Poverty, wealth and conservation

Action towards effective people-centred conservation: six ways forward

Sonja Vermeulen

Abstract. International agencies are committed to conservation and development that shares costs, benefits and decision-making powers more equitably. People-centred conservation does not mean that poverty reduction or local development priorities should always override other social goals, but does mean that we need to work on practical solutions to reconcile conservation and development at local and global levels. This paper presents six areas where useful progress can be made:

- interrogation of “public good” notions of biodiversity value versus other views of nature;
- greater rigour in seeking local values and priorities;
- clarification of what “participation” is for;
- acknowledgement and tackling of power differences among stakeholders;
- recognition of synergies (not just clashes) between local and international conservation priorities; and
- development of legitimate frameworks for negotiation.

A new ascendancy for local priorities in conservation?

“People-centred conservation” is now – after decades of dispute – firmly at the centre of international environmental policy discourse. The 2003 World Parks Congress put forward the overarching principles that “Biodiversity should be conserved both for its value as a local livelihoods resource and as a national and global public good” and that “Equitable sharing of the costs and benefits of protected areas should be ensured at local, national and global levels”.

The Convention on Biological Diversity similarly calls for equitable benefit sharing, and has as its core mechanism the holistic “Ecosystem Approach”, which draws on multiple interest groups within society and relies on local management institutions as far as possible. Bilateral donors and finance agencies (OECD, World Bank, IMF, ADB) have jointly committed over the last decade to target development spending towards reduction of poverty. The first message from these international processes is that conservation must work for poverty alleviation. Allied to this is a second supporting message that being poor means more than lacking income: poverty has many facets and can be tackled through investments along a variety of routed towards development, particularly in healthcare and education. The range of targets and indicators of the MDGs reflect this broad understanding of poverty. Importantly, multi-dimensional approaches to poverty reduction recognise that being poor means not just fewer goods and services, but exclusion from social decision-making – in other words, lack of power. In recognition that poverty is as much about political as economic marginalisation, international environmental policy processes call for “Strengthening mechanisms for the poor to share actively in decision making...and to be empowered as conservators in their own right” and for
“freedom and choice” to be understood as a central component of human well-being and poverty reduction.\(^4\)

All of these international processes – the CBD, MDGs and PRSPs, WSSD, WPC and MEA to name some of the major acronyms – provide a forceful and widely legitimised framework for a people-centred conservation in which the viewpoints and choices of poor people are taken seriously. People-centred conservation does not mean that the agendas of poor people must over-ride the role of conservation in other key social aspirations such as environmental sustainability. But it does mean that the trade-offs and commonalities between local goals and global goals, between goals of conservation and goals of development, need to be given greater – and more incisive – attention than has been the case in the past. The purpose of this paper is to outline some of the key areas in which progress can be made to take up the practical challenges of reconciling global and local priorities for conservation and development.

**Way Forward 1: Interrogate the dominance of global public good notions of biodiversity value.**

In general usage, conservation of biodiversity means sustaining total biological variety for the global public good. But neither “conservation” nor “biodiversity” has a single agreed meaning. A useful starting point in any questions about conservation is “conservation for whom?” The current international push for poverty alleviation suggests an answer of “for poor people” – bringing in both the global public good and local priorities. Local perceptions of biodiversity and priorities for conservation and development may differ substantially from the concepts used in international dialogue. Since local people are by default the direct managers of most biodiversity, the values that underlie their choices and practices are far more relevant than usually acknowledged.

Local understandings of ecosystems and values attached to biological diversity are by definition specific and unique – not just to ethnic groups or communities, but to individuals within those communities. Nonetheless it is useful to generalise some of the salient features of internationally dominant values compared with the kinds of values more likely to be shared by poor rural communities – but not often made explicit (Table 1). Reconciliation between global and local priorities will require reconciliation between these contrasting sets of values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global biodiversity values</th>
<th>Local biodiversity values</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indirect-use (environmental services) and non-use values (option and bequest values) are primary concerns</td>
<td>Direct-use values (in providing a variety of foods, medicines and other uses) as, or more important than indirect-use and non-use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal of conservation, with or without sustainable use</td>
<td>Ideal of sustainable use, with or without conservation benefits</td>
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Way Forward 2: Seek local opinions on, and priorities for, conservation.

Some aspects of local people’s relationships with biodiversity are well documented – particularly local uses of, and local knowledge of, species and ecosystems. Other aspects have received far less attention – particularly the choices, preferences or priorities that people might have for biodiversity management. Much research into local biodiversity values has depended on observation of patterns of harvesting and use, without triangulating these results through interviews, discussions or other techniques that simply ask people what they want. Consequently, a lot of what is said about the possibilities for reconciliation between global and local priorities for conservation and development is based on scant understanding of what local priorities might be in any given locale.

The key way forward here is to build the capacity of local interest groups to express their preferences effectively – and the capacity of external agencies to listen and to ask the right questions. The existing wide literature and well developed guidance on tools for participation and inclusion are relevant here to contexts where conservation meets development. A simple checklist (Table 2) can provide an appropriate framework to enable a more holistic understanding of local biodiversity values and act as a starting point in negotiating equitable sharing.

Table 2. Checklist of possible local biodiversity issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access</th>
<th>Non-use values</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Local land rights: legal ownership of different land types, customary ownership, distribution among communities and among/within households</td>
<td>• Environmental services: perceived roles in microclimate regulation, air and water purification, regulation of water flows (both floods and dry season flows), nutrient cycling, pollination, dispersal, disease control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Local resource access rights: bye-laws, rights of access (e.g. seasonal use of privately owned fields), formal or unspoken rules on use and management</td>
<td>• Cultural, spiritual and future option values: sacred, heritage and social values associated with nature, landscape beauty, recreation, cultural events and significance of land types and species</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Uses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Taxonomic and ecological knowledge: species names and distribution patterns; habitat classification, detailed life-cycle and ecosystem knowledge</td>
<td>• Uses of land types: residential land, agricultural land, forest land, range land, wetlands, rivers, sea</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Livelihoods and conservation— arguments shaping the debate

Way Forward 3: Achieve greater clarity on the reasons for local participation.

Much of the debate around synergies and trade-offs between conservation and local development is coloured by explicit or implicit assumptions as to whether local people’s participation in decision-making is a means or an end (Table 3). Both pro-conservation and pro-development lobbies place emphasis on win-win outcomes between conservation for the global public good and development for the local good while avoiding politically uncomfortable positions as to which of these outcomes is their primary goal. But strategies and tools for global and local priorities for conservation and development will be more likely to succeed if different stakeholders are able to state clearly their ultimate aims and preferences in given trade-off scenarios – such as situations in which local people choose short-term economic gains over longer-term conservation.

Table 3. Summary of arguments for local participation in decision-making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Justifications for local participation can be divided into two classes of rationale:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The normative / ethical rationale is that social structures and processes should reflect moral norms.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Decision-making processes should be legitimate and subject to democratic control (governance argument).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Costs and benefits of extraction and management should be distributed equitably (distribution argument).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The instrumental / pragmatic rationale is that participation can decrease conflict and increase acceptance of or trust in the management process. Opportunities occur as new interest groups are positively engaged in the process.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- In worst-case scenarios, shared decision-making will reduce the negative impacts of local activities (mitigation argument).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- In best-case scenarios, participation by diverse groups and individuals will provide essential information and insights about risks and consideration of the social, cultural and political values that will be as important as technical considerations in determining outcomes (synergy argument).</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Local interest groups in particular can benefit from a more transparent understanding of the goals and motives of external agencies that become involved in local biodiversity management ("local knowledge" in its broad sense includes this kind of understanding of external policies — see Table 2). One useful tool to help navigate the jargon of conservation and development projects and policies is a typology based on the continuum from “poverty reduction as a tool for conservation” to “conservation as a tool for poverty reduction” approaches (Table 4). Making the normative rationale for local participation in biodiversity decision-making more explicit can be a useful policy tool in itself, for example by legitimising assessments of integrated conservation and development projects in terms of outcomes to “good governance” (e.g. representation, accountability) rather than simply in terms of habitat or species preservation, or immediate local economic effects.

### Table 4. A typology of pro-poor conservation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Approach becomes increasingly active</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use poverty reduction as a tool for conservation</td>
<td>Recognition that poverty issues need to be addressed in order to deliver on conservation objectives. Poverty is a constraint to conservation.</td>
<td>Alternative income generating projects; many integrated conservation and development projects; many community-based conservation approaches.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensate fully, and mitigate, negative impacts of conservation on poor people, and make policy transparent</td>
<td>Conservation agencies recognise that conservation can have negative impacts on the poor and seek to provide full compensation where these occur and/or mitigate their effects.</td>
<td>Social impact assessments prior to protected area designations; compensation for wildlife damage; provision of locally acceptable alternatives when access to resources lost or reduced; compensation for land foregone.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapt conservation to generate new benefits for poor people</td>
<td>Conservation still seen as the overall objective but designed so that benefits for poor people are generated.</td>
<td>Revenue sharing schemes around protected areas or wildlife tourism enterprises; employment of local people in conservation jobs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use conservation as a tool for poverty reduction</td>
<td>Poverty reduction and social justice issues are the overall objectives. Conservation is seen as a tool to deliver these objectives.</td>
<td>Conservation of medicinal plants for healthcare, wild species as food supplies, sacred groves, pro-poor wildlife tourism.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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**Way Forward 4: Make power dynamics explicit and develop tools to tackle them.**

Well intentioned efforts to increase local involvement in decision-making are often built on simple models of round-table multi-stakeholder dialogue. But less powerful groups are disadvantaged within such dialogue — to the extent that it may be in their best interests to take careful tactical stands within discussions, or not to participate at all.¹²
Processes to reconcile global and local priorities for conservation and development require recognition of the power differences among stakeholder groups – to develop specific mechanisms to overcome them. Stakeholders seeking pluralism need to build it actively, through developing capacity among disadvantaged groups as well as structuring the “roundtable” to limit the dominance of the powerful.

Tools for marginalised and disempowered groups (such as local biodiversity interest groups) to increase their positive impacts on relevant policy processes exist, but they are not always recognised as “tools” or shared successfully through networks. Appropriate development of capacity building will build on local strengths in a variety of areas, such as:

- Social organisation (how to get local institutions right – with legitimised and workable representation)
- Defence of local preferences and conservation practices
- Information access and management
- Negotiation techniques to engage successfully with more powerful groups
- Practical management skills in both conservation and administration

More powerful groups can use identical or equivalent tools, such as the array of effective methods for stakeholder analysis, to analyse and mitigate their own influence (of course, such tools can also be used tactically to imbalance power further).

**Way Forward 5: Recognise synergies between global and local conservation values.**

Conflicts between priorities for global conservation and local development are the subject of constant heated debate. A promising alternative is to emphasise instead the scope for synergies between priorities for global conservation and local conservation (Diagram 1). Rather than incorporating local participation into external conservation projects, a better starting point might be to build on existing local technical and institutional strategies for resource management – to recognise local people in poor countries (not just those in wealthy countries) as an asset rather than a threat to conservation goals. Joint planning, action and monitoring between external and local partners have proved to be powerful means to reconcile differing viewpoints and develop a shared sense of purpose.

Partnerships between local and global conservation interests are able to unite legitimacy with policy-relevant networks to lobby for shared goals such as tackling the root causes of declining biodiversity: social inequity and global over-consumption. Effective global-local partnerships need to be highly tactical – avoiding broad project-driven approaches but instead making tactical alliances – in coalition with or opposition to other representative groups, governments or businesses. One of the main challenges for these alliances is to bring about redistribution of economic opportunities (e.g. downstream processing) and regulatory burdens (e.g. harvest or trade bans) that currently disadvantage poor communities relative to the large-scale agri-business, logging, plantation, mining or fisheries companies that are the drivers of biodiversity loss in many countries.
Way Forward 6: Develop legitimate frameworks for negotiating conservation and development trade-offs.

Arguments around integrated conservation and development projects (ICDPs) generally hinge on the promise of win-win outcomes for both global conservation priorities and local development. In reality, although synergies exist and should be maximised, trade-offs and how to negotiate them deserve more serious attention. Useful guidance comes from the coastal management sector of the Caribbean, where a formalised process for analysing and negotiating trade-offs among the conservation and development interests of various stakeholder groups has been developed successfully (Diagram 2). This multi-step process enables stakeholders to compare alternative scenarios and prioritise their own environmental, social and economic values to achieve a common quantitative language around which to agree.

Picture 1. Thriving biodiversity in India. The neelgai is sacred to local people. (Courtesy Ashish Kothari)
compromises between conservation and development goals.

Transparent techniques like these can, if carefully facilitated, help to mitigate the power differences among interest groups. A great deal of practical advice on facilitation of conflict resolution and conflict management is now available. Differences in perceptions and priorities can be turned from being the problem into an asset. Where different groups have different aims and different conceptions of success, mutually agreeable outcomes are more likely. Universal indicators, such as those used in the MDGs, and generalised value-systems, such as “good governance”, will mask variety – and as such must be used with care to avoid exacerbating conflicts.

Tools, the focus of much of this paper, are not enough. Colchester (1997) notes that many conservation initiatives engage locally on “the assumption that they are dealing with local people...tactical tools are of little value without higher-level strategies to strengthen governance, particularly at national levels.”
with legitimate rights to the ownership and control of their natural resources” – while in fact the broader frameworks that might legitimise those rights are entirely lacking. Thus tactical tools are of little value without higher-level strategies to strengthen governance, particularly at national levels. These are long-term goals: many who rally for equity in conservation decision-making would argue that solutions lie outside the “sector” in much bigger issues of how society can shape governments and markets. Commentators on conservation have made a powerful case that the true challenge in modern environmental governance is to move from “public opinion” to “public judgment” or from “participation” to “de-liberation”.


Notes
2 OECD, 1996.
4 MEA, 2003.
5 Expanded from Vermeulen and Koziell, 2002
9 Shell et al., 2002; Lawrence et al., 2003.
10 Fiorino (1989) gives a related but different categorisation of rationales for public participation. He distinguishes normative (associated with what is right and wrong), substantive (associated with information needed for the decision) and instrumental (associated with achievement of other related goals) rationales.
14 Lawrence et al., 2003; Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2004.
16 Hildyard et al., 1998.
17 Brown et al., 2002.
18 Potter 1996; Susskind et al., 1999; Means and Josayma, 2002; Castro and Nielsen, 2003).

References
CCC (Community Conservation Coalition), Putting conservation in context: social science tools for conservation practitioners, CCC, Washington DC, 2003.
Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, Ecosystems and...
Abstract. Today, poverty has a central place in international debates, agendas for cooperation, government policies and commitments of civil society. The discussion focuses on the causes of poverty, its structural characteristics and the ways to face it. This article takes a brief historical perspective upon poverty. We will move from the time of colonization to the present time when, in the heart of the hegemonic power of neo-liberalism, we see a frantic search for ways to cope with almost 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty.

Poverty eradication is one of the Millennium Development Goals, a commitment signed by the countries of The United Nations in 2000. Five years later, the Millennium Ecosystem As-