Going back to basics

By TAN CHENG LI

The recently concluded global meet on biological diversity came up with a host of plans aimed at stemming further loss of Earth’s priceless species and ecosystems. However, reality dictates that ultimately, it is national priorities that will determine the implementation of the programmes.

THE global meeting to protect earth’s biological diversity which took place over the past two weeks in Kuala Lumpur, almost could not conclude. A group of delegates were still haggling over money matters late Friday evening when the Seventh Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP-7) was expected to close.

When they finally agreed on how to parcel out the limited funds to the many conservation projects, it was already 11pm. Over the next five hours, bleary-eyed delegates adopted 30 documents discussed over the two weeks, covering a range of topics from mountain biodiversity to technology transfer and sharing of the benefits from using genetic resources.

COP-7 is the largest United Nations meeting hosted by Malaysia, to date. Over 2,300 delegates from governments, non-governmental organisations, UN agencies, indigenous communities, industry bodies and academics came together to find ways to significantly reduce biodiversity loss by 2010. The target was set two years ago at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa.

The approaching deadline lends urgency to COP-7 but did the gathering deliver? The outcome received both bouquets and brickbats but, as always, the lack of commitment of countries to provide funds threaten to
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shifts from words to action after being in existence for 10 years.

However, COP-7 underscores the difficulties in making this transition – countries have to find a balance between global priorities and targets to stem biodiversity loss, and preserving national sovereignty over such efforts.

“We must be wary of the words ‘global targets’ as we have national development priorities and we may not have the capacity to meet those targets,” says one Malaysian delegate.

Discussions at COP-7 also reflected an all too classical North-South divide, particularly when trade concerns crept into documents on the table. Some developed countries insisted on subjecting CBD programmes on invasive alien species as well as marine, inland water and mountain ecosystems to international trade rules. This drew strong protests and was rightfully rejected.

“If these proposals had gone through, it would mean conservation programmes would be restricted by trade concerns,” says Tewolde G. Egziabher, director-general of the Environmental Protection Authority in Ethiopia.

The attempt to link conservation with trade reflects reality – economic concerns still supersede environmental ones. “It is unsustainable production and trade at all costs versus conservation and sustainable use for the longer term. The tension has been building up over the past 10 years but the clash became very obvious this meeting,” says Chee Yoke Ling, legal adviser to Third World Network, a coalition of groups working on development issues.

Clear targets

Still, COP-7 did produce a host of outcome-oriented work programmes with targets – a quantitative approach to protect biodiversity which many applauded.

“By adopting measurable indicators and specific goals for the overall 2010 target, this conference has empowered governments to more accurately monitor progress – or the lack of it – in reversing the modern extinction crisis,” says Klaus Toepfer, executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme.
Key points in the CBD strategic plan include: to conserve at least 10% of each type of ecosystem, protect areas of particular importance for biodiversity, stabilise populations of species now in decline, control threats from invasive alien species, promote sustainable use and consumption of biological resources, and ensure that no species of wild flora or fauna are endangered by international trade.

The 187 governments party to the CBD also agreed on indicators to help measure progress towards preventing biodiversity loss, such as measuring the number of alien invasive species, area of forest under sustainable management and aquatic water quality.

Conservation group Greenpeace, however, fears that the future for many threatened plants and animals still hangs in the balance. It commended the decision for a global network of protected areas but asserts that the agreement is worthless unless decisions are carried out nationally. Developing countries, on the other hand, have reiterated that the work programme should be bound by national capacity and priorities.

At COP-7, the first step towards an international regime on access and benefit-sharing of genetic resources was taken. A mandate was given to a working group to elaborate on the nature and scope of the regime, which will determine future rules on access and benefit-sharing. This issue is central to the CBD which recognises that companies and scientists should no longer have free access to genetic resources but must share the benefits derived from these materials with source countries.

Delegates bickered for days over what the working group should consider when elaborating on the possible features of the regime. Much to the disappointment of many, COP-7 made no decision on whether the regime will be legally-binding as preferred by developing nations. Worse, some developed countries insisted on subjecting the working group to budgetary concerns.

“This means it will not meet if there are no funds. This is clearly a bid to slow down negotiations on the regime,” says delegate Gurdial Nijar, law professor at Universiti Malaya.

Native appeals

Despite a strong presence at COP-7, indigenous communities were sidelined. Being non-parties, they were mere observers and could only plead their case at the meeting. Their calls went unheard as delegates ignored their concerns and rights in talks on protected areas, eco-tourism, protection of traditional knowledge and benefit-
sharing of genetic resources.

The decisions focused on facilitating – instead of regulating – access to traditional knowledge and genetic resources, says Debra Harry, director of the Indigenous Peoples Council on Bio-colonialism.

“The parties fail to acknowledge that much of the world’s biodiversity exists in indigenous people’s territories and they are reluctant to give us rights to control access.”

Indigenous groups are not the only ones at a disadvantage. Small delegations, too, were stretched thin, what with several meetings held concurrently. The issue of negotiation capacity emerged.

“Negotiation is never on a level playing field. It is the large delegations from developed countries which influence the talks,” says Christine Weizsacker of the Federation of German Scientists.

Thus it is a wise move that delegates have agreed not to have new work programmes for the next six years. Work will focus on implementation and reviewing progress towards the 2010 target. This shift in approach will bring the CBD back on track as an overburdened agenda can only strain resources. As one observer points out: “They should get back to basics.”

The agreed strategic plan, with its framework of goals, targets and time frames, provides a road map for parties to move towards the 2010 target. It can be the basis for countries to shape their own biodiversity strategies and action plans. It is only through such efforts that the gap between 10 years' of policy development and concrete action can be bridged. And, hopefully, there will be some signs that more extinction of species have been curtailed when parties to the CBD meet next in Brazil in 2006.