

NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN - INDIA

INTEGRATING ISSUES OF EMPOWERMENT AND EQUITY IN THE NBSAP PROCESS

Supplementary Guidelines for NBSAP Executing Agencies¹

[As stressed in the planning documents of the NBSAP process, and discussed at the Inaugural National Workshop, the issue of empowering people to participate in biodiversity conservation and management, is one of the critical cross-cutting themes. This brief note highlights how this theme can be dealt with by executing agencies at all levels]

ON EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power and responsibility (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important.

This definition of *empowerment* probably pulls together all characters of empowerment very compactly and succinctly. Broken down, this definition reads like this:

- Empowerment is Multi-dimensional
- It is a social process
- It helps people gain control over their own lives
- It is a process that fosters power in people
- This power is for use in their own lives
- It is for use in their communities
- It is for use in their society
- It should help them to act on issues which they define as important

If we look at the NBSAP process from this angle, what should we be doing?

Since the process is going to take place at various levels like sub-state sites (the LACs), ecoregions (the EWGs), states (the SSCs) and at the national level, we must see that this concept of empowerment permeates at all levels. The thematic level (TWG) members who may not be working directly with people for making plans need to take extra care so that this principle becomes a part of their planning process.

The two key phrases in this definition are :

- **Power and responsibility (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society.**
- **Acting on issues that they define as important.**

¹ This note was prepared by P.V. Sateesh, Member, TPCG, with inputs from other TPCG members

The first phrase emphasises the importance of **local** implication of the plans that are made in the NBSAP process. Therefore the points to check out are:

- Is the plan capable of providing power and responsibility to people for use in their own lives
- Is this power and responsibility useful for their communities and societies

The first test in empowerment is passed, if the answers to these questions are *yes* in the plans that we come up with.

The second question is the people's definition. The NBSAP planners need to be keenly aware of this point. It is primarily **local people (not outsiders) who must define** what is important for them and they should be ready to act on those issues.

This means that as conservationists, wild life specialists, marine scientists and ecologists, we are bound by two cardinal principles:

- ❖ Firstly **we** must **not** offer plans to people. We must help people to design **their own** plans.
- ❖ The facilitation for designing these plans must always keep in mind that the plans should meet the local needs of the person, her/his community and her/his society. Anything that fails to meet these qualifications does not lead to empowerment.

This aspect of empowerment should be the focus of all NBSAP process.

ON EQUITY

Though I have not found a compact definition for equity, an attempt to define equity can be on the following lines

- ***In any plan, equity based cost and benefit sharing should ensure that the haves pay major share of the costs and the have-nots receive a major share of benefits.***
- ***Marginalised and vulnerable sections of the community should get rights to access a major share of resources and rights for participation and decision making. The plans should consciously engineer a higher stake for the vulnerable sections and work on poor's resources and poor resources.***

If this definition is broadly acceptable, how should we ensure that this principle is enshrined in the NBSAP process?

We must ensure that all the major actors in the NBSAP process check out the plans that they have helped formulate for the following principles:

- a. If there are benefit sharing elements in that plan, who shares the maximum benefits? Is that fair?
- b. Has the share of the poor and the marginalised been ensured? Is that adequate?

- c. Is the plan supporting or obstructing the livelihood security of the poor and the marginalised? To what extent? If it is supporting the livelihood security of the poor, is that adequate? If it is obstructing this security, how do we build in corrections/compensations?
- d. Does this plan hinder the sustainable access to resources of the poor and the marginalised?
- e. If not are there ways of building corrections into this to help poor people's access to resources?
- f. Is the concern for biodiversity in the plans consciously or unconsciously act against the interests of the poor and the marginalised?
- g. If it does, are there ways of marrying the interests of the biodiversity conservation with the interests of the poor? How can this concern manifest itself in the plan?

EMPOWERMENT, EQUITY, AND CONSERVATION

One of the questions that is often raised is: what happens if people's plans come up against the plans for conservation of biodiversity? What is people are simply not interested in conservation, or their knowledge and concerns are not adequate to conserve the entire spectrum of biodiversity?

This is a genuine question. One of the ways of dealing with this issue is to engage into a longer dialogue on the context of such a contradiction and the local issues leading to such a position taken by people. Invariably we can come up with some very fascinating insights which will inform us of the conditions under which people can take an anti-ecological stand. Secondly, it is important to provide local people with information that they would otherwise not have access to, including larger policy/legal issues, perspectives and information from formal scientific studies, and so on. This backdrop can contribute decisively to the pro-biodiversity plan that may be presented, the conflicts it might generate and the possible solutions one might find. The more collaborative such a planning process is, the more well-informed it is likely to be, and therefore also the more sustainable in the long run.

It may not be possible for every executing agency in the NBSAP process to come up with very concrete suggestions on all aspects of empowerment and equity. **But the planners at every stage must raise these issues among themselves and with the communities and other sectors with whom they would work to create the plan. *This raising of issues and trying to find honest answers to these questions are very important.***

Finally, **executing agencies must keep in mind the two bottom lines of the NBSAP process:** maintaining and protecting the *ecological security* of the region they are planning for (and of the country as a whole), and enhancing and protecting the *livelihood security* of the people who are directly and most heavily dependent on biological resources.