

COMMUNITY-BASED NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN NORTHERN PAKISTAN

Javed Ahmed and Shafqat Hussain

IUCN - The World Conservation Union
Gland, Switzerland

THE CONTEXT

Project Location

The case study is based on a pilot project entitled “Maintaining Biodiversity in Pakistan with Rural Community Development”. This is a four year nationally executed pilot project funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) through UNDP. The project area is located in the Northern Pakistan and is characterized by a high altitude cold mountain desert ecosystem (see Figure 1). The ecosystem consists of high alpine pastures with scattered patches of juniper/birch forests. The main wildlife species include snow leopard, ibex, marco polo sheep, markhor, musk deer, brown and black bear, and partridges.

Political Situation

Prior to 1970, the project area was divided into small states, privately run by Mirs and Rajas. People did not have any political or civil rights as enjoyed by the rest of country. Mirdoms and Princely states were abolished in 1970 and the area came under direct administration of federal and provincial governments. State functionaries moved in and the traditional power centres were replaced by modern state institutions.

Economic Situation

The economy of the area is based on subsistence level agro-pastoral activities, with limited agricultural productivity due to climatic constraints. The area is generally poor and resource deficient, physical infrastructure is inadequate, and off-farm employment opportunities are limited as the wage labour industry is underdeveloped. The only real sustainable opportunities of off-farm employment are provided by the tourism industry. After the construction of the Karakoram Highway (KKH), market towns are emerging along KKH, especially between Gilgit and Pak China border. It is only in this region that the economy is diversifying, and a shift is taking place from production of staple subsistence crops to market oriented cash crops, and – potato, apples, etc. business with China, mostly in cheap consumer items.

Social Organization

As a consequence of Aga Khan Rural Support Programme’s (AKRSP) intervention in the project area since 1983, the social landscape has changed significantly. With the emergence of a social organization model based on participatory local-level institutions, a tradition of collective action has emerged. The political vacuum created, at the grassroots level, by the abolishment of the Mirdoms has been successfully filled by the AKRSP fostered Village Organization (VOs). These local-level informal institutions are providing an efficient social infrastructure for development at the grassroots level. The success of the approach has been widely acknowledged and many government and non-government organizations are working with and through the VOs for local- level sustainable development.

THE INITIAL SITUATION

Local people have traditionally enjoyed usufruct rights for grazing animals in the pastures, collection of fuelwood and some timber for their construction needs. The communities had a history of regulated use of these natural resources through unwritten but mutually agreed upon laws. Unfortunately, there were no local traditions for conservation of wildlife, which were hunted both by local people as well as outsiders. The wildlife population further suffered due to other factors such as loss of habitat through overgrazing and deforestation. After the abolishment of Mirdoms, the natural resources started to degrade at a very fast rate. The root cause for this was the loss of tenure of local people over the natural resources in their areas. The government took ownership of most of the forests and all of the wildlife, but the local population continued using resources. The relative degradation of forests, pastures and wildlife correlates highly with the degree of government control. Recent research in the project area concludes that forests and wildlife, which are under complete government control, are the most degraded resources. In comparison, the pastures which are not regulated by the government are in good condition through wise use, as sustainability of this resource is essential for subsistence of local people.

The factors leading to degradation of natural resources under state institutions, and to sustainable use under community management, are: Efficiency, equity and accountability. The state institutions are generally less efficient than the private sector. In this case they lacked both financial and human resources to manage the natural resources over vast areas of difficult terrain. Furthermore vested interests have led to overexploitation of the resources, at the cost of benefits to local people. The absence of a credible accountability system is further affecting the efficiency of the public institutions. In comparison, the membership local organizations are more efficient, ensure equity for sustainability, and are accountable to their membership. Therefore, wherever the local institutions have management responsibility, the use of natural resources is sustainable and the health of the ecosystem is good.

THE CHANGE PROCESS

This process of institutional transformation gradually began to diversify and the institutions that were created around basic human needs started to grow organically. The need to conserve the fragile ecosystems started to emerge as a major issue during the process. In response to the increasing demands from local communities, IUCN and AKRSP fielded a reconnaissance mission in early 1991 to examine the feasibility of a community-based natural resource management project. Based on the report of the Mission, IUCN prepared a project entitled “Conservation of Biodiversity With Rural Community Development“. The project was submitted for GEF funding through UNDP. It was approved and implementation of the pilot phase of the project (PAK/93/G41) started in 1995. The main aims of the pilot project were to:

- Demonstrate how conservation of biodiversity can be enhanced by providing rural people with the technical skills;
- Demonstrate how local institutions can manage wild species and habitats for sustainable use; and,
- Assess the effectiveness of rural village management of natural resources.

The project activities were built on top of the social infrastructure of village organizations (VO) and Women Organizations (WO) fostered by AKRSP in the northern Pakistan. Northern Pakistan is characterized by a cold mountain desert ecosystem, and agriculture depends on stream water diverted to farmlands through irrigation channels. AKRSP also helped the VOs to enhance agricultural production and productivity. The communities in northern Pakistan also depend heavily on the renewable natural

resources for their subsistence. Although AKRSP had always been concerned with the health and condition of these resources, this did not form part of their active programme.

Under the pilot project, IUCN embarked upon a change in the process of local institutional development that aimed at integrating the natural ecosystems with the farming systems, and promoted sustainable use for conservation. The change process included: Formation of VO clusters at the watershed level, and helping the VO/Cluster prepare village development and resource conservation plans to:

- Establish a framework for project activities;
- Foster, within the community, a sense of direction to link development with conservation, and identification of core problems and solutions; and,
- Agree on a set of norms for sustainable development and use of resources.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The last decade has seen a wide variety of Community-Based Conservation (CBC) approaches. An attempt is made here to illustrate the conventional, the CBC and the Conservation through Community Development (CCD) approaches through a stylized diagram (see Figure 2). Implicit in the classical approach is that the solution to conservation lies in transfer of capital and technology. No attention is paid to the underlying causes of resource degradation, and the resources are protected by keeping the people out through gates, fences and wardens – depicted by a solid line between the curved arrow and the straight arrow at ‘A’ (see Figure 2). However, the high costs and the inability of state institutions to exclude people, renders the approach socially unacceptable and economically non-viable. This approach considers people as part of the problem and is for the protected areas.

The CBC, on the other hand, tries to seek people’s participation in conservation. While it is difficult to generalize, the essence of this approach is to ask communities to implement the predefined agenda of the conservation agencies, establish buffers between parks and people and allow them limited use of resources in buffer zones. In some cases, as an additional incentive, socio-economic development of local communities is provided to secure their goodwill. The linkages between the conservation agencies and people are represented by horizontal arrows (see Figure 2, at ‘B’).

The conservation continues to remain an agenda of professionals and scientists. The results of CBC were better than those of the conventional approach. However, the gains are generally short-lived as there is a heavy reliance on external inputs. These approaches are basically used for the conservation of protected areas (PAs) through donor-assisted projects. But in most cases, the national governments are unable to bear the recurring costs after the project funding cease.

Alternatively, the CCD approach (see Figure 2, at ‘C’), aims at putting the local people in the ‘driving seat’, transferring control and building their capacity to conserve and sustainably use natural resources. This conservation approach becomes the agenda of the local communities, the government institutions, and the local NGOs, while the donors assume a supporting and facilitating role. Thus, CCD is significantly different from CBC approach. This approach is the only answer to: (i) Conservation of biodiversity outside of the PAs (over 90 percent of the world area); (ii) Providing functional link between conservation and development; and, (iii) Sustainable management of the PAs.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Valley Selection

One of the challenges in the pilot project was to select 12 sites in an area of 70 sq km spread over five districts. The main considerations were that the site selection should be done through a consultative and transparent process. The first step was to develop criteria for site selection that should be socially acceptable, and biologically feasible. The criteria were also developed through a participatory consultative process involving local communities, NGOs, and the relevant government agencies (see Annex 1).

Keeping in view the criteria, a short list of potential sites was prepared through a general survey of the area and through semi-structured interviews. After short listing, data for each valley on various parameters of the selection criteria were gathered through reconnaissance surveys. The data were presented at consultative workshops held at main cities in three geographical different project areas, namely Chitral, Gilgit and Baltistan. Representatives of local communities, NGOs, and relevant government agencies participated in the process, and were asked to make the final selection. There was general consensus on the project sites in Gilgit and Baltistan. However, in Chitral, three sites were selected through consensus while selection of one site was deferred. Additional information was sought on two candidate valleys, and the fourth site was then selected through consensus in a separate consultative meeting.

Dialogues With the Communities

Since the aim of the project was to enable local communities to conserve and make sustainable use of their natural resources, it was, therefore, imperative to solicit their willingness and commitment. After the site selection, the process of consultation and participatory planning was initiated with the communities in the potential project sites. The process consisted of three dialogues, each stretched over a period of time.

The First Dialogue

A meeting with the general assembly of the VO(s) marked the commencement of first dialogue. The Social Organizers (SOs) of AKRSP, and the relevant staff of the line agency accompanied project staff to all these meetings. The agenda of the first meeting consisted of a briefing by the AKRSP SO on the introduction, purpose of the visit, the aims and objectives of the project by the project staff, an assurance by the staff of the line agency of the government's support to the communities, followed by a general discussion. Invariably, the majority of the villagers showed interest in the project, but asked for more time for village-wide discussions and consensus building. As an example, the first dialogue ended with a resolution, signed by all VO members, informing the project of their willingness to enter into a partnership with the project (see Annex 2). This process usually took 2-3 months, and during this period there were many meetings between the VO representatives and the project staff to provide additional information and clarifications of the village concerns.

The Second Dialogue

Submission of the resolution by the VO(s) marked the beginning of a participatory planning process as the Second Dialogue. The project started with a broad-based village-level planning, leading to the more specific planning for biodiversity conservation. Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) methods and field surveys were employed for the appraisal and planning process. The outputs of the second dialogue include: (i) Village Development Plan; (ii) Resource Conservation Plan; and, (iii) Terms of Partnership (ToP) between the project and the VO(s) for implementation and future cooperation.

The Third Dialogue

The ToPs are presented in the general assembly meeting of the VO(s) and, if approved, are signed by both the parties. The meeting to sign the ToP constitute the third dialogue and after signatures of the ToP, implementation begins on the RCP. The ToPs provide the framework of future collaboration with the VO(s) for implementation of the RCP.

Capacity Building

The goal of the project is to test the new approaches to conservation, i.e. conservation through community development. One of the means to achieve this objective is capacity building of the local people – an important component of the project. Capacity building is a long-term and slow process. A successful capacity building programme depends on constant supply of resources and periodic monitoring. The project envisages that capacity building should not be indiscriminate, it should rather be in line with the long-term project objectives. The project recognizes that capacity building is required at two levels: first, at the community level, and second, at the regional or national level.

At the local level, the project impart regular training to the Village Wildlife Guides (VWGs) in survey methodologies. To date, three courses for VWGs have been organized in which members from the project communities participated. The project is also assisting one project site, Bunji, in establishing a Village Wildlife Training Institute (VWTI), where courses for the community members interested in biodiversity conservation will be initiated. In addition, workshops have been organized for the local teachers to incorporate environmental awareness agendas in their teaching curricula and methodologies.

Apart from nurturing local institutions, capacity building of government institutions was also the focus of the project. The project facilitated institutional and policy changes to create an enabling environment for community-based conservation. At the national level the project has organized two training course in Wildlife and Natural Resource Management.

VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT AND RESOURCE CONSERVATION PLANS

The village development plans analyze the historical trends in population growth, livestock numbers, farmlands, condition of pastures, forest, wildlife populations, etc. It takes stock of the natural resources, and the potential for their development and sustainable use. It includes a prioritized action plan with time lines and assignment of responsibilities for action. The village development plan is prepared by the VO(s) themselves, with the assistance of project staff. Once completed, it is ratified by the general assembly of the village and signed by the VO(s) representatives. During the planning process, the villagers identify an important resource that they wish to conserve as an agenda for 'biodiversity conservation' and define a regime for its sustainable use. Implementation of village development plans begins in collaboration with AKRSP, and linkages are sought by the VO(s) with other development assistance opportunities through the government and other agencies.

The project staff begins to work with the VO(s) on the Resource Conservation Plan (RCP). The preparation of the RCP involves taking a census of wildlife, doing a habitat survey, and identify ways and means to mitigate the underlying causes. It also involves preparation of community rules for the conservation and use of natural resources (pastures, forests and wildlife), prescribing sanctions for violation of these rules, defining basis for income sharing, setting up and the capitalization needs of a village conservation fund, and training needs assessment. RCPs are approved by a District Conservation Committee and thus become a means of empowering the VO(s) to implement the plans. To forge a partnerships between the project and the VO(s), each others roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and mutually agreed terms of partnership (ToP) are signed by both parties.

The pilot project was evaluated by an independent external UNDP Mission in April 1997. The following is an excerpt from the UNDP external evaluation mission on one of the plans:

The VMP for Khyber Village in the Northern Areas is an outstanding document, written by the community. It clearly states the problems being faced by the community, the attempts to date by the community to address the problems, community perceptions of the solutions to the problems and their vision for the future. While project staff facilitated the process, this plan was written by the community and is printed in the simple, colourful language of the people of Khyber. The validity of this document was impressed upon the mission during our meeting with the community in Khyber. It is encouraging to see a plan of this nature in an era of technical reports and complex (often external) planning.

Empowerment of communities was necessary for them to participate in conservation. A step in this direction included establishment of District Conservation Committees (DCC).

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Devolution of power and control, and de-concentration of management of natural resources, in turn, requires that local communities be empowered to assume their new roles. However, empowerment could be counter-productive if done without recognizing the socio-political context of the project area as well as that of beneficiary communities. The need to develop a situation-sensitive approach becomes even more important in the context of a support programme intending to mobilize the people to work with the state structure. This being the case, giving more power (control) to communities could easily be confused with dis-empowering the state, with which the powers rest. Thus any attempt on part of the project could easily be confused with (political) empowerment of the people at the expense of reducing power and control of the state.

Community empowerment could also be problematic in yet another way: “Are the people really capable of doing in the future what the state has been doing for them for such a long time?” The flip side of this is “Have the government institutions matured enough to devolve what has been their job till now?” The project managers had these questions on their mind, and the empowerment of communities has depended on their degree of institutional maturity, in order to minimize any potential conflicts. Therefore, the project’s approach has been to facilitate an incremental devolution of authority and control over resources from the *public institutions* to the *public*. Care was always taken that the process must remain apolitical and thus non-threatening for all actors.

As mentioned, the devolution of power by state institutions to local institutions depends on their own level of institutional maturity. In this regard the project has had varying experiences. For example, the NWFP Wildlife Department has declared the project sites in Chitral as “Community Game Reserves” under the Wildlife Act, while on the other hand, the NA administration has been quite reluctant to take similar measures, though, informally they acknowledge that the communities have a definite role in conservation. And it goes without saying that the NA administration has been giving full support to the project. Such experiences allow us to conclude that empowerment should be considered an incremental process dependent not only on the capacity of the local community but on that of state institutions as well.

DISTRICT CONSERVATION COMMITTEES

In Pakistan, all powers are vested with the bureaucracy and masses in general, and rural people in particular are relatively powerless. Therefore, conservation through community development is meaningless unless local communities are empowered.

The communities in the project area have traditional use rights in pastures and forests, but they have no tenurial rights over flora and fauna. They have proprietary rights only on agricultural land. Although there is progress to facilitate a policy and legal reform, it was necessary to provide the communities with the backing of the administration in order for them to implement the RCP(s) with confidence and authority. This was accomplished through the establishment of District Conservation Committees (DCCs). The Committees are headed by the Deputy Commissioner, with the Divisional Forest Officer Wildlife, the Assistant Commissioner, the Deputy Superintendent of Police, representatives of local NGOs, and the village representatives from the project valleys as members. The villagers have never before had the occasion to sit at the same table with the district-level authorities and discuss local issues with them. From the point of view of villagers, the DCC forum contributed importantly to breaking down this communications barrier, it raised their self-esteem, and it contributed to building the self-confidence of the villagers. The approval of the RCPs by the DCC(s) empowers the communities to make conservation their 'own' agenda and they provide the impetus to its implementation.

The DCC has had another spin-off deterrence against illegal hunting. It is generally the influential persons who indulge in poaching. DCCs, being the overseeing mechanism for community-based conservation, has given a strong indication to these people to stay away from the community-based conservation areas.

VILLAGE CONSERVATION FUNDS

To address the long term sustainability of the local conservation initiatives, separate Village Conservation Funds (VCF) have been established in each VO/Cluster. The seed money for VCFs was raised through contributions by the VOS and grants from the project. The VOS have been able to increase the capital through contributions from other sources and income from trophy hunting. The VCFs are jointly managed by the VO/Cluster and the project. The funds have been invested in high-yielding term deposits. The VO/Cluster uses the income from the fund to pay for the cost of village volunteers who undertake natural resource surveys, monitor the use, and perform watch and ward duties. The income is also used to develop irrigated pastures and woodlots to reduce pressure on the natural resources. In addition, the VO/Cluster can use the income for community welfare purposes.

The VCF is a 'common financial resource' and its operation and management keeps the communities together. It is thus an innovative approach that ensures long-term commitment of the communities for conservation and sustainable use of the natural resources. The concept of VCFs have many advantages over the conventional trust funds. Some of the advantages are:

- There are no overhead costs;
- The capital stays in the country;
- Management of VCFs strengthens VOS for collective action; and,
- The communities willingly contribute to funds that benefit them directly.

THE OUTCOME

In less than three years of operation, the project has made a significant impact in the area. The VOS (there are 1500+ VOS) are universally showing interest in biodiversity conservation. The commitment and interest of VOS has now made biodiversity conservation an agenda of AKRSP who have therefore decided to link their development programme with conservation and has shown interest in technical collaboration with IUCN.

Many VOS have approached the project directly for technical assistance. Two significant cases are Shimshal and Haramush. Shimshal is a remote valley close to Khunjerab National Park (KNP). The wilderness areas of Shimshal were included in the KNP without consulting with the local people. People of Shimshal have not accepted the KNP boundaries and do not allow it to be managed by KNP. They are so agitated that they will not even talk to anyone about this. The area presents an exceptional wilderness landscape with rich biological diversity. It is a prized destination for trekking. People of Shimshal are cognizant of the eco-tourism potential, and have themselves established a nature conservation trust. Learning that this project is helping VO(s) with conservation without any danger of area being declared a PA, they have sought technical assistance from the project.

The other interesting example is that of Haramush. Haramush is close to Gilgit and some of the 'reputed' poachers and traders in animal parts live there. They have annihilated big game from their own valley and go all over the area in pursuit of their trade and sport hunting. They have also approached the project for help to rehabilitate local populations of wildlife. These are but just a few examples of the impact of the project.

The need to strengthen, refine, and fine-tune the approach, the interest of the communities in conservation, and the potential for its replication have justified a full-scale operational project for GEF funding. The lessons learnt have also provided a basis for the provision of community participation in the Protected Area Management Project for Pakistan prepared by the World bank and approved by the GEF.

Annex 1. Criteria for Selection of Valleys

1. Biodiversity

- Major Wildlife Key Species (an indicator of fauna and habitat)
- Condition of Natural Resources
- Wildlife number (high, adequate, low)
- Habitat condition (good, average, poor)

2. Social Organization

- Number of villages / WOs / VOs
- Institutional maturity of WOs / VOs
- Ethnicity
- Major conflict, if any
- Any community initiatives to conserve natural resources

3. Ecotourism

- Tourist attractions
- Current situations
- Potential for development

4. Economic Plants

- Species found with distribution (rich, average, poor)
- Exploitation (collected/cultivated)

5. Hunting Control

- Access to valley (number of entry points and level of difficulty to monitor outside poachers)
- Local poaching situation and level of difficulty to stop through peer pressure

6. Demonstration Value (high, medium, low)

7. Chances of Success