

Panel Discussion on the Contribution of Traditional Medicine to the Realization of International Development Objectives related to Global Public Health

New York, 12 February 2009

Economic and Social Council Chamber

The panel discussion was the first event at the Council to prepare for the Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) devoted this year to global public health. Chaired by the President of the Council, the discussions focused on the role of traditional medicine in helping to achieve the health-related development goals. The President emphasized that traditional medicine was a field where the knowledge and know-how of developing countries was enormous and a source of hope for improved health conditions at the global level. It was therefore a field where industrialized countries could gain a lot from the experience of developing countries.

The event was co-organized by the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Intellectual Property Rights Organization (WIPO), the Secretariat of the Independent Forum on Indigenous Issues/DESA and the Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination/DESA. The co-organizers had arranged and made possible the presence of panelists who addressed the theme of the panel from various angles. An interactive discussion with Member States followed. Panelists included:

- Dr. Xiaorui Zhang, Coordinator for Traditional Medicine, Department of Essential Medicine and Pharmaceutical Policies, World Health Organization;
- Mr. Antony Taubman, Director and Head of the Global Intellectual Property Issues and Life Sciences Program, World Organization of Intellectual Property;
- Dr. Myriam Conejo, Medical Doctor and Coordinator of the *Centro de Salud* (health center) Jambi Huasi, Quito, Ecuador;
- Dr. S. Rama Rao, Officer-in-Charge, WIPO Coordination Office in New York, who delivered the presentation by Dr. VK Gupta, Head, Traditional Knowledge Digital Library, Information Technology Division, Council on Scientific and Industrial Research of India.

Summary of the discussions

The **World Health Organization defines traditional medicine** as “the sum total of the knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health, as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illnesses”.

Although it has a long history, traditional medicine has become a globalized phenomenon recently, with a flourishing market for its products and practices. For example, in 2005, sales revenue of Chinese traditional medicines reached US \$14 billion,

an increase of 23.81% compared to the previous year. In developed countries, an increased share of the population uses complementary and alternative medicine.

In this context, panelists warned that **this burgeoning market, left unregulated, could harm both developing and developed countries**. Like a double edged sword, traditional medicine knowledge and medicinal plants are a source of great hope for meeting demands of primary care and the development of emerging economies. However, over harvesting of medicinal plants and the inappropriate use of local and indigenous knowledge could be a potentially dangerous practice if appropriate control mechanisms are not in place.

Panelists advocated for **policies that would integrate traditional medicine into national health care systems**. Such policies should ensure safety, efficacy and quality through appropriate regulation. They should also ensure availability and affordability of traditional products, while promoting their rational use by consumers and practitioners. It was considered encouraging that as of 2007, forty-eight countries had national policies on traditional medicine and over a hundred countries had established herbal medicine law or regulations. The establishment of national research institutes in this field, present now in 62 countries, allowed for accelerated progress.

The complementary nature of traditional and western medicines was stressed. Within the context of primary health care, it was considered that the two could blend together in a beneficial harmony, as exemplified by the practice of **Jambi Huasi clinics in Otavalo, Ecuador**, where both traditional and western medicines are used in the treatment of patients from local and indigenous communities. Further, the use of either type of medicines was not mutually exclusive to indigenous or non-indigenous peoples. Experience has shown that clinics that use both types of medicines have helped to improve the credibility of traditional methods.

The economics of traditional medicine was also emphasized, as they are generally much less expensive than western medicines. Given the weakness of public health systems in many countries and the lack of resources, the development of this sector is of high relevance. For example, treatment for psoriasis with Indian traditional medicine costs considerably less and takes less time to complete than with Western medicine. Both the developing and developed world can therefore benefit from its use to speed up efforts towards universal access to health and other health goals.

Speakers stressed that traditional medicine also used a **more comprehensive approach encompassing the socio-cultural situation of the local population** and their cosmo-vision and beliefs, a particularly important aspect for indigenous communities. In the case of the Jambi Huasi clinics in Ecuador, this has much facilitated access and trust by local population to health services. The psychological, emotional and energy related dimensions of the patient are taken into account, as much as the biological one.

At the international level, **the World Health Organization is increasingly involved** in this area of work. A WHO Congress on Traditional Medicine was held in November

2008 in Beijing, China, and the WHO Executive Board adopted a new resolution on traditional medicine in January 2009 which emphasizes the need for national policies to support integration of traditional medicine into health system. WHO supports countries in these efforts.

Ensuring that traditional medicinal knowledge is not lost (**preservation**) and that its originators are given credit and appropriate reward for their inventions (**protection**) was a prevalent theme in the meeting. A call was made for the coordination of efforts at the national and international level to strengthen legal provisions to that end.

Preservation of traditional medical knowledge and related genetic resources aims at saving them for the future generations of their original community and making them available to a wider public on terms that are fair, appropriate and respectful of the values and interests of traditional knowledge holders. Speakers commended progress made to preserve traditional knowledge and to recognize their value. For example, the historical culture of treating traditional medicines as taboo and witchcraft in Kenya has today changed into a culture that embraces these methods.

Protection against illegitimate dissemination, misappropriation and misuse of traditional medical knowledge requires international legal action. Measures are needed to reduce the likelihood of the misappropriation of intellectual property rights, particularly patents, related to traditional knowledge and genetic resources. Mechanisms to promote equitable sharing of benefits from their use, including by indigenous communities, should also be put in place.

An interesting experience presented to the Council was the **Indian traditional knowledge digital library system**. This digital database includes the names of hundreds of traditional Indian medicines and their specificities, available in both local and Western languages in which data are translated. It prevents misappropriation, as it can only be accessed for patent searches and examination purposes, with clear conditions set for granting patterns. Speakers stressed the potential of this mechanism for replication in countries where local and indigenous knowledge are important.

At the international level, the **World Organization of Intellectual Property (WIPO) develops guidelines and legislative options** for the protection of traditional knowledge. Draft provisions elaborated by the Intergovernmental Committee set up on these matters have already become influential benchmarks for protection of this knowledge. Indigenous communities also make important inputs to these endeavors. Debates are on-going on the nature and format of an outcome to help establish a better framework, such as for example an international binding instrument.

Several speakers stressed that the increased use of traditional medicine required **stronger regulatory frameworks** in developing countries to assess the safety of herbal medicines and to preserve bio-diversity. This discussion was linked to broader sustainable development policy debates, as the preservation of quality medicinal plants requires bold actions to protect the environment in general. A call was made to

demonstrate strong political will and to improve the healthcare capacities of developing countries in order to ensure that the use of traditional medicines is possible and fruitful.

Policy recommendations

Although speakers acknowledged progress made in this field both at the national and international level, many advocated for a **more universal and systematic framework that would address traditional medicine from its various dimensions and ensure that its practice and use equally benefit the holders of this knowledge, particularly indigenous communities, and the whole world who needs them to advance towards reaching international health goals.**

In particular, it was recommended that policy makers should:

- **Develop policies that integrate traditional medicine into national health care systems, through appropriate legal and regulatory frameworks and the establishment of national institutions specialized in this field;**
- **Continue to promote universal access to health care through the support of the use traditional medicine, particularly for the benefit of local and indigenous communities;**
- **Develop legal mechanisms at the national and the international level that protect against illegitimate dissemination, misappropriation and misuse of traditional medical knowledge and promote equitable sharing of benefits from their use;**
- **Accelerate the efforts aimed at establishment of an integrated international intellectual property regime to protect traditional medical knowledge and traditional knowledge including by developing databases of such knowledge where appropriate".**