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## Village voices challenging wetland management policies: PRA experiences from Pakistan and India

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### • The context

This paper focuses on people-wetland interactions at two sites of international importance for conservation: the Uchali wetland complex in Pakistan and Keoladeo National Park in India. Management plans for these wetlands were drawn up following western scientific principles and the internationally agreed guide lines of the RAMSAR Convention (Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat).

In both cases effective protected area (PA) management has been hampered by the passive or active opposition of local communities living in and around these wetlands. The threat of worsening conflict between local people and conservation authorities created a context in which consultations with local communities was deemed necessary for effective wetland management.

Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRA) were carried out in several villages neighbouring each wetland. In each case the purpose of the was three fold:

- To assess the social impact of PAs management on local communities and make the assessment available to all stakeholders;
- To revise the PA management plans in the light of interactive dialogue between local people and outsiders; and,
- To initiate a dialogue on the policy reforms needed to involve local communities as equal partners in wetland conservation.

Both PRAs were designed to involve key government and conservation agency staff in experiential learning. Throughout the training workshops and appraisals it was emphasised that 'participation' is not simply the application of a 'method'. Rather, it is part of a process of dialogue, action, analysis, conflict resolution and change.

### • New insights

PRA findings from the studies have major policy implications for wetland management. These are discussed for each site below.

#### Keoladeo National Park (KNP), India

KNP is a RAMSAR and World Heritage site protected under national parks policy. It is a major tourist destination in India. The PRA exercise with local communities raised five issues which relate directly or indirectly to the implementation of national parks policy.

*Grazing.* Local people believe that buffalo grazing inside the wetlands contributes to habitat management. Villagers argue that it is needed to sustain their own life style and the biodiversity of the wetland. National parks policies ban livestock grazing. Yet scientific evidence suggests that wetland grazing is required to control the water weeds.

*Fodder collection.* Local collection of grass is not permitted under the national policy. Yet the Park has to cut grass to prevent fires.

*Tourism.* Local people receive few benefits from tourism. They feel resentful that the park authorities appear to manage the park more for tourists than for local people.

*Water.* According to local people, the park has priority on water from a nearby dam. They feel their water rights have been violated and challenge the water distribution policy.

*Access to Temples.* Park policies restrict the entry of local people into the park. People challenge the violation of their traditional rights to visit the temples inside the park.

### **Ucchali complex, Pakistan**

The Ucchali complex is an internationally recognised site for wetland conservation in north central Punjab, Pakistan. It consists of three interdependent wetlands, Ucchali, Khabbaki and Jalar. PRA revealed a profound mismatch between local experiences of the social and ecological history of the wetland and the perceptions of outsiders.

External organisations and professionals tend to assume that lakes Ucchali and Khabbaki are natural features of the landscape. Yet according to villagers, Lake Khabbaki is a disaster flood zone rather than a lake. They state that the wetland is of very recent origin, formed by heavy rains over the last 50 years. It sits on prime agricultural land owned by neighbouring villagers.

Currently, Khabbaki is managed as a sanctuary for undisturbed breeding of wildfowl with no public access. Local people's prior land rights have been neglected in conserving the wetland, creating conditions for conflict between the state and local communities. They feel the policies that regulate and restrict their access to the RAMSAR site need to be reformed.

During PRA mapping, the villagers drew the boundaries of the wetland. These were compared with those of natural scientists involved in wetland management planning. The scientists tended to focus on species of special concern for international conservation and the wetland habitat *per se*.

By contrast, the villagers shared a wider analysis of the wetland. They explored the connections between forests in the watershed, land use history, livelihoods and the White Headed Duck's only overwintering site in Pakistan. Complex issues such as patterns of migratory bird activity, changes in water

quality, rates of sedimentation and the relationship between ground water levels and wetland presence were locally monitored and often well understood.

PRA revealed many social and ecological differences between the three villages visited. This local level diversity suggests that standard and undifferentiated approaches to wetland management planning and implementation are inappropriate. There is a need to combine the general application of ecological management principles with the site specific knowledge and innovations of local communities.

PRA discussions highlighted that farmers who had lost land and/or traditional rights over resource use could not appreciate the value of 'long term' conservation benefits for society. In their view, conservation benefits should be immediate and quantifiable. Villagers felt they should get a fair share of the benefits accruing from the successful management of the wetlands or a fair compensation for loss of productive resources.

To avoid further conflict, the PRA findings suggest that: village proposals for management should be incorporated into the existing management plan, legal matters should be clarified, (i.e. local rights on land under the lake water), and joint management schemes should be developed by increasing dialogue between villagers, conservation agencies and government departments.

### **• Policy implications**

The two exercises at Ucchali and Keoladeo raised several issues which are directly related to policies on wetland conservation in India, Pakistan and elsewhere.

### **National parks and people**

The national parks policy in India is categorical in 'banning' livestock grazing. This is based on a universal assumption that people and their livestock damage biodiversity. At Keoladeo, local communities directly questioned the national policies.

Although they are fighting for their traditional rights, villagers argue that livestock grazing inside the wetland maintains biodiversity. This is supported by research. After a decade long study, scientists have concluded that grazing is needed in the park, although they did not suggest any changes to national park policies.

### **Tourism and local people**

Many tourist policies are based on the assumption that it will help local people. The outcome of these PRA studies seriously questions such assumptions:

- The net loss to local people in establishing the national park is significant;
- Tourists are subsidised by the government in visiting the park; and,
- Tourism revenue reaches a different segment of the population to those who bear the burden of the national park.

### **Declaring RAMSAR sites**

The Uchali experience leads us to question the RAMSAR convention and its policies of declaring internationally important wetland sites. The PRAs revealed that the local people own part of the Uchali wetlands: the lakes are gradually expanding and people are losing their private lands. The RAMSAR site declaration made by the Government of Pakistan clearly contravenes its own policy of protecting private property.

### **Wise use**

The concept of wise use of wetlands has been around for the last ten years. But in practice, wise use is defined, implemented and evaluated by government experts and international consultants. The PRA exercises indicate that if local communities are given the opportunity, they can define, design, implement and evaluate the wise use of their wetlands. Wise use policy should be based on peoples' priorities, knowledge and management systems.

### **Changes in policy and action**

The extent to which the PRAs have encouraged shifts away from normal top down practices can be assessed in terms of three sets of criteria (Box 1). Stage A comprises criteria that evaluate the design and implementation of PRAs and PRA training. Stage B evaluates how well the recommendations that emerged through initial appraisals are followed up e.g. the strengthening of local institutions. Stage C relates to higher level policy changes needed for the devolution of power and planning to the local level.

In terms of Stage A, both the Uchali and Keoladeo experiences with PRAs have been highly successful. Local government officials and NGO staff were trained and information was exchanged with local communities. Reports and other outputs have had a positive impact in international fora (see below). In terms of Stages B and C, we cannot yet evaluate the long term implications of the PRA. For example, the following questions remain unanswered:

- Did the PRA change anything on the ground?
- Did local people derive any substantial benefits?
- Have steps been taken to share resources and conservation benefits more equitably?

It is also too early to see if national wildlife conservation policies at a national level will change to incorporate:

- differentiated approaches to highly site specific situations e.g. the three lakes forming the Uchali complex;
- the recognition of prior rights and the granting of rights of access and use to some PA resources (e.g. grazing resources in Keoladeo National Park, India);
- the adoption of enabling legislation for joint protected area management in Uchali and Keoladeo National Park.

**BOX 1**  
**EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF PRA**

Stage A. Implementation of the PRA.  
This stage is normally successful. The experiences of the workshop are used by the institutions conducting the PRA exercise.

Stage B. Short term follow-up to the PRA.  
The workshops and the exercises prompt a series of recommendations which can be followed up by different institutions. This stage builds local confidence that outside institutions will function for local benefit.

Stage C. Long term follow-up to the PRA.  
The ideal objectives of the PRAs include the following:

- The PRA experiences will be used to advocate bigger policy and institutional changes;
- Local communities are empowered;
- Planning is democratised and decentralised;
- The knowledge systems advocated by the Western and urban institutions are questioned.

This stage is a great opportunity as well as a challenge for the institutions and individuals engaged in the PRA. Radical changes in the approaches of institutions presently involved in PRA could occur.

A central challenge facing policy makers is to consider people-park conflicts more historically and try to resolve them more imaginatively. Differences in the scale of opposing stakes and claims were revealed as village voices reconstructed the local social and ecological histories of the wetlands for outsiders. Yet PRA exercises should not be limited to conflict resolution. The experiences emerging from these and other PRAs in different countries suggest that a major policy shift in the conservation of natural resources is required. PRAs or similar processes should ideally lead to new, socially acceptable, policies.

Policy reforms need to acknowledge that some stakeholders' claims to resources are illegitimate because they ignore previously existing rights of long term local residents. Enabling policies for joint protected area management will need to address larger questions of land alienation and land scarcity (Ucchali) and grazing rights (Keoladeo). For

villagers these are the crucial policy issues. Should they be left out of the policy reform, inequities will perpetuate the conflicts which the proposed joint management schemes attempt to mediate. It is against these yardsticks that the ultimate 'success' or 'failure' of these PRAs should perhaps be judged. In both wetland contexts, village voices are calling for these profound policy reforms.

A still greater challenge for policy makers is to ensure that the initial location and planning of PAs is based on local peoples' knowledge, analysis and priorities *from the outset*. The PRAs described here should not be seen as examples of how governments can rectify poorly designed and socially insensitive PA schemes. Instead, we hope these examples support a different participatory approach in which local people exert more democratic control in PA design and management. In both policy and practical terms, their realities and voices must count more than those of outside professionals and their national or foreign based institutions.

### **Costs and benefits**

PRAs require considerable preparation and planning by professionals working in the conservation organisations. But the overall cost of completing one exercise is relatively cheap. In each case the benefits were training, capacity building and the revision or preparation of protected area management plans.

Both exercises have drawn key staff from government departments into the process. This is not a small achievement. The training process for the government officials creates new possibilities for the further spread and scaling up of these participatory approaches.

### **• Learning from the process**

A number of important lessons may be learned from these wetland studies.

Firstly, the PRAs provided professionals from government and conservation agencies with first hand experience of the impacts of PA policies and management schemes. The experiential learning in the villages provided a

*moment* in their professional lives to reflect on the perverse impacts of standard approaches to PA design and management. They gained a better understanding of villagers' knowledge and own readings of the landscape and local history. The value judgements, biases and ideologies behind conservation 'expertise', top down planning and national policies for wildlife protection were partly or fully exposed through dialogues with villagers.

Secondly, the national policy implications for wetland management were raised to an international level by showing a video describing the participatory appraisals carried out in India. This was shown at the Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties of the RAMSAR Convention (Brisbane, Australia, 19-27 March 1996). In the recommendations of this international meeting, both the Uchali and Keoladeo national park experiences were noted as "models for active and informed participation of local people in the wise use of their wetland resources". The Contracting Parties (country governments) were called upon to facilitate from the outset the participation of local and indigenous people in the management of wetlands.

Lastly, the PRAs have stimulated heightened awareness of the variety of alternative futures and policy frameworks for conservation and natural resource management. Villagers' analyses often deeply question the assumptions of current protected area management policies. Through village voices, conservation becomes a central political question linked with the enduring debates over the distribution of wealth and power. By framing the policy issues in this way, local people challenge conservationists and policymakers to rethink the distribution of land, economic rights and ecological responsibilities in and around protected areas. This process is long overdue and we hope that future PRAs in this area will contribute to it.

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## NOTE

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors alone and are not necessarily endorsed by the organisations they represent.

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