

## **What Role for Local Communities in Poverty Reduction and Maintenance of Ecosystem Services? Some clues, recommendations and challenges from recent policy debates**

My remarks here today are made with particular reference to a workshop held in May this year, during the annual conference of the International Association of Impact Assessment in Stavanger, Norway. Hosted by the Ministry of Environment, the workshop focussed on the role of local communities and indigenous peoples in the follow-up of the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* (MA) in environment and development policy, or more specifically, the Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). A report prepared by the International Institute for Environment and Development for the conference summarises some of the experiences and necessary conditions for community conservation to contribute to these global targets. What I would like to do here today, is to challenge *you* to consider some of the perspectives, lessons and questions we grappled with during that workshop.

One of the most dramatic observations from the MA is that most of the ecosystem services were found to be disturbed to such an extent that reaching the goal of a significant reduction in the rate of loss of biodiversity by 2010, or the MDGs by 2015, could prove impossible unless remedial action is taken urgently. While the relationship between ecosystem services and human well being is not linear or fully understood, the MA highlights that

- “the harmful effects of the degradation of ecosystem services are being borne disproportionately by the poor, are contributing to the growing inequities and disparities across groups of people, and are sometimes the principal factor causing poverty and social conflict.”

### **Implications for Poverty Reduction Strategies**

This is cause for concern not only for the poor. All human beings, societies and cultures depend on the goods and services provided by nature, although industrialisation and a high level of welfare and perceived security of livelihoods cause some of us to forget that relationship. For many of the world's poor and indigenous peoples, however, ecosystem services represent the very bottom line and safety net of their everyday existence. The 2005 World Resources Report, *The Wealth of the Poor*, has three key conclusions that are relevant to our discussion on ecosystem services and national poverty reduction strategies today:

- The poor are overwhelmingly located in rural areas and natural resources are their most important asset. Income from ecosystems can act as a fundamental stepping stone in the economic empowerment of the rural poor.
- Poverty alleviation must account for the environment, and ecosystem protection must accommodate the ambitions of the poor. Ponder this one: what does it *really* mean to have Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers account for the environmental costs, and to base conservation on the interests, rights and aspirations of the poor? Quite a challenge, but necessary nonetheless.
- The catalyst of the achievement of both is *governance*

### **Contribution of local communities to improved governance of natural resources**

These are global challenges that must be addressed also at the local level. A recurring theme in many of the poverty-environment debates is the need for local level management of land and resources. The MA itself is somewhat ambiguous on this. On the one hand it notes that

- rural communities play a significant role in the maintenance of crucial ecosystem services including biodiversity, carbon sequestration, pollination, and water resource management, and that
- “a number of community-based resource management programs have slowed the loss of biodiversity while contributing benefits to the people...”
- It further notes that many of the measures needed to maintain vital ecosystem services would stand a better chance of success if communities were given ownership or user rights to natural resources, allowed a greater share of the value added by sustainable management of them, and had greater say in decision-making relating to ecosystem management.
- At the same time it recognises that capturing local benefits has been one of the more problematic responses to biodiversity loss: While “win-win” opportunities for biodiversity conservation and local community benefits do exist in the long term, and are sometimes also discernible in the short term, local communities can often achieve greater economic benefits from actions necessitated by short-term gains, that do lead to biodiversity loss.

On this background, then, I would like to invite you to pay critical attention to experience with community based natural resource management as a vehicle for poverty reduction and achievement of the MDGs. I would like to invite you, first, to identify conditions enabling communities to conserve, manage and benefit from the sustainable use of natural resources. Of particular interest to *international environmental governance* would be the potential that community based natural resource management might hold for practical implementation and further development of the biodiversity related conventions. I would also like to invite you to

propose further application of the MA in environment and development policy and practice, and where EU's development policies might fit into this picture.

In countries characterised by a limited reach of the state over its citizens, natural resource management is, practically speaking, left to communities. Or so it may be argued. However, poor governance, political marginalisation and lack of secure access to these natural resources today prevent poor communities from exercising this responsibility in a sustainable manner.

### **Capacity-Building and an Enabling State**

The Convention on Biological Diversity, in its ecosystem approach, states that the management of natural resources should take place at the lowest possible appropriate level, and be based on people's cultural understanding and traditional use of natural resources. This is because traditional knowledge and management practices are important factors in management of ecosystem services and should be developed in tandem with new technologies and scientific research. Government must play an active role in bridging local communities and modern science. This is particularly important for meeting the challenges that emerge from global development processes (climate change, habitat fragmentation). Participation in decision-making and creation of ownership to solving biodiversity problems at local level is required for lasting solutions.

Recent experience from Southern Africa, however, indicates that experiments in devolution of authority to manage natural resources run the risk of being undermined by tendencies towards recentralisation. Seeing that some of these experiments in devolution of authority for managing ecosystems have instilled potentially threatening ideas of rights, transparency, democracy and governance in local communities, and sometimes enabled them to add to their

livelihoods, some governments in the region have retracted from their former willingness to experiment with local level management, and have started to recentralise the authority to ecosystems as well as the income generated from sustainable management of these.

Some of the most important lessons from the experience with community based natural resource management, then, are that effective, transparent institutions and coherent, enabling legislation at national level, as well as rigorous procedures are important preconditions for devolution of appropriate authority for management of natural resources to communities. Together with devolution of responsibility there must be training, education and capacity-building at government level as well as local level, and there must be positive economic and social incentives in place to promote sustainable decisions. It will be exciting to see whether new tools such as Payment for Ecosystem Services, or in this context, compensating local and indigenous communities for management of ecosystem services (whether in monetary or other terms), can contribute to a more sustainable basis for community management.

### **Summary and Recommendations**

In sum, we may note that there appears to be evidence that community conservation *can* help address the direct drivers of biodiversity loss and poverty at local level. Community conservation *cannot* solve these huge and interlinked challenges at global level. Without local action, however, the international targets set within the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the MDGs are likely to be at best irrelevant and most likely, unattainable. The role of local communities and indigenous communities are of particular importance in countries characterised by weak governance. Specific recommendations for the EU, partner countries as well as the conservation community, then, would be to:

- Recognise the contribution of community conservation to the achievement of the CBD and other MEAs, as well as to the MDGs. Community conserved areas and sustainable use of these – including indigenous territories, communal lands and sacred groves – should be given the necessary recognition and support, to complement more “traditional” protected areas and management models.
- Establish national mechanisms for enabling community participation in decision-making processes within the CBD (and other MEAs). Community conservation is not just about the practical involvement of communities in conservation activities, but their full and active participation in conservation planning and policy-making.
- This could also include a role for communities in the design and carrying out of Environmental Impact Assessments and Strategic Environmental Assessments. The latter is gaining increasing importance, of course, in this time of budget support and sector programming.

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