

The Decline and Fall of the Roman SBSTTA?

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At 2:00am Thursday morning, Delegates concluded their session by ditching the 'Vision' for the work of the CBD on Agricultural Biodiversity. As they left the building, the Moon entered a total eclipse. An Omen?

Not only is agricultural biodiversity still threatened but SBSTTA's decline may precede a fall unless COP takes a bold decision to ensure the primacy of sustaining agricultural biodiversity over the commodification of agriculture.

On Wednesday night, through tedious interventions, questioning and often deleting text that might, even slightly, challenge the unfettered growth in production of, and international trade in, industrial agricultural and livestock products including agrofuels, a few countries wore down any opposition in a long, repetitive, monolingual session.

The result is a limp paper that is literally 'visionless'. It is weaker than the documents produced 12 years ago at their second meeting held in Montreal in 1996. That meeting built upon the Rio process and recognised the importance of agricultural biodiversity, 'its distinctive features and problems requiring distinctive solutions'. Later that year in Buenos Aires, COP 3 agreed the first Decision on agricultural biodiversity. To this they attached Annex 1 which succinctly summarised the challenges to and benefits of agricultural biodiversity, translated four years later in Nairobi into a programme of work.

Now, in Rome, the UN's food and agriculture capital, SBSTTA 13 presaged another dynamic development of actions and policy - a 'paradigm shift towards biological intensification' as FAO described it in their opening speech and echoed in many lively interventions, Side Events, reports and posters throughout the week.

SBSTTA could have built on all these calls for change that reinforce what, especially women, farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, forest dwellers and other food providers have been doing and saying since the dawn of civilisation: we need to work with nature, nurture the land and waters and agricultural biodiversity, using biologically-based agriculture, livestock production and fisheries that provide healthy local food for people and healthily functioning ecosystems.

SBSTTA could have championed this – a move that would also help agriculture to adapt to and mitigate climate change. It could also have moved policy decisively against carbon-consuming and agrochemically-driven production of commodities and agrofuels, that pollutes water, degrades land, contaminates foods and feed and creates dependency on remote and powerful corporations.

But there's not even a sniff of a paradigm shift and, worse:

There is no strong call to insert agricultural biodiversity policies and actions into the UNFCCC adaptation / mitigation discussions.

Ecosystems are mostly described as providing 'services' not 'functions', emphasising economic primacy over ecology.

And on agrofuels, rather than abstention, SBSTTA may recommend to COP that there is a need to 'develop a tool to accurately assess... the degradation of ecosystems due to policy measures that increase the demand for biofuels'. No call for an immediate moratorium in sight! Watch out for a BonnFire of Biodiversity at COP 9.

Will Parties take the bold step to rewrite this potentially regressive SBSTTA recommendation and, in Bonn, agree a visionary Decision on agricultural biodiversity that will secure our future food, livelihoods and Life on Earth?