

# Biocultural community protocols: tools for securing the assets of livestock keepers

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## Introduction

International recognition of the vital role communities play in conserving and managing livestock biodiversity is growing. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) now refers to livestock keepers as ‘guardians of biological diversity’ (FAO, 2009). Their 2007 Global Plan of Action on Animal Genetic Resources (FAO, 2007) supports:

*...indigenous and local production systems and associated knowledge systems of importance to the maintenance and sustainable use of animal genetic resources [and] the establishment and strengthening of in situ conservation programmes, including support to community-based conservation organizations.<sup>1</sup>*

Despite these gains on paper, many scien-

tists and bureaucrats tasked with conserving animal genetic resources remain unaware of the linkage between specific livestock breeds (i.e. animal genetic resources) and communities. They continue to ignore the rich local knowledge and expertise of livestock-owning communities whose way of life – and animals – are threatened by the loss of access to grazing, lack of services and low economic returns from traditional breeds. They give preference to conserving livestock breeds on government farms and through cryoconservation instead of supporting conservation by local communities, as is mandated by the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD).<sup>2,3</sup>

At LIFE Network, we have come to recognise that international agreements are not necessarily implemented at the local level.<sup>4</sup> Communities need help to

<sup>1</sup> Strategic priorities 6 and 8 (FAO, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> See Article 8j.

<sup>3</sup> Cryoconservation is conservation by deep-freezing genetic material.

<sup>4</sup> LIFE is an international group of organisations that work with livestock keepers at the grassroots level. LIFE supports community-based conservation and development of local breeds and animal genetic resources. It highlights especially the role of pastoralists in conserving livestock biodiversity, and has developed a method for documenting indigenous knowledge about animal breeds and breeding.

secure their rights (Köhler-Rollefson *et al.*, 2010). Biocultural community protocols (BCPs) are one tool for helping to do this. A livestock BCP might document breeds and associated traditional knowledge and practices, and invoke rights under various existing legal frameworks such as the UNCBD. The process of developing these documents – when driven and designed by communities – offers the potential to strengthen community cohesion and the capacity to secure and defend rights.

Through LIFE's connection with the legal NGO Natural Justice, some LIFE Network partners were inspired to support the development of a number of BCPs by livestock keepers in Pakistan, India and Kenya.

This article examines three different experiences, and the extent to which these BCPs were community-driven processes. It looks at whether and how communities have been able to make use of the protocols in the struggle to have their rights recognised, and whether there were other benefits for communities in developing the protocols. It also discusses some emerging lessons and how these might help inform future work.

### Pashtun Biocultural Protocol

The Pashtun live in the north-east highlands of Balochistan province, mid-west Pakistan. They are an indigenous and tribal pastoral community known as the Janobi Pashtunkhawa. Their territory centres around the Suleiman mountains and is comprised of 13 districts of Balochistan. References to the area, also known as *Arya Warsha* or 'the place for grazing', can be found in the Avesta, the holy book of Zoroaster, which is 2700 years old. Pashtunkhuwa is the cradle of domestication for many species like the Bactrian camel, sheep and goats.

Pashtun people are nature lovers. They keep their livestock in eco-friendly produc-

tion systems and can be nomadic, semi-nomadic or sedentary. Livestock is important not just for livelihoods. They are an intimate part of the cultural and spiritual life of Pashtun livestock keepers. The community is proud of their role in the conservation of precious biodiversity and landscape diversity. They decided to develop the BCP because the importance of their role had never been appreciated. The community wanted to reflect this through the BCP. Although other Pashtun people share knowledge, breeds and customary practices with the Janobi Pashtunkhawa, accessibility to some Pashtun lands is difficult due to conflicts in tribal areas of Pakistan and southern Afghanistan. It was not possible to develop a BCP for all the Pashtun people.

### Process

Initial awareness-raising about the BCP began in October 2010 by three people from SAVES.<sup>5</sup> They travelled throughout the region, meeting with livestock keepers. Their aim was to raise awareness about the general process of developing a BCP and about specific ideas for this particular process.

### Primary meetings

First, we held group discussions with community groups at different village levels. These were documented in Pashto (the Pashtun language). Discussions focused on their livestock breeds, flora and fauna diversity that they know and use, and farming systems and practice. The community members demonstrated their familiarity with biological resources and their pride in their biological and cultural richness. Basic yet vital information was gathered, such as the names of breeds, their importance in low-input systems and dry seasons, the taste of the food items produced by their animals, and the cultural importance of the breeds. A first draft of

<sup>5</sup>The Society of Animal, Veterinary and Environmental Scientists (SAVES) is an organisation set up by a university-educated Pashtun man with a background in animal science.

Photo: Abdul Raziq Kakar



**Kahi camel of the Suleiman mountainous region.**

the BCP was then composed, focusing on the origins of breeds and their diversity, importance and production systems.

### Secondary meetings

On the basis of doorstep meetings (knocking on doors and talking to whoever answered), elders, indigenous knowledge experts, ethno-healers and best breeders were selected from the community for secondary discussions. This selection was based on the participants' knowledge, livestock species balance and willingness to participate, and led to the constitution of regional expert groups (REGs).

Three to five REGs meeting were held in each region, or sub-ecological areas designated on the basis of tribes, livestock species and accessibility. The draft protocol was discussed with each REG in detail, and more information elicited. With inputs from the community, a second version was drafted. Community representatives (e.g. elders) were involved in setting the criteria

and designing the process for finalising this draft.

### Final meeting

Almost 40 individuals were selected for a three-day BCP workshop. The selection criteria were knowledge, livestock species balance and regional/tribal balance. Outside experts (scientists, lawyers and scholars) from the urban Pashtun community were also invited. The discussions focused on livestock breeds and evolved knowledge, ecosystem vegetation and effective customary laws which could support the Pashtun livestock production and pastoral system (e.g. for conservation, resource rights, access and decision-making). Other aspects included livestock products, weather and climate, production systems and the role of livestock keepers in society. An environmental lawyer from Pakistan compiled a list of national and international laws and regulations related to the rights and well-being of pastoralists.

Laws were discussed with participants and included in the protocol. After amendments and corrections, the final draft was declared.

The BCP has given the Pashtun a concrete document which can be used to inform others about their role and importance. The process has helped livestock keepers organise themselves. They are stronger now and have a forum to defend their rights. SAVES has used the BCP to highlight the important role of the Pashtun in biodiversity and livestock conservation with national and international policy makers. For example, the Pashtun have defined and reported some breeds of livestock which were unknown before. As the founder of SAVES and co-author of this article, Abdul Raziq Kakar says:

*In my view, BCP is a process of organising and strengthening our community and protecting our community and its livestock culture.*

### Constraints and solutions

It was difficult to organise these meetings. The area is vast and inaccessible, with little mobile phone connectivity in many parts. The mobile way of life of many pastoralists contributes to this constraint.

Often, people were busy and had little time for extended discussions. To overcome this, the traditional information system called *hall* was used. *Hall* is the exchange of information about the rains, weather, grass conditions, disease, mortalities, movement and news. People share information with others they meet – especially relating to livestock and livelihoods. Horses and camels were used to access remote areas. To involve more people, elders were included from the start. Elders are highly respected and we took care to explain the process and rationale. Actively involving community elders was also important for generating local ownership of the BCP process.

More work is needed to expand the Pashtun BCP content and process and link

it with other Pashtun communities living in adjoining areas. These communities are separated either by international borders or provincial and administrative boundaries.

### Raika Biocultural Protocol

The Raika are the largest pastoral community of western Rajasthan in north-west India. They have a close relationship with the camel, but have also developed many other livestock breeds, including cattle, sheep and goats. They are an extremely egalitarian society, often sharing animals amongst each other. As long as common property resources are amply available, the Raika feel strong and prosperous. Historically, they also have a close relationship with the ruling class of Rajputs, caring for their camel breeding herds, and enjoying grazing privileges in forests. But over the last 60 years, the Raika have suffered as developments have eroded common property resources and restricted access to remaining areas, such as intensified crop cultivation, new wildlife sanctuaries, population pressures, road building and land enclosures. There is also a split between traditional animal-keeping Raika and educated young people who are not interested in livestock and do not value traditional knowledge highly.

The Raika Biocultural Protocol describes a number of local breeds that they have been stewarding, including camel, Nari cattle, Botic sheep, and Sirohi and Marwari goats. The protocol sets out, among other things:

- biocultural values and roles of the Raika for *in situ* conservation;
- sustainable use of animal genetic diversity and forest and rangeland ecosystems;
- customary laws and decision-making processes (e.g. relating to prior informed consent); and
- the rights and responsibilities of the community and government agencies under national and international laws and policies.



Photo: LPPS archives



Raika protesting for their grazing rights, Rajasthan.



Bhanwarlal Raika and his camel herd entering Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary.

Photo: Ilse Köhler-Rollefson

### Process

The Raika BCP is thought to be the first BCP ever completed by livestock keepers. It was developed with the support of international NGO Natural Justice and Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan (LPPS), a local NGO that has been working with the community for over 15 years to document traditional knowledge about livestock keeping and genetic resources. So a large amount of written documentation was already available.

In May 2009, two Natural Justice representatives – who had suggested the idea of establishing a BCP – travelled to the Raika area and based themselves at LPPS headquarters. With LPPS staff, they met with a cross-section of the community at

their doorsteps, explaining the rationale for a BCP and learning about the problems and constraints faced by the Raika, especially regarding grazing rights in a nearby wildlife sanctuary. Although Raika women generally do not interact with outsiders, and were not involved in these discussions, LPPS are aware that women are active behind the scenes and have some power, usually handling most money matters.

The information was compiled into a draft document in English. This was shared and discussed with community elders and revised accordingly. LPPS translated and printed the document in Hindi, sharing it widely with the community, local government officials, and internationally. In September 2009, a Raika female leader

Photo: Ilse Köhler-Rollefson



Raika leading his sheep and goats to grazing in the contested Kumbhalgarh Sanctuary.

presented the BCP at a meeting of local and indigenous communities on access and benefit-sharing (ABS) in Nairobi. She later travelled to Montreal for the Sixth Ad hoc Open-ended Working Group on Article 8J (Convention on Biological Diversity). However, it was difficult for her to share these experiences with the community afterwards, since they could not relate to travel abroad.

The Raika have used the document when interacting with government officials, especially the Forest Department. It has put them 'on the map' and become a source of information for young people. However, in their current struggle for grazing rights, it has also become evident that internationally binding agreements like the CBD severely lack local awareness and implementation, even though India is a signatory to the convention.

### Problems and constraints

The Raika BCP builds on extensive existing documentation. It represents a concise summary of important aspects of Raika culture, traditional knowledge and genetic resources. This is useful, but also dangerous. It is not a comprehensive record and provides a limited segment of their total knowledge. While its legal contents are valuable, they are difficult for the Raika to understand, highlighting the need for legal empowerment within the community. The biggest value is in using the printed document to interact with outsiders. Overall, the BCP is just one of many tools in the arsenal required by the Raika to claim their rights under the Indian Forest Rights Act.

### Samburu Biocultural Protocol

The Samburu are Maa-speaking pastoralists in Northern Kenya. They are closely related to the Maasai, with an estimated 800,000 households in the districts of Samburu, Laikipia, Isiolo, Marsabit and Baringo. Nine clans are divided into two

main subdivisions, White Cow and Black Cow. Eight keep livestock and the ninth consists of hunters and gatherers. They moved to the present area following the 1911 Treaty between Maasai leader Lenana and the British.

The Samburu keep small East African Zebu cattle, Red Maasai sheep and East African goats. The Red Maasai sheep has a unique genetic capability to cope with internal parasites, especially *Haemonchus contortus* (a kind of stomach worm). This has attracted attention from scientists who are keen to understand the genetic basis of this trait, which has obvious commercial potential. Despite this interest, the survival of the Red Maasai is threatened, particularly by the strong promotion of cross-breeding with Dorper sheep and market demand for large-bodied animals. The community itself seems to have lost confidence in its indigenous breed, although it is significantly more drought resistant than the Dorper and required for a number of Samburu life-cycle rituals.

### Process

Compiling the Samburu BCP built on a series of activities that the LIFE Network Africa coordinator initiated in Samburu District, 2008.<sup>6</sup> It began with a study of indigenous knowledge and breeding prac-



Samburu herder reading the Raika BCP.

Photo: Ilse Köhler-Rollefson

<sup>6</sup> The Samburu BCP process is part of the Africa BCP Initiative which is supported by the ABS Initiative (funded by GIZ), the Open Society for Southern Africa and the Heinrich Böll Foundation.



Photo: Ise Köhler-Rollefson

**Samburu and Red Maasai sheep.**

tices for Red Maasai sheep. Methods included field visits, community awareness meetings, informal interviews with individual herders and other stakeholders, and herder focus groups. The findings illustrated the close interconnectedness of the Samburu culture with their sheep. But it also raised the communities' awareness of their breed's potential and scientific interest in their breed (Lekimain, 2009).

In August 2009, a LIFE Africa member from a prominent Samburu family travelled to the region to document local institutions and leadership structures (Lenyasunya and Wanyama, 2009). He organised community meetings to inform them about BCPs. He also asked community leaders to identify experienced herders who would be interested and willing to participate in drafting a Samburu BCP.

Then, in September 2009, a BCP-drafting support team composed of lawyers from Natural Justice (NJ), the League of Pastoral Peoples and Endogenous Live-

stock Development (LPP), the female Raika leader and the LIFE Africa member from Samburu travelled to Maralal. They held two workshops in two locations. Some 40 herders from different villages and other local stakeholders participated and discussed community identity and origin, cultural significance of breeds, relationships between ways of life, traditional knowledge and associated customary laws, the conservation of breeds and local biodiversity, and current challenges.

Back in their office, the NJ lawyers then drafted the BCP text. The draft was subsequently amended through the other members of the BCP support team and then translated into the local language.

During a follow-up workshop in 2009, the two LIFE Africa members went back to the communities to share the Samburu language draft with a group of selected herders. The herders discussed ways forward. Suggestions included using the protocol to educate young people, mobilise

their own and other communities and lobby for their rights. Their corrections and amendments were included in the final document before printing.

The Samburu BCP was launched on 28th May 2010 in Maralal through the deputy director of the Kenyan Livestock Production Service in the presence of more than 30 Samburu livestock keepers and officials from the Samburu Livestock Production Service.

The Samburu were happy to see their protocol published and expressed eagerness to initiate conservation activities. Moreover, the deputy director has embraced the idea of biocultural protocols and is set to promote them further.

### Problems and constraints

Unlike with the Pashtun and Raika, there are no local Samburu organisations to provide continuity to the BCP process and follow-up. At the time of writing, it is unclear to what extent the community has made use of the BCP document. However, efforts are underway by LIFE Network Africa to revive the interaction and to use the existing work as a starting point for a comprehensive project to conserve the Red Maasai sheep breed.

### Conclusions

Biocultural protocols are an extremely useful tool for making visible the connection between communities and their breeds – a connection that continues to remain invisible to outsiders, including officials who are tasked with conserving animal genetic resources. BCPs provide the foundation and an essential first step for *in situ* conservation projects for animal genetic resources. They make clear that the ownership is with the communities. This is of great importance not just for conservation projects. In future, commercial interest in locally adapted breeds and their



The Samburu BCP cover.

adaptation traits can be expected to increase.

The idea behind BCPs is that they are a community-owned and driven process. The cases described here were catalysed by outsider organisations or people, who either had long-standing relationships with the community (Raika) or originated from them (Pashtun

and Samburu). BCPs cannot be a stand-alone measure and need to be embedded in a continuous long-term process directed at community empowerment if they are to be used to defend communities' rights. The biocultural community protocol document captures this process and the relationship between the community, its eco-system and outside actors at a particular point in time. The role of outside facilitators is to ensure that this happens in a truthful and comprehensive manner.

The meaning of the BCP document will vary tremendously. It will not only depend on the community, but also pressures exerted upon them. If a community is living happily, they will find it difficult to understand the rationale for the BCP and the process behind it. But this situation changes once a community comes under pressure from outside.

The Raika are experiencing a major threat to their way of life. In recent months – while this article was written – they have been informed that their prime natural resource base, the Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary, is being converted into a National Park. Among other documents, they are submitting the BCP as proof of their legitimate claim to a role in the future management of the park. So even though the benefits may not be immediately apparent, we believe that BCPs are an important tool for securing the assets of livestock-keeping communities in the long term.



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