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Creating stakeholder ownership of biodiversity planning: lessons from India

by TEJASWINI APTE

Introduction

This article is based on the findings of a year-long study of the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) planning process in India. It draws on almost 200 interviews and was published as *An Activist Approach to Biodiversity Planning: a handbook of participatory tools used to prepare India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan* (Apte, 2005)¹. The main objective of the handbook is to describe and analyse some of the tools that went into eliciting participation in the NBSAP process. It is written for practical use. The tools described can be adapted for participatory biodiversity planning in other contexts. The study was conducted in four Indian states: Sikkim, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

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This article begins with a brief overview of the NBSAP to set the context, and then presents some of the lessons learnt with regard to creating ownership. It ends by discussing briefly the progress of the national biodiversity plan produced.

Background to the NBSAP

The NBSAP was a project of the Ministry of Environment and Forests of the Government of India. All countries that are signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) are required to prepare an NBSAP, which is meant to serve as the primary vehicle for national implementation of the CBD.² The Ministry appointed a national non-governmental organisation (NGO), Kalpvriksh Environmental Action Group, to prepare the NBSAP. In a context where government environmental policies are prepared predominantly in a centralised manner, the preparation of the NBSAP was visualised as a decentralised process covering all the states of India. What

¹ See the In Touch section for a review of this book and ordering details.

² The Convention on Biological Diversity was signed by 150 government leaders at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. It was the first global agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. It aims to put the principles of sustainable development into practice. See www.biodiv.org for more information.

Procession of women carrying traditional seeds at Deccan Mobile Biodiversity Agricultural Festival



followed was a unique process unlike anything that had happened before in national environmental planning, in terms of scale, ambition, decentralisation and people's participation. The NBSAP process lasted from 2000 to 2003.

The NBSAP approach was based on the premise that biodiversity has ecological, cultural, spiritual, as well as economic, value and impinges on every citizen. Planning for its conservation should therefore be owned and shaped by as many individuals as possible in an equitable process that allowed the most marginalised voices to be heard. The aim was biodiversity conservation as well as livelihood security. A key element of the approach was also the premise that the wider the ownership of the process, the greater the chances of the plan being accepted and implemented at a national and local level.

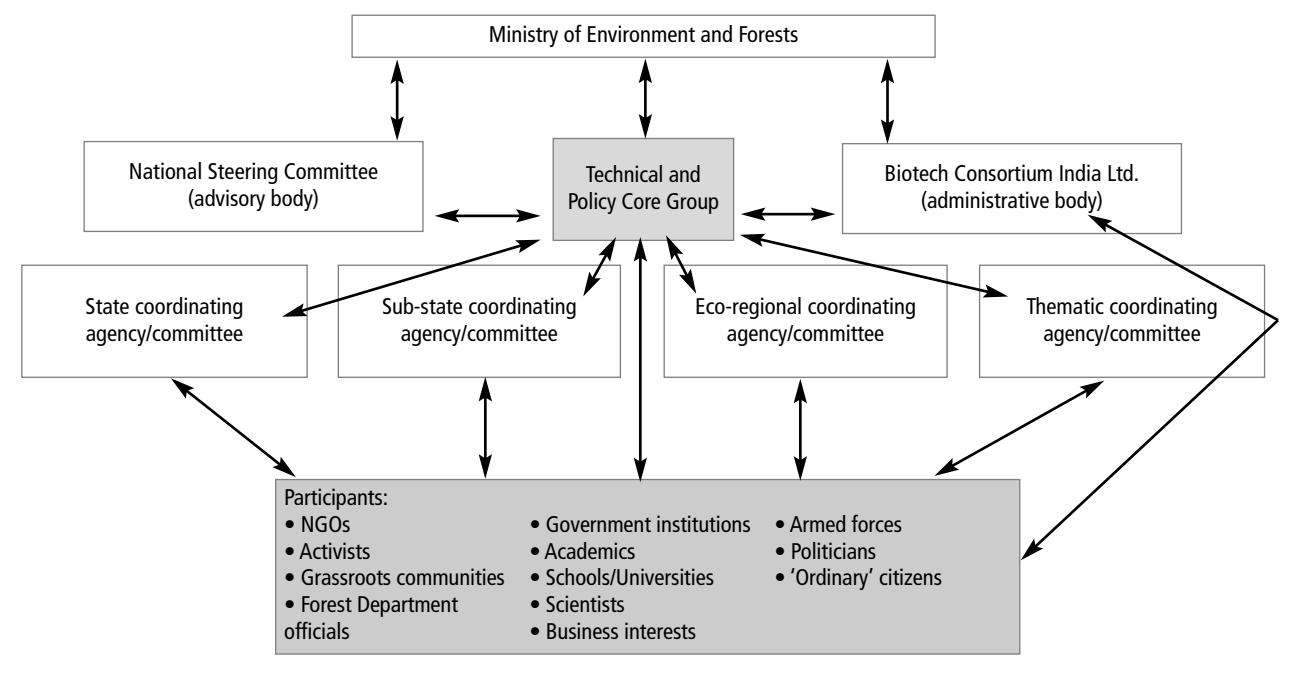
Most importantly, there was a consistent emphasis that the **process** of putting the plan together was as important as the final **product**. In other words, apart from what might come out of the final plan, the process itself was to yield results in terms of increased awareness of biodiversity,

empowerment through participation, local initiatives to begin implementation of local plans, and so on. In this sense, the NBSAP process was turned into a form of activism, as much as the putting together of a formal national plan.

Separate biodiversity plans were prepared at four levels across the country:

- State (in 33 states and union territories);
- Sub-state (at 18 selected sites to create more detailed local level plans);
- Interstate eco-regions (in 10 eco-regions cutting across state boundaries); and
- Thematic (13 themes relating to biodiversity, such as 'Culture and Biodiversity').

A coordinating agency was appointed for each location or theme – usually an NGO, government department or academic institution. A local committee of relevant persons/organisations was constituted to provide support to the coordinating agency. The agency was responsible for developing a plan for the relevant state, sub-state site, eco-region or theme. Each agency was required to elicit wide

Figure 1: Communication flow between components of the NBSAP process

public participation in the planning process, and was encouraged to use a range of participatory tools for the purpose. Guidance and support was provided to coordinating agencies by a national 15-member core team of NGOs, activists and scientists: the Technical and Policy Core Group (TPCG). The TPCG was central to the conceptualisation and day-to-day running of the NBSAP process.

A total of 71 plans were prepared across the four levels. Each plan was meant to be an independent, stand-alone document that would be directly referred to for implementation of strategies and actions in the concerned area. Key elements from all plans were finally integrated into a single National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP).

Creating stakeholder ownership of a participatory process

Many of the lessons learnt from the NBSAP experience are to do with creating a feeling of ownership among participants. People need to identify with, and feel ownership over, a process in order to participate meaningfully and value the output. In different contexts, different things are likely to create ownership or alienation, e.g.:

- the type of coordinating agency selected;
- the kinds of resource materials or decorations used in a

biodiversity festival;

- the opportunity for teamwork; or
- the use of dialects.

In terms of implementation of the 71 individual plans, generating ownership was crucial: there was no in-built mechanism or guarantee of implementation from the government. At this stage it was purely a planning process. The idea was that ownership over the process would create a pressure or momentum for implementation by stakeholders.

I discuss below two aspects of the NBSAP – the selection of the coordinating agency and information dissemination – which offer lessons for creating stakeholder ownership. The lessons are greatly condensed here due to restrictions of space. For a more comprehensive discussion of the process, see Apte, 2005.

Selection of coordinating agency

A key aspect that impinged heavily on the NBSAP process was the selection of coordinating agencies. This is not surprising, given that the process was a very decentralised one with independent decision-making by coordinating agencies. The criteria for selection were that the agency should be:

- relatively independent;

Photo: Ashish Kothari

**Decorating the bullock carts
for Deccan Mobile Biodiversity
Agricultural Festival**



- not seen to be on any one side of the spectrum between conservation and livelihoods; and
- acceptable to governmental and non-governmental organisations.

This was a difficult set of criteria to meet for every selection, but the TPCG tried to find a reasonable balance within it.

A bureaucratic constraint in the procedure of appointing coordinating agencies was that once a state-level agency had been appointed it could not be changed, regardless of the quality of the process. This affected the possibilities of ensuring accountability of state coordinating agencies.

The following lessons emerged regarding coordinating agency selection.

Government or NGO?

Some interviewees were of the opinion that any government agency is the wrong choice to handle a wide-ranging, participatory process like NBSAP. It was felt that government institutions usually have their own agenda, are too bureaucratic,

and find it difficult to be self-critical and to understand or mobilise participation. Depending on the context of government-civil society relations, having a government agency in charge of a process may stifle the possibility of creating feelings of stakeholder ownership over it. However, while some NBSAP experiences supported this view, there were contrasting experiences as well. For example, in Sikkim, the Forest Department conducted one of the most participatory NBSAP processes in the country. Some factors to keep in mind when selecting a coordinating agency include:

- **Who is in charge?**

Much depends on the capacity and interest of the individuals in charge. When the right individuals are in charge, a government agency can show high levels of achievement because of the immense human resources and institutional back up that it commands.

- **Accountability**

The flip side is that when a government agency has little interest in a process, not much can be done to ensure its success. This is because there is frequently a lack of account-

ability within government institutions, or simply due to the slow workings of the bureaucracy. Non-governmental organisations are usually (not always) more approachable in terms of informality and openness to 'outside' ideas. At any rate they are more concerned about maintaining an image of efficacy and responsibility. Funds are not likely to be a lever for accountability of a government organisation unless the funding is a very large sum in relation to normal institutional resources (NBSAP funding was negligible in a large institutional context).

Action such as holding back funds to ensure accountability could perhaps make a difference to smaller, non-governmental institutions, which tend to rely on smaller amounts of funding. So coordinating agencies need to be selected keeping in mind that the type of agency will affect the possibilities of accountability.

• Lack of continuity among personnel

Personal relationships built up with stakeholders during a process may be disrupted due to personnel transfers. This is difficult to guard against in any organisation when dealing with a process over a few years. In a government institution though, it is almost inevitable due to routine transfers of officials.

Perception of coordinating agency amongst stakeholders

The perception of the coordinating agency amongst local stakeholders affects the extent to which the agency can involve people in a process. Therefore it is important to take into account local dynamics among stakeholders when choosing a coordinating agency.

For example, some interviewees in Andhra Pradesh felt that the state-level coordinating agency was the wrong choice because it did not have a record of handling successful participatory processes or links with local communities. Consequently, some people did not take the process seriously because of the institution heading the process.

At sites where interviewees were overall more positive about the coordinating agency, this reflected on their keenness to be part of the process. For example, for the Uttar Kannada sub-state and Karnataka state processes it was widely felt that the coordinating agency selections were good because both agencies were seen as 'neutral' and well networked amongst key stakeholders.

In short it seemed important for stakeholders and potential participants to have the perception that the coordinating agency was:

- neutral;
- well networked with key players in different sectors;
- capable of conducting a participatory process.

Box 1: Negative outcomes of insufficient prior information

• Commitment levels remain low

People need to know the implications and the benefits of participating in a process. If there are monetary benefits, these are easiest to communicate. The challenge is in communicating non-monetary benefits, for people to know that it is worthwhile to contribute their time and expertise.

This is particularly important when targeting smaller NGOs and institutes – these usually tend to be pressed for time and resources, and therefore need to make careful decisions about how to make the most effective use of what is available. A process that does not seem to have clarity in terms of information or purpose is likely to put off people who have too many other things to do.

• Quality of inputs is directly affected

If a meeting is called without distributing an agenda beforehand, people are likely to come out with knee-jerk reactions rather than coming mentally prepared for the meeting.

Information dissemination: build-up and follow-up

Receiving and exchanging information is crucial if participants are to develop a feeling of ownership over a process. In contrast, feeling 'left out of the loop', or 'not in the know' is likely to create disinterest, disillusionment or even suspicion.

It seems that there is no substitute for face-to-face contact, or the personal touch, as a tool for communication. Information and updates sent on email or by letter have less value when not supplemented by telephone calls, regular meetings or briefings. In some cases, invitations through a general email or letter, without personal communication, even caused offence or irritation.

Two common complaints across the sites studied were insufficient **prior information** (e.g. circulating an agenda prior to a stakeholders' meeting) and insufficient **follow-up information** afterwards (e.g. updates on further activity or implementation). Box 1 shows the negative effects of insufficient prior information.

The need for follow-up information seems to be especially under-estimated. Dissemination of follow-up information needs to be marked out in the work plan of a coordinating agency as a separate activity, requiring the allocation of time, resources and responsibility. Box 2 shows why follow-up information is needed.

What happened next?

The TPCG submitted the national plan to the Ministry two years ago, but since then the Ministry has refused to approve and release it. The Ministry was displeased with parts of the

Box 2: Need for follow-up information

- **Maximising impacts**

Follow-up is crucial in terms of maximising the initial impact of a festival or meeting, and 'cashing in' on its value by keeping people interested and involved. For example, attracting people to a biodiversity festival is only the first step in biodiversity awareness-raising. The event would only partially retain its value if not followed up by a strategy of further awareness-raising activities.

- **Creating feelings of empowerment and ownership over output**

In Sikkim, most interviewees were not aware of the fact that there had already been some implementation of the Sikkim biodiversity plan. The long information gap and the feeling that 'nothing was happening' had created some amount of disillusionment. There was no specific mechanism in place to ensure that people were made aware of developments in implementation. Another example of insufficient follow-up was that, after widespread and successful village-level planning meetings, villagers were not given copies of their own village-level plans in their own language. This would clearly impinge on ownership of the output, and any possibilities of local initiative to implement the plans.

In contrast, the coordinating agency of the Deccan sub-state process (Andhra Pradesh) ensured thorough follow-up to its mobile biodiversity festival meetings. The following year, thousands of Telugu language plan summaries were distributed to participating villages. The plan was also read out and presented as the outcome of the previous year's festival, and feedback was solicited. This was key to building on empowerment and ownership created by the meetings.

plan, including the statement that India's current development paradigm is environmentally unsustainable. In Parliament, the Ministry stated that the plan contained inaccuracies and would embarrass India internationally. But neither did it want to negotiate any changes with the TPCG. It simply suppressed the plan, and there was a breakdown in communication. This led to the TPCG independently releasing the plan to the public in October 2005. It is believed that there has been an overall change of heart in the Ministry and a growing antipathy to participatory or empowering processes. The Ministry is likely to submit its own version of the plan to the government.

In this context, the consistent emphasis that the **process** of preparing the plan was as important as the final **product**

Call for participation brochures translated into different Indian languages



Box 3: Some innovative participatory planning tools used in the NBSAP process

- **School Biodiversity Registers**

Forty-nine schools in 14 districts mapped the area around the schools and interviewed local residents to compile local biodiversity information as inputs for the Karnataka state plan.

- **Interactive Radio Drama**

Weekly radio dramas in the Kannada language were broadcast state-wide over 14 weeks. Episodes were interactive, to solicit public inputs for the Karnataka plan and raise biodiversity awareness. More than 800 responses were elicited; 9.4 million people heard the series.

- **Mobile Agricultural Festival**

In Andhra Pradesh, bullock cart processions travelled through 62 villages over 32 days. The carts were decorated with exhibits of 75 varieties of traditional seeds, crop diversity rituals and traditional crop recipes. People sang and danced in celebration of crop diversity. Public meetings were held to get inputs for the Deccan sub-state plan. About 20,000 farmers participated in the meetings and 50,000 people saw the exhibition.

emerges as the principle strength of the NBSAP. States possess independent plans, many of which have a stakeholder support base built up during the process. NGOs and government departments are free to implement plan recommendations. There are already examples of local-level implementation. Valuable offshoots of the process include new networks, awareness and capacity building. Thus the **planning process** itself created the potential to achieve at least some of its goals of biodiversity conservation.

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