

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my privilege and honor to open this Colloquium "Biodiversity for Development – a way forward to the SDGs".



Story about the Ginkgo Biloba tree in Hiroshima

In 1945 (August 6) an atomic bomb exploded 600 meters above the city of Hiroshima. Some 80.000 men, women and children had perished. Tens of thousands more succumbed to their injuries and the effect of radiation. In an area of 12 km² the city was completely destroyed.

Surrounded by the horror of Hiroshima, within days of the explosion, some trees started sprouting again. These trees were Ginkgo Biloba trees. Their roots underground has been spared the nuclear annihilation.

The ginkgo tree is a living fossil, it coexisted with the dinosaurs in this museum. It's presence today is proof of its unique resilience. The Ginkgo owes its resilience to its very long genome, 3 times as long as the human genome. Its wide range of defense mechanisms ensured its survival during ice ages and nuclear blasts.

This metaphor of the resilience of the Ginkgo tree, offers a compelling story about the importance of biodiversity today. It shows us we need a variety of defense mechanisms in order to confront sudden shocks.

Agenda 2030

This need for resilience through diversity is evident in the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development. Biodiversity and ecosystems rank high on the SDG agenda and are particularly reflected in SDG 14 on marine biodiversity and SDG 15 on terrestrial biodiversity.

The Belgian development cooperation promotes eco-systems integrity and biodiversity in numerous ways.

- (1) In our governmental collaboration with African countries Enabel, the implementing agency of Belgium's development cooperation, promotes sustainability through an eco-systems approach.
- (2) Belgium is since long an important donor of the global centers for international agricultural research, the CGIAR centers.
- (3) And finally, Belgium funds the CEBios program. An important pillar of our Belgian Development Cooperation's specific support to biodiversity and our engagement under the UN Convention on Biological diversity.

In the past 5 years the CEBioS program has been working with partners in developing countries, mainly Least Developed Countries like Burundi, DRC and Benin, to build these partners' and countries' capacities and knowledge on biodiversity and ecosystem services. Poor people in the

least developed countries (LDCs) are disproportionately dependent on ecosystem services for their basic livelihood.

Not only are poor people in LDCs very dependent on natural resources and ecosystems services for their subsistence, the extreme poverty is at the same time a threat to natural resources, biodiversity and ecosystems. All too often, extreme poverty forces people into make radical short term decisions, without having the luxury to think about devastating long term consequences. It leads to a vicious circle where already threatened ecosystems are further degraded, eventually ending up in humanitarian crises with conflict and forced migration.

Biodiversity will only be preserved if the local people and local entrepreneurs understand how important ecosystems are for them and if they appreciate the present and future benefits those could provide (for example eco-tourism, pollination). In coordination with other stakeholders, the CEBioS program contributes by awareness raising and capacity building and strengthening scientific knowledge and technological skills through trainings, workshops, joint research programs and scholarships.

I recommend CEBioS to continue to work in LDCs and fragile environments and to focus even more on the links between the development and academic world, to focus on impact and results and look at linkages with other actors such as Enabel and the Belgian Non-Gov actors on the ground in our partner countries.

Conclusion

Once again, I am honored to open this colloquium today and I am confident the discussions today will bring some food for thoughts and valuable innovative ideas for another 5 years of CEBioS!