knowledge with the approval and involvement of the relevant ILCs.

For instance if users want to use traditional knowledge in their research and product development, they are required to seek the prior approval of the relevant ILCs and must negotiate mutually agreed terms that encourage the equitable sharing of any benefits that may arise from the use of this knowledge .

Some national governments are already implementing Article 8(j) of the CBD through national legislation, law reform and their own national biodiversity action plans, strategies and programmes. Amongst other objectives, this ensures that the prior informed approval of the relevant ILCs is sought before traditional knowledge is accessed and used.

The Traditional Knowledge Information Portal

The Article 8(j) homepage and the online Traditional Knowledge Information Portal has been created by the CBD to promote awareness and enhance access by ILCs and other interested parties seeking more information on traditional knowledge, innovations, practices and measures, to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. They can be viewed at: www.cbd.int/traditional and www.cbd.int/tk

CASE STUDY

Traditional knowledge of the Hoodia plant

The Hoodia plant is a succulent species indigenous to Southern Africa. It has been used for centuries by the indigenous San peoples to stave off hunger and thirst, when food is scarce and during long hunting trips. Traditional knowledge related to Hoodia has been passed down through generations of San peoples.

In 1996, the South African-based Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) patented the active compounds of Hoodia, which were found to suppress appetite. The commercial potential of Hoodia as an appetite suppressant in the anti-obesity market led to licensing agreements between CSIR and some large pharmaceuticals companies to develop and commercialize a Hoodia-based product. However, these actions were initially taken without the consent of the San peoples.

As a result of media coverage of the potentially lucrative agreements made to develop the plant's properties and an outcry by a South African NGO, measures were taken to initiate negotiations between CSIR and the San peoples. This led to a benefit-sharing agreement, which included monetary and non-monetary benefits, and the setup of the San Hoodia Benefit-Sharing Trust. The agreement called for milestone payments during the product development period and royalty income in the case of successful commercialization of a product. Funds will be used for the development, education and training of the San community and to support projects and institutions working to improve research and protection of the San's traditional knowledge and heritage. Although it is expected that larger amounts of money will flow from the agreement at a later stage, some payments have since been awarded to the trust fund and are being used to strengthen the institutional base of the San across borders in Southern Africa.



Traditional knowledge is a vital source of information for identifying uses of genetic resources that humanity as a whole can benefit from

Image copyright: Lucian Coman/Shutterstock: Indigenous San man





Factsheets in the ABS series

Access and benefit-sharing

Uses of genetic resources

Traditional knowledge

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