

Capacity development for biodiversity conservation

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The euphoria of having persuaded most countries of the World to agree to and sign the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has slowly been replaced, in the global community, by a sense of frustration at the slow rate of implementation of the provisions of the convention. Though countries are "obliged", under the CBD, to do various things and to refrain from doing other things, most countries do not seem to be interested, or willing, or be able to stand by their obligations.

In the fourth meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP IV), the members took note of the problems of implementation and COP advice was that the Global Environment Facility (GEF) addresses capacity issues more firmly. The conventions on climate change and desertification requested GEF to provide support for Capacity Building. GEF after wide consultation, expressed support for a strategic partnership between the United Nations Development Programme UNDP and the GEF Secretariat, to produce a comprehensive approach for developing capacities at country level. This is the

Capacity Development Initiative (CDI). The assumption is that the critical missing element in developing nations is the capacity to implement.

Fortunately, "capacity" has been described broadly enough to include political capacities (policies, laws, financial allocations), institutional capacities (infrastructure, defined responsibilities, transparency, access to information) and human capacities (expertise, training, work environment). This coverage is impressive, but by no means totally comprehensive.

The agenda also differs according to the perspective. Whereas the fundamental concern is (or should be) the slow progress in actually protecting biodiversity, an added concern for the international secretariats involved, seems to be the slow progress in formal compliance with the convention, and poor reporting back to the secretariats from member countries. Within many countries, an added concern appears to be their perceived failure to negotiate

successfully for a larger share of resources and/or greater influence, within the processes of the convention.

The conservation of biodiversity requires, within communities, within countries and in the world in general, both commitment and ability. Whereas basic intention and potential commitment can be built up by the raising of awareness about the value of biodiversity and the dangers inherent in its destruction; the second, or operative, level of intention is far more complex. Where the sacrifices involved in conserving biodiversity are too high, in the short-term, in comparison to the benefits which may accrue in the longer term, intention falters. It also falters where the costs of conservation are certain but the benefits are doubtful, or where the benefits do not assuredly flow to those who pay the costs.

Among affluent societies, a change in attitudes can, even by itself, achieve a breakthrough where people start valuing the benefits of biodiversity conservation over any opportunity costs that its conservation might impose. They can also be made to discount immediate benefits for greater, long term, gains. However, among subsistence societies, the choice might often be between survival and conservation, and postponing immediate benefits might imply for the specific community that they might not survive to enjoy the long-term gains.

Community conservation

There is often a belief that rural societies would conserve resources if they were in control of them. Traditional practices, such as the maintenance of sacred groves, are cited as evidence. What is often forgotten is that the social and

CDI Activities in Africa

- National capacity needs assessments covering thematic areas: biodiversity, climate change and land degradation are to be conducted in Uganda, Senegal and South Africa;
- Regional workshop on the CDI and Africa's capacity needs in global environmental management will be held in Cairo, Egypt, later in 2000.

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Many of the traditional and contemporary resource use practices among rural communities the world over are geared towards sustainable use of natural resources. Such practices are usually focussed on species and resources that are of direct value to the community

cultural preconditions under which sacred sites and groves were set up and maintained mostly do not obtain today. And, considering that in most cases the protection of sacred sites and groves was secured out of fear of divine retribution, perhaps this is just as well.

However, a distinction needs to be made between the sustainable use of resources and the conservation of biodiversity. Many of the traditional and contemporary resource use practices among rural communities the world over are geared towards sustainable use of natural resources. Such practices are usually focussed on species and resources that are of direct value to the community. Recent studies in India and elsewhere show that such species comprise a very small proportion of the total diversity of species in the ecosystem. Therefore, sustainable use patterns in most cases do not necessarily secure biodiversity values.

Larger context

The state of the economy has a profound influence on both the intent and the ability to conserve. In stagnant or slow growth economies, especially in countries of the south, there are few opportunities for alternate sources of incomes or livelihoods. In such a situation, if populations and aspirations do not grow faster than the economy, there is some stability; and communities, if empowered to do so, can use sustainably, their natural resources for meeting their subsistence needs. This is mainly because such resources are their only source of livelihood and they have

historical wisdom about the consequences of degrading these.

The intent is there, but what is required is the ability to ensure continued access to these resources and the ability to protect these resources from "outsiders" who want to plunder them. Where some areas have been put apart by the community for total protection (perhaps as sacred sites), there is a good chance that as long as an equilibrium is maintained, such areas would continue to be so protected, thereby safeguarding much of the biodiversity.

However, in fast growing economies, the opportunity cost of conserving nature continues to go up. A fast growing economy makes increasing demands on the natural resource base. It also provides increasing monetary returns for these resources and alternative sources of income, at least to the more privileged members of rural communities. This often leads to a transitional period where resources are put under great stress. Here the intent and ability of the society, especially the government, becomes critical. If it is ready to share a part of the gains of a growing economy with the local guardians of biodiversity resources, with approaches such as eco-development, then there is hope that these resources might survive the transition. However, where everything is either left to the "market forces" or where the intent and ability of societies and governments to safeguard biodiversity is weak, havoc ensues.

In short, where economies are stagnant and traditional methods of production predominate, though the

people remain poor they have no option but to protect their natural resources as these alone stand between them and annihilation. However, even in such societies, where the control of such resources shifts into the hands of those who are not critically and immediately dependent on them, disaster follows. Where rural communities do not have the ability to prevent such a shift, it usually occurs. And where their own populations and/or aspirations grow disproportionately to their ability to increase productivity sustainably, degradation results. But, stagnant economies cannot endure for long and in any case take a huge toll on the poor. Therefore, economies must be stimulated into growth but with a clear strategy to protect the natural resource base in the interim, till they can reach a level where their populations have a real option of protecting the environment and realistically achieving the standards of living that they aspire to.

It is within this very complex scenario that the CDI has to address capacity development priorities. Some are relatively straightforward, like the raising of awareness, of skills, better access to information, stronger institutions and institutional structures. All these certainly raise the chances of promoting biodiversity conservation. However, these by themselves cannot address the basic issues outlined above. Therefore, if the global community hopes to achieve any palpable results, it must look at the issue in an integrated manner where capacities are developed across sectors to steer economic growth in a manner such that it is not destructive of the environment. Perhaps the first step would be to target, for capacity development in biodiversity conservation, the departments of planning and finance in each of the countries, rather than the usual departments of forest, environment and natural resources.