

COMMERCE AND BIO-POLICY

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The actual meaning of the word bio-trade is directly linked to bio-production, bio-processing, bio-standards, bio-packaging, bio-transport, even bio-marketing. As a matter of fact, the term appears in every single stage associated with the production process of a specific product. This product should fulfil the conditions set by bio-policy, the policy concerned with the protection of our environment and our existence within it.

Many steps in this direction have been taken during the last decades, and the first examples of bio-trade applications have started showing results. Each modern business has only to take into consideration the conditions and the standards set for the production and/or the sale of a specific product, in order for this product to comply with bio-policy conditions. This is not necessarily enforced through decisions, decrees or directives of a particular State organisation; bio-policy itself can take care of the protection of the environment we live in, our own way of living, and our future existence on this planet.

Bio-trade starts at the production stage and ends at the market place. We live in a complex world that is going to require innovative approaches to deal with some of the problems we have created through technology. A series of procedures that will allow a particular product to be cultivated or manufactured with the use of materials that are harmless to the environment and to our health, should be adopted to this effect. Raw materials, by-products, fertilisers, mechanical by-products, such as air or noise pollution, and waste products should be dealt with, according to environmental protection regulations.

Product manufacturing and processing must be regulated to protect the environment. This approach can give a different view of the product, demonstrating that bio-trade is a way of life. Moreover, packaging should consist of environmentally-friendly materials, and should be easy to open, with appealing colours and designs to attract the consumer, i.e. bio-psychology. The retail price should also be realistic, so that the average consumer can afford the product. Transportation of the goods must be conducted in an environmentally-friendly and safe manner, and must avoid resulting in noise pollution. Special care should be taken so as not to contaminate the goods during shipment.

All this requires information, training and bio-education. Industries, commercial enterprises, agricultural units, transport companies, production executives and management should adopt this philosophy and shed obsolete practices, guided by the desire to increase profits irrespective of the damage to the environment. At the same time, the consumer must be informed by the media about the importance of bio-products and trade and how these products can facilitate and protect our lives, families and society in general.

Is it, however, the sole responsibility of the business world or the consumer to accept a new philosophy, a new way of life? Most certainly not. It is the responsibility of all who are privileged to live on this planet and wish to continue living here. Humans and animals share a common environment as well as a common evolutionary legacy. Living in a man-made landscape, we easily forget that our well-being is rooted in natural systems. All human enterprise rests on the foundations of natural systems that provide a myriad of invisible support services. Our connections to these systems may be less direct and obvious than those of other species, but we are no less implicated in the web of life.

No one has stated this fundamental principle more clearly than the early 20th century American environmental philosopher John Muir: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find that it is bound by a thousand invisible cords to everything in the universe." Therefore, our first action must be to offer comprehensive and scientifically substantiated information to the public, in simple words and with the use of examples. This will make everyone comprehend the principles of bio-policy, as well as its effect on our lives. Most of all, the business world needs to be informed of the principles of bio-policy, since, at the moment, the information being received is either insufficient or non-existent. Diligent work by government bodies, scientists, corporations, and individuals is required, if the threats posed to the next generation are to be reduced.

It is, however, known that many countries are characterised by indifference or negligence when it comes to offering correct and timely information to businesses operating within their territory. This means that pollution prevention is absent from their business policies and preventative measures for the protection of people and the environment are, therefore, not applied. Thus, the responsibility for raising awareness of this situation lies in the hands of certain "volunteers," who have realised the meaning of bio-policy and are willing to offer their services for the protection of the environment. Their contribution is considered enormous and precious, and provides information to those responsible for applying bio-policy principles. Environmental groups become the levers used for initiating reforms in production, trade and marketing, on a global scale.

The application of various directives issued by unions, States and organisations, and the adoption, on an international level of ISO standards for various categories of goods and services, as well as Total Quality Controls, can facilitate businesses to better adapt to bio-policy

principles. It is quite understandable that, while individuals can effectively comply with bio-policy standards, these efforts must be matched by broad governmental action, to produce a world-wide effect.

It is true that re-adjusting trade to make it comply with bio-policy principles requires considerable expense. This additional cost, however, can be converted into profit, since there is bound to be a change in production and trade conditions, reducing costs and amending market prices. For example, promotion and advertising costs shall be minimised, since quality, environmental value and environmental packaging, among others, will be a single characteristic of all bio-products. Once consumers realise the value of bio-produced products, time and money will not be an obstacle to obtaining these goods, and advertising spots will not influence purchasing decisions.

There is no doubt that sometimes, trade and bio-policy may appear to be competitive. In this respect, we have only to imagine the disastrous effects an uncontrolled international commercial practice would have on the environment. The Treaty of Vienna, for the control of substances harmful to the ozone layer, and the Montreal Protocol, which was signed in 1987 and mandates the phasing-out of CFCs and other ozone-depleting chemicals, take care of some of these practices. These treaties also control the transportation of hazardous waste, which, as is well known, has been the subject of many discussions in the past, due to the fact that many under-developed countries, around the world, became the "paid recipients" of hazardous waste, produced by developed countries. One should also consider the adverse effects of the trade of rare animal and plant species, had the CITES and FCCC treaties not been signed.

It is essential to develop legislation, with the aid of national and international bio-policies, that will allow the reconciliation of free trade practices and environmental protection. For example, the Arbitration Section of the International Chamber of Commerce, in Paris, could become responsible for cases concerning bio-policy and environmental trade practices. This would be successful if both sides agree to discuss their differences, thus avoiding going to extremes. In its first report, the Trade and Environment Committee of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) did not resolve the conflict of interest between trade and environmental protection. It merely touched upon the problem and confirmed the requirement for further discussion. It is necessary to raise awareness of the great need to adopt a common strategy, regarding educational techniques designed to support both trade and bio-policy, and the WTO, UNCTAD, OECD and ITC could be actively involved in this endeavour. In particular, the International Trade Centre in Geneva should assist developing and under-developed countries to go through this transitional stage at no environmental cost.

A saying comes to mind: "Though we cannot control the winds, we can set our sails and ride along with them." With our sails raised high, we can ride to the future guided by bio-policy, so that the generations to come can have an environment favouring the harmonious coexistence of every living creature on Earth.

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