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Cosmetics (900)

Cosmetics are defined as preparations - such as powders, oils, creams, pills - used for healthcare and most of the time for beauty reasons. They include products that people use daily such as perfumes, creams, shampoo, lipstick, etc. Unless they are mostly the results of research in chemistry exactly as pharmaceutical or chemical products, cosmetics are commonly perceived as harmless to the environment. They however have several environmental impacts which are handled in different ways. Recently, several national and international initiatives have taken the aim of encouraging a cosmetic industry that could successfully link human well-being with the conservation of nature.

The most obvious impact of cosmetics is related to the chemical components that they do contain. The potential harmful effects of these components are, in the same way as for chemicals, regulated by the national and international authorities dedicated to chemical components' control.

A second impact, that is increasingly attracting attention and particularly interesting with regard to the objective of sustainable development, is related to the exploitation of biological components by the cosmetic industry. Cosmetic recipes are indeed often drawn from the properties of seeds, plants, trees as well as animals, in order to propose effective healthcare solutions. For example, the milk of the coconut fruit has been used very early as a skin moisturizer; the petals of roses have been used in perfumery for ages; etc.

The consequences of the use of biological components by the cosmetic industry on the conservation of the world's biodiversity are the subject of several debates at the national and the international levels of policymaking. In contrast to the first environmental impact already mentioned - chemical pollution - that is mostly the subject of restrictive regulations (as the EU REACH legislation), these discussions aim at creating a complementary relationship between the uses of the world's biodiversity in cosmetology, and the conservation of natural resources. This positive equation would consist in the sharing of the benefits made by the users of the biological resources - mostly the pharmaceutical and cosmetic industry - to the actors responsible for the conservation of these resources - mostly local authorities and indigenous people.

At the international level, several international organizations are, since the beginning of the 1990s, discussing the development of international principles to encourage the collaboration between the users and the providers of biological material. The main organizations concerned with this topic are the United Nations Environmental Program, the World Intellectual Property Organization and the World Trade Organization.

Under the United Nations Environmental Program, the Convention on biological diversity, that has been adopted in 1992 and ratified by 168 member States, recognizes in its third objective, the need to share the benefits arising from the commercial use of biodiversity products. The Convention therefore asks the users of biological components - cosmetic

companies included - to redistribute part of their benefits to the local communities and indigenous people that have been conserving these components for centuries.

The World Intellectual Property Organization and the World Trade Organization are also currently discussing a special disclosure requirement for patents' applications using biological material. Such a disclosure aims at enhancing the transparency related to the use of natural genetic resources in order to improve the possible financial contributions of firms for biodiversity conservation. Nevertheless, all these new regulatory elements are under negotiations and are not supposed to be adopted before the beginning of 2010.

Several initiatives at the national and the corporate levels are already in force. Several cosmetic firms have started to develop new products and ranges based on the responsible use of biodiversity components, as well as on the sharing of the benefits with local communities. In Brazil, the enterprise Natura is one example of such firms. Natura has recently elaborated a so-called "Ecologic" range that reconciles biodiversity conservation with cosmetics' development. For instance, the firm commercializes a fragrance elaborated from the sap of a tree harvested in the forests nearby Bélem, in the Brazilian state of Amapa. This sap is harvested by indigenous people who have, through a partnership with the firm, been able to maintain their activities, while improving their everyday life with the building of schools, hospitals, etc. These populations are also responsible for the conservation of the natural specie. The Brazilian state is very active in encouraging such partnerships.

Countries rich in biodiversity are more inclined to adopt some incentives to foster the involvement of biological material users in biodiversity conservation. American and European states and companies are however also starting to participate actively in these schemes. For example, the transnational corporation The Body Shop has been one of the first firms to engage in natural and fair trade cosmetics. The firm is now present in 61 countries worldwide.

The current market trends in cosmetology shows that consumers recently favor biological products obtained through transparent and fair supply chains. It is probable that the growing demand for these kinds of cosmetics will improve the mutual supportiveness of biodiversity conservation and human healthcare.

See also: corporate social responsibility; healthcare; supply chain management; transparency.

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