

ICCA Consortium South Asia Regional Assembly (27th Nov to 1st Dec 2019)

Background

The ICCA (Indigenous Peoples and Community Conserved Areas and Territories) Consortium is an international association dedicated to promoting the appropriate recognition of, and support to, community conserved areas globally. Its members are indigenous peoples' organisations and federations, community organisations at various levels and civil society organisations working closely with them. Its honorary members are individuals with relevant expertise and commitment to ICCAs. The activities of the Consortium range from supporting local ICCA-based initiatives to promoting appropriate international and national policies and practices, from strengthening capacities to carrying out research initiatives and developing technical publications. The ICCA also endeavours to work with concerned state institutions and other expert bodies.

The Consortium is now encouraging a process of regionalisation aimed at strengthening ICCA networks and federations in different regions to be able to more effectively support ICCAs on the ground. As a step towards this, the ICCA Consortium South Asia Regional Assembly was held in Udaipur, Rajasthan in November 2019. The objective was to bring together members and honorary members of the Consortium, its partners and others who are working on community conserved areas in India and South Asia, to share and learn from each other's experiences as well as to define a way forward for community conservation in South Asia.

Other than a large number of people from India, representatives from Nepal and Bangladesh participated. There was representation from various gram sabhas and local initiatives, civil society organisation, independent researchers, academics and more.

Sessions on Introductions and on ICCAs

The first day involved personal introductions as well as introduction to different organisations, ICCA sites and work that individuals were involved in. In addition to this, there was an introductory session on ICCAs in the global, South Asian and Indian contexts.

Conservation and Restoration

ICCAs (referred to as community conserved areas or CCAs in India) are thought of as a counter narrative to the dominant one of exclusionary conservation. However, livelihoods and subsistence issues could lead to mismanagement of ICCAs, causing degeneration of ecosystems. Traditionally, many systems were followed to ensure conservation, such as hunting or fishing only at specific times of the year, not practicing these activities in sacred groves, harvesting only at certain times, etc. But many of these systems have broken down over time for various reasons and have not been replaced by other systems. There is a need to monitor ecosystems to know if conservation intervention is necessary.

There were three questions that came up during the discussions and each was taken in the context of an ecosystem. These questions were: *What are the gaps in the conservation systems? What measures are being taken to fill these gaps? What other support is necessary for conservation or restoration of the ecosystem?*

Forests

The gaps for forest ecosystems were identified as absence of inter-generational knowledge sharing; lack of respect for traditional knowledge systems and customary management practices; imposition of external knowledge systems; lack of coordination between the communities and management committees, particularly when they are politicized; and knowledge not evolving in accordance with changes in lifestyles and market systems.

It was discussed that reviving a sense of ownership in local communities will revive systems of management and conservation. In India, this is now being aided by the implementation of the Forest Rights Act. Cross-generational interactions would facilitate knowledge transfer, as would the belief that forests belong to the future generation. For newer and non-customary use of forests, newer rules of sustainability need to evolve, apart from reviving customary practices.

In terms of support, management plans need to be made using people's customary knowledge and convergence with various government agencies. Development of local leadership and documentation of traditional knowledge in the local language are also necessary.

Grasslands

Members of this sub-group included representatives from high altitude grasslands in Jammu and Kashmir, the Western Ghats grassland systems, and peninsular savannahs. They felt that the colonial rule as well as post independence policies have disrupted local management and governance systems. This is made worse by decrease in livestock-based livelihoods.

The group discussed several ways to remedy this situation: information dissemination in local languages, land use planning, biodiversity documentation, restoration works and trails, youth awareness and engagement, linkages with livelihoods, and more.

The support required for this would include: archival information, documentation and research, identification of biodiversity and livelihood potential, policy intervention for grasslands, linking livelihoods to youth aspirations. The main challenges are urbanisation, industrialisation, mobilisation of youth and government policy programs.

Wetlands

Wetlands are limited resources and they are increasingly supporting larger populations. Encroachments and invasive species (many of which are due to government programmes) are some of the threats faced by wetlands. Traditional practices of fishing have collapsed because of increasing pressures and exclusionary government policies, among other reasons. The "blue revolution" to increase wetland production led to erosion of traditional knowledge and degradation of wetlands. The manner in which extraction is done (using excavators) is also detrimental to the ecosystems. Wetlands are treated as wastelands by many, due to the lack of knowledge about their significance. Policies have so far perceived wetlands as sources of water for consumptive use alone, whereas local communities have several uses for wetlands.

Many measures need to be taken to fix these issues, including controlling of exotic plants and fish, setting aside areas for biodiversity conservation, restoration of aquatic ecosystems, stopping use of excavators by government departments for extracting floating vegetation and for de-silting, gaining a better understanding of fish and plant species and water quality, reducing dependence on fishing,

closing down fishing activities during the breeding season, and creating market demand for local varieties of fish through highlighting their nutritional value.

Support can be provided in the form documenting and translating local knowledge, recognising people's systems of management, public investment in wetland conservation, forming a network of communities working on wetland conservation, financial support, development of fishing support systems such as cold storage, seed production nurseries, and appropriate transportation.

Equity Issues in ICCAs

A panel with participants from Nepal and India discussed examples in South Asia that look at the intersection of caste, gender and youth in ICCAs. The group discussed several challenges faced by women and youth in ICCAs, especially those from marginalised groups. Many women panellists shared their own journeys of empowerment. They discussed their work on women empowerment, women's rights over land and natural resources, representation of women in governance institutions and their participation in decision making, women leadership, girls' education, livelihood options and more.

Systems of Governance in ICCAs

The fish bowl conversation methodology was used to talk about systems of governance in ICCAs. The questions posed to participants were: *What is the governance structure in your ICCA? How did you move to self-rule? How have you made the government accountable? What efforts were taken to enhance governance capacities of the community members engaged, especially those of the marginalised sections? How were wisdom and maturity aspects addressed?*

Response of Premanand Madavi, Panchgaon, Maharashtra:

We obtained CFRs in 2012. We have gram sabhas where the presidentship rotates for every meeting, to avoid power concentration with one person. Our forests were deteriorated by the forest department. Now, five people guard the forests every day. We also welcome women gram members who have returned to their natal village due to widowhood or divorce. Our gram sabha issues free grazing permits. Members have to apply to the gram sabha for permits to harvest timber for housing purposes. Putting off forest fires is the responsibility of all villagers. If some member objects to the decisions of the gram sabha they are free to have longer discussions.

Regarding government accountability: Even if we have conflicts within ourselves, when it comes to facing the government, we come together as one unit. The forest department seeks permission from us to work in our forests. Once the forest department started some work in our sacred grove without our permission. Although we could have physically stopped them, we didn't, as that might have turned violent. Instead, we decided to oppose through peaceful means, by writing letters to the CCF.

Response from Mukesh Shende, Korchi, Maharashtra

We are trying to include more women in the gram sabha. We have formed women's Self Help Groups. We have a cluster of 15 villages. Several such clusters having 30/40/60 villages at the taluk level are called Ilaka. Every gram sabha is represented by 2 men and 2 women in the 15 village cluster. Selection of villages for the cluster is on the basis of sharing a common forest area. Each

cluster, in turn, sends one man and one woman at the Block level (90 villages). All groups are represented in the maha gram sabha – including the physically challenged, OBCs and dalits.

Block level maha gram sabha cannot interfere or influence the village gram sabha's decisions, including those regarding finances. Each gram sabha contributes Rs. 5000/- as a membership fee to the maha gram sabha. The maha gram sabha meets once a month. An office of the maha gram sabha houses all the official documents on information related to various government schemes and can be freely accessed by member gram sabhas.

Regarding conflict resolution: The maha gram sabha calls a discussion meeting in case of conflicting decisions between member gram sabhas. All member gram sabhas congregate and discuss the issue and their decision is applicable to the concerned gram sabhas. In case it is not acceptable to the concerned gram sabha, they are free to take legal recourse.

Regarding government accountability: We initially write letters and make applications to concerned government authorities, whenever development schemes are forced upon us. When these don't work, then we resort to agitations. We also believe that we have a right to the public funds allocated for use to the different departments.

Response from Nima Lama, Tsum Valley, Nepal:

There is only one community in our valley, Chungma community. We have made some rules for conservation. There is a project – Manashu Conservation Project – funded by the Forestry and Conservation Ministry. Another unit, Ahimsa committee supports the conservation. Our valley has been declared as Ahimsa Kshetra (non-violent zone). There are some rules under this 1) No hunting 2) No harvesting rock-bee hives 3) No lighting fires in the forest 4) No cutting green wood. No military or police can violate these rules. Chungma community penalises violators.

Response from Ghulam Rasool Sheikh, Kashmir:

Panchayat system was already in place in our area. In Tosa Maidan, the community came together to stop the use of the grasslands as a military firing range. Sixty four sarpanches came together for this. Of this, seven sarpanches formed the Central Front. The decisions taken by various gram sabhas were conveyed to the Central Front, who used RTI to get information and disseminate it to the respective clusters. The Central Front then conveyed the gram sabhas' decision to the government. They also demanded the funds for local development and submitted restoration and conservation plans prepared by the villages to the government.

Response from Kazi Nazrul Islam, Bangladesh:

In our area, there are three hill districts where the hill tribes follow customary land management systems. The ICCAs, known as Village Common Forests (VCFs) are managed by Paras heads, Moja heads or VCF committees. VCFs are not government forests, they are Kaash lands (i.e. community commons). There are about 400 VCFs in Chittagong. Timber and bamboo can be harvested after getting permission from the governing body. In cases where the government tries to implement mismatched development policies, para heads discuss and convey their decision to the government. At times, the government has been forced to retract these policies.

Response from Seno Tsuhah, Nagaland:

Nagaland has village councils (VCs). VC members are elected by a secret ballot by both men and women. The tenure of VC is 5 years. Traditionally, village elders were in the VC. Now, representatives of clans constitute the council of elders (CEL) and CELs elect representatives to be VC members. Bigger CELs have more number of representatives in the VC. VCs meet as per need, for eg. for land disputes, theft, etc. However, there are few women representatives in the VC. VCs can have different groups such as women's societies and youth societies. CELs discuss and drafts resolutions which are given to the VC. Then VCs meet, discuss and decides on the resolution. 4th Jan is celebrated as VC Day. All villagers attend the public meeting and the approved resolutions are read out. People can air their opinions on it. Tribal bodies settle disputes between different VCs through customary law.

Response from Salam Rajesh, Manipur:

In the hills, there is a two tier system of governance. Elected VCs and above them, traditional tribal councils. If decisions cannot be taken by the VC, then they approach tribal council. Final decision will be done by the tribal council. VC tenure is indefinite. We declared part of Loktak lake as fish sanctuary. Our strategy is to now get legal recognition for it by approaching the district magistrate.

Comments from the outer circle of the fish bowl:

- 1) Kuldip Rathod – Our committees have 50% men and 50% women. The Tanda Panchayat decides which government schemes need to be implemented or used and which to avoid.
- 2) Vijay Jardhari – Jardhargaoon has forests that have RF tenure but, our Van Suraksha Samiti (VSS) have taken over the authority of governing these forests. Initially the forest department resisted, now they don't interfere. Forest fires are controlled by the local communities and the forest department is then compelled to join us in that. If the community is alert and has the will power, they can do it.
- 3) Srikanth Peruri – Kalpawali has a slightly different structure of governance. We have a registered society comprising of 11 villages. These villages have VSSs. Benefits accrued from sale of forest resources are distributed to all villages.

There was a common consensus that emerged from the discussions – that there cannot be any uniform or universal governance institution. Depending on the local context, governance mechanisms can be very diverse and adaptive, yet functioning within the universal principles of transparency, equity, justice, collective and open dialogues, and inclusiveness.

World Café

A session using the world cafe methodology saw breakout groups on systems of **Knowledge Generation** within ICCAs, Systems of **Management and Planning** being adopted within ICCAs, and on **Livelihoods Security**.

Knowledge Generation

The group discussed that 'knowledge' in this context can be a tradition which leads to conservation or it can be a new system. It includes information about locally important resources and habitats. It can be in the form of songs, stories and customs. New systems can affect the transfer of traditional knowledge from one generation to the other. There is a need to develop a knowledge system that

combines both traditional knowledge and new systems. This could be done through events such as wild foods festivals, biodiversity resource kits, encouraging youth and children to engage in data collection, information sharing through wall paintings and posters, and concepts like 'barefoot ecologists'.

Management & Planning

This breakout group felt that there is a need for management and planning in ICCAs in order to develop an understanding about resources, for equitable benefit sharing, to get recognition from the State, to identify conservation needs, to feel a sense of ownership and define responsibility, for effective implementation of decisions, and to better understand and use legal provisions for management of ICCAs.

There are formal and informal systems of management. Informal systems are designed and owned by the communities. Formal systems are needed in order to get recognition by the State, and to cope with outside forces such as corporate driven development.

The group felt that State ownership of resources is the problem and it is not possible to work with them due to their colonial management approach. They felt that customary laws should be included in acts and policies, policies for natural resources should be drafted based on community livelihood systems and sustainability, and there should be Acts for recognition of rights over all natural resources.

Livelihoods Security

The third group discussed several occupations related to ICCAs. The participants shared the various efforts being taken to ensure livelihoods security, for instance, planting medicinal herbs and plant species good for handicrafts, stopping hunting, controlling tourism and planning tourism activities, reviving traditional dance-forms to aid knowledge transfer, rejuvenating wetlands through weed removal and introduction of indigenous species of fish, and much more.

Failures were also discussed. For instance, ecotourism has always been projected as a livelihoods option. But in many cases, though initially successful, it created a lot of pressure on ecosystems, ultimately resulting in the collapse of the conservation initiative.

The group also discussed several challenges such as government ban on animal trade, restricted access to PAs, the need for skill enhancement in the communities, plastic items in the market having affected the sale of bamboo products, the changing public perceptions with regards to some traditional livelihoods such as honey collection (now viewed as 'stealing'), poor road and rail connectivity making it difficult to get products to market and so on. Moreover, people felt that some traditional livelihoods, being related to caste, tend to subjugate certain groups of people. Some traditional knowledge can also be harmful and unsustainable.

Presentations

A variety of presentations highlighted international policy support to ICCAs and policy transformations in different countries, the potential of transformative laws such as the Biodiversity Act and the Forest Rights Act of India, and ICCAs within the larger context of alternatives and radical ecological democracy. The WCMC registry process and membership in the ICCA Consortium were also a topic of dialogue.

Way forward

A concluding session on strategies and way forward was held. Discussions took place on whether or not a network of community conserved areas in South Asia was needed and if yes, what its structure should be. Several people felt that while working on ICCAs in their respective areas and regions, they often felt isolated and alone in their work. A network would be a space for introspection, reflection and cross-learning. It would also help local and national advocacy and provide a common collective identity to enhance people's voices in various forums. A network at South Asia level could review and monitor the international instruments for support of ICCAs, provide global visibility to ICCAs as an alternative narrative to fortress based conservation and lobby for the same.

It was decided that while the network at South Asia regional level should be strengthened, smaller thematic working groups should also be formed. These would be at the level of landscapes and ecosystems that are geographically and culturally connected. Such groups could then come together at the national and regional levels and also link with the international networks. This way, the approach would be bottom-up. Such an approach would ensure greater internal cohesion and understanding and also greater participation. These thematic groups should ensure at least 50% direct participation of ICCAs and greater representation of women and youth.

The thematic groups formed were: Grasslands and Savannahs, Wetlands and Riverine ecosystems, Himalayan Mountain Ecosystems, Forests, Trans-boundary ICCAs, Gender in ICCAs, and Youth in ICCAs. The thematic groups yet to be formed include Urban ICCAs, Marine and Coastal ICCAs and Desert Ecosystems.

Each thematic group listed their immediate action points, which included outreach, networking, documentation, knowledge generation and advocacy among other things. The following were discussed as the focus areas of the network at South Asia level:

- ☐ Linking conservation activities with livelihoods, particularly the livelihoods of the youth, considering their aspirations
- ☐ Empowering women and youth within ICCAs
- ☐ Identifying a common set of values and principles that are emerging from ICCAs
- ☐ Skill and capacity building among the ICCAs in various fields including the ability to represent themselves and talk about their issues
- ☐ Advocacy and legal support at all levels
- ☐ Facilitating exchange visits and training programmes
- ☐ Creating fellowship based programmes for custodians of ICCAs
- ☐ Supporting communities in conflict zones as witnesses to their social and political reality of state repression by providing a forum for their voices and testimonies to be heard
- ☐ Facilitating establishment of links between people across nation state boundaries, particularly in international conflict zones as ICCAs as peace zones.

It was decided that the overall coordination for South Asia would continue to be done by Kalpavriksh. Formation of a regional coordination committee was suggested which would include coordinators of various thematic groups, national coordinators and council members. Development of an ICCA South Asia web portal was also discussed.