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A PEOPLE'S PLAN FOR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION: CREATIVE STRATEGIES THAT WORK (AND SOME THAT DON'T)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

India's approach to preparing the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) is a unique example of people's planning for environmental governance. Coordinated by a non-governmental organisation, the NBSAP was prepared via a large-scale decentralised planning process across all states of India. A diversity of innovative tools and strategies helped to reach out to thousands of people nationwide between 2000 and 2003, enabling more than 70 state, sub-state, eco-regional and thematic plans to be prepared, in addition to one national plan.

In the NBSAP planning strategy, the process of putting the plan together was as important as the final product. The process helped to increase awareness of biodiversity, empower people through participation and inspire some local initiatives to begin implementation of local plans. In this sense, the NBSAP process became a form of activism. It also demonstrated the potential of decentralised planning to generate positive spin-offs such as capacity building.

This paper reflects on some of the lessons that emerged from the process, many of which will be invaluable for similar planning initiatives in both environmental and non-environmental sectors, within and outside India. Particular insights include how to generate stakeholder ownership of the planning process, the use of complementary clusters of tools to target diverse social sectors and the role of voluntary activity.

The process was particularly successful at including the voices and views of marginalised social sectors. But it did not build alliances with the politically powerful, which was ultimately detrimental to the plan. The author urges the need for politically astute positioning if such grassroots' based plans are to be accepted and implemented by government bodies.

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A PEOPLE'S PLAN FOR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION: CREATIVE STRATEGIES THAT WORK (AND SOME THAT DON'T)[1]

Tejaswini Apte

INTRODUCTION

Between 2000 and 2003, thousands of people all over India were involved in a national environmental planning process that was unique in its scale, ambition, degree of decentralisation and popular participation. This paper documents some of the lessons learned from the process.

All countries signatory to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) are required to prepare a National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), the primary vehicle for national implementation of the CBD. In India, the NBSAP was a project of the Ministry of Environment and Forests. Surprisingly, despite government environmental policies generally being prepared in a centralised and top-down manner, the ministry chose a national NGO, Kalpavriksh Environment Action Group,[2] to design and prepare the NBSAP, and accepted Kalpavriksh's proposal to prepare the NBSAP through a decentralised process covering all the states of India. This was also one of the most ambitious NBSAP planning processes internationally, in terms of the diversity of ecological and cultural contexts it covered, and in terms of the intensely decentralised nature of the process.

The uniqueness of the NBSAP process—with all the inspirational successes as well as pitfalls that a pioneering effort entails—raises valuable lessons. These include

1. This paper presents just a few selected aspects of the NBSAP; a fuller discussion of the NBSAP experience can be found in: Apte, T. 2005. *An Activist Approach to Biodiversity Planning: A Handbook of Participatory Tools Used to Prepare India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan*. IIED. London. This is the original publication; written for practical use, it explains a range of tools step-by-step to help practitioners adapt and design tools/strategies for their own contexts internationally. The analysis is based on almost 200 interviews conducted in the Indian states of Sikkim, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. ISBN 1-84369-5480. Available at www.earthprint.com and free for non-OECD countries. Download: http://www.policy-powertools.org/related/NBSAP.html. This paper is also based on Apte, T. Forthcoming 2007. Future in their hands! Strategies for making a people's plan. *Futures: The Journal of Policy, Planning and Futures* Studies. Vol.39. (Special issue on transformative initiatives). Oxford, UK.

2. Kalpavriksh Environment Action Group is a 27-year old NGO with offices in Pune and New Delhi. Kalpavriksh website: www.kalpavriksh.org

the innovative range of participatory planning tools used, as well as the broader organisation and strategies employed for inclusion and people's empowerment. There are also insights to be gained from the political positioning of such a process: though the process was sanctioned by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, the ministry refused to approve and release the national plan that emerged from the process. It is apparent that the political acceptability of a national process that tries to be truly decentralised and inclusive of marginalised voices cannot be taken for granted, despite the government's official support of decentralised governance, civil society participation and the right to information.

The NBSAP's transformative potential for the future lies in the large-scale, democratic and civil-society driven character of its planning process; the lessons to be learned from this experience are relevant for future planning processes within and outside India, in environmental as well as non-environmental sectors.

CORE CONCEPTS: BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION, LIVELIHOODS AND MARGINALISATION

The overall aims of the NBSAP were biodiversity conservation and livelihood security (Box 1). Its central tenet was that biodiversity has ecological, cultural, spiritual and economic value, and impinges on every citizen. Thus, planning for biodiversity conservation should be owned and shaped by as many individuals as

Box 1. Biodiversity and livelihoods

There is a strong link between biodiversity conservation and livelihood security in India. The Final Technical Report of the NBSAP refers to livelihood security as "*the security of human communities and individuals critically dependent on biological resources, including guaranteed access to, control over and responsibility towards, such biological resources and related knowledge*" (Technical and Policy Core Group and Kalpavriksh, 2005[3]). The livelihoods of millions of people depend on biodiverse ecosystems. About 70% of India's population depends on local ecosystems for subsistence requirements like food, water, medicine, housing and fodder. Thousands of plant species and hundreds of animal species directly link human livelihoods with biodiversity; they provide security for millions of farmers, livestock rearers, forest-dwelling tribals, hunter-gatherers, nomads and fishing communities (Technical and Policy Core Group and Kalpavriksh, 2005). It is therefore vital in the urban-centric euphoria of economic liberalisation, foreign direct investment, information technology and galloping urban consumerism that began in the early 1990s, to remember that the well-being of the vast majority of India's population depends on very different concerns: the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and the securing of livelihoods and cultures that are dependent on biodiverse ecosystems.

3. This is a concise version of the report. It includes the full text and all official NBSAP documents (including those referred to in this paper) on an enclosed CD. Email Kalpavriksh (kvbooks@vsnl.net) for a copy.

possible in an equitable process that allows the most marginalised voices to be heard, especially those whose livelihoods depend on natural resources (Box 2).

Box 2. NBSAP emphasis on participation of different sectors

"It is critical that in all these activities, there be maximum participation of all sectors (governmental agencies, local communities, independent experts, private sector, armed forces, politicians, etc.), especially through:

1) making the process of working fully transparent
2) inviting public inputs at every step
3) making all relevant information available to the public
4) using local languages in all key documents and events
5) respecting the output of 'lower' level (e.g. sub-state) action plans and information, and integrating them into 'higher' level (e.g. state and national) action plans
6) allowing for a diversity of opinions and approaches to be reflected in the process and in the final BSAPs".

Source: "Methodological notes" distributed to all coordinating agencies as guidance for conducting the planning process. Ministry of Environment and Forests, 2000.

Given that the NBSAP planning process attempted to include all citizens, especially the most marginalised voices, it is useful to recognise that there are differing degrees of marginalisation and participation (Table 1). This table does not provide an 'absolute' scale of participation, but is a useful tool to help conceptualise the findings of this study. Most public participation programmes stop at serial numbers 3, 4 or 5 of the table.

The complexities of the term 'marginalised' need to be acknowledged. Even among those who are normally marginalised from planning and policy-making processes, some people are more empowered than others to make their voices heard. With reference to Table 1, the same individual/institution may occupy different 'boxes' at different points of time, and the overall experience of a single individual/institution with regard to policy inputs may range from non-participation and manipulation, to various degrees of tokenism and consultation. For example, in rare instances, such as with the NBSAP, an NGO like Kalpavriksh may be offered partnership, whereas in other instances it may occupy the other end of the scale with non-participation. Indeed, by the end of the NBSAP process, when the Ministry of Environment and Forests refused to approve and release the national plan submitted to it, Kalpavriksh had 'moved' from 'partnership' in Degrees of Citizen Power to one of the categories in Degrees of Tokenism.

Table 1. Differing degrees of marginalisation and participation

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Manipulation	Therapy	Informing	Consultation	Placation	Partnership	Delegated power	Citizen control
Non-Participation		**Degrees of Tokenism**			**Degrees of Citizen Power**		

Explanation:
Non-participation (manipulation + therapy): "levels of non-participation that have been contrived by some [e.g. insincere planners] to substitute for genuine participation. Their real objective is not to enable people to participate in planning or conducting programmes, but to enable power holders to 'educate' or 'cure' [or persuade] the participants."
Degrees of tokenism (informing + consultation + placation): "Here, the outsiders are allowed to hear and to have a voice... When [these activities] are proffered by power-holders as the total extent of participation, citizens may indeed hear and be heard. But under these conditions they lack the power to ensure that their views will be heeded... Placation is a higher level of tokenism because the ground-rules allow have-nots to advise, but retain for the power-holders the continued right to decide".
Degrees of citizen power (partnership + delegated power + citizen control): "These are levels of citizen power with increasing degrees of decision-making clout. Citizens can enter into a partnership that enables them to negotiate and engage in trade-offs with traditional power-holders... [In] delegated power and citizen control, have-not citizens obtain the majority of decision-making seats, or full managerial power".

Source: Arnstein, 1969.

Interestingly, within the NBSAP process itself, stakeholder participation also ranged across the different 'boxes' in Table 1. In some cases, it was evident that 'participation' did not go beyond providing information. In other instances there was consultation, but the existing power equations (or other circumstances) did not permit this to develop into partnership. Some instances even suggested a type of tokenism where people were consulted but their inputs not taken seriously (i.e. an 'illusion' of participation).

THE PLANNING STRATEGY: PROCESS VERSUS PRODUCT

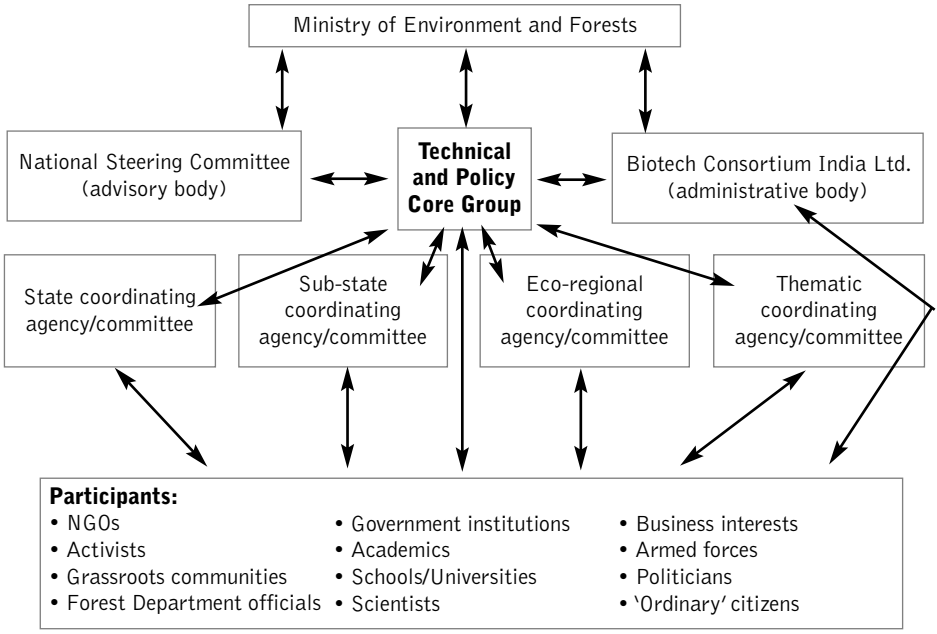
The NBSAP planning strategy consistently emphasised that the **process** of putting the plan together was as important as the final **product**. In other words, regardless of what might come out of the final plan, the process itself was meant to increase awareness of biodiversity, empower people through participation, inspire local initiatives to begin implementation of local plans, and so on. In this sense, the NBSAP process became a form of activism.

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

1. State (in 33 states and union territories)
2. Sub-state (at 18 selected sites to create more detailed local level plans)
3. Inter-state eco-regions (in 10 eco-regions cutting across state boundaries)
4. Thematic (13 themes relating to biodiversity, such as 'Economics and Valuation of Biodiversity')

A coordinating agency—usually an NGO, government department or academic institution—was appointed for each location or theme (Figure 1). A local commit-

Figure 1: Communication flow between components of the NBSAP process



tee of relevant persons/organisations was formed 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 broad, multi-sector, public participation in the planning process (Table 2), and was encouraged to use a range of participatory tools for the purpose. Guidance and support were provided to coordinating agencies by a national 15-member Core Group of NGOs, activists and scientists, headed by Kalpavriksh. The Core Group was central to the conceptualisation and day-to-day running of the NBSAP process.

Table 2. Levels of involvement in the NBSAP process

Level	Composition	No. of participants
Core team	Central coordinating teams (Core Group and National Project Directorate); National Steering Committee; Coordinators of each site/theme	110
Direct substantial or decision-making involvement	Members of State, Sub-state, Eco-regional and Thematic committees; and sub-thematic paper writers	1,300
Direct occasional or advisory involvement	Members of subsidiary working groups; respondents to Call for Participation or advertisements or other public outreach activities	1,000 (approx.)
Indirect but influential involvement	Participants at festivals, public hearings, workshops and other public events	50,000 (approx.)
Passive involvement	Recipients of NBSAP outreach activities such as visitors of biodiversity festivals, radio listeners, newspaper readers, TV watchers, etc.	Tens of thousands (if not hundreds of thousands?)

Source: Kothari A *et al*. 2002.

Out of a planned 74, 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 by the Core Group into a single National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP).

Diverse participatory planning tools

A range of participatory planning tools was used to prepare the NBSAP and gain inputs from different social sectors. The decentralised planning process was successful in mobilising people to innovate and experiment with tools. For example:

- **Biodiversity festivals**: Several states organised biodiversity festivals. In the Deccan region of Andhra Pradesh a mobile biodiversity festival on a bullock cart procession travelled through 62 villages over 32 days. This was one of the few festivals used to elicit public inputs into the plan as opposed to simply awareness-raising. The bullock carts were decorated with about 75 varieties of traditional seeds and an exhibition of foods cooked using traditional crops. People sang and danced along in celebration of crop diversity. In each village a public meeting was held

to gain planning inputs from farmers. About 20,000 farmers participated in the meetings and 50,000 people saw the exhibition.

- **Interactive radio drama**: Weekly radio dramas in the Kannada language were broadcast state-wide over 14 weeks in Karnataka. Episodes were interactive, based on grassroots interviews, to solicit public inputs for the Karnataka plan, and to raise biodiversity conservation awareness. Each episode ended with a request for listeners to send in thematic information. E.g. the medicinal plants episode asked listeners to write in about the use of local curative plants. 800 responses were elicited; 9.4 million people heard the series (Apte, 2005a; 2005b).

- **School Biodiversity Registers**: 49 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. The idea was to move data collection and conservation planning out of the exclusive realm of the 'experts' and into the realm of local communities. The exercise was based on the belief that a great deal of valuable, undocumented knowledge on biodiversity is with local communities.

Other participatory tools included: village level public hearings; sector-specific village meetings (e.g. village heads or women); school projects, competitions and nature camps; national, regional and state workshops; boat racing; and written questionnaires for government officials. NBSAP newsletters, national and regional workshops and a compendium of guidelines and concept papers were used to facilitate communication with co-ordinating agencies/committees.

There was also a national media campaign, which used:

- Media campaign outreach tools: website, television spots, radio spots, print articles, collaborative workshops.
- Media campaign products: logo, Call for Participation brochure (containing information about the value of biodiversity and the scope of the NBSAP process, distributed to invite people's participation), posters and wall calendars.

There were, of course, both strengths and weaknesses in the tools and the ways in which they were used. Not all were executed successfully. The national media campaign in particular did not achieve some of its key goals (see below).[4]

4. See the original publication (Apte, 2005a) for a fuller analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the tools.

This very brief sampling of participatory tools used in the NBSAP process illustrates the diversity of methods used for participatory planning, and underlines the ideology of inclusiveness that underpinned the NBSAP approach.

POSITIVE SPIN-OFFS: CAPACITY BUILDING, AWARENESS, LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION

Learning, networking, capacity building and local action were positive spin-offs of the NBSAP process.

Capacity-building

Improved networking, exposure to new information and consolidation of ideas were consistently cited as positive outcomes of the NBSAP process, in diverse sectors. For example:

- Teachers in Karnataka's School Biodiversity Register programme felt that field work and interactions with the local community increased their knowledge and confidence.

- Forest Department (FD) staff in Sikkim used their experience of co-ordinating the Sikkim planning process to subsequently design a participatory planning process for the conservation of medicinal plants. The process also created a strong network of contacts across the country which, staff felt, would be of benefit to the Sikkim FD in the future.

- Tribal network members in North Coastal Andhra Pradesh felt that the planning process helped them generate new ideas to conserve the environment, improved their skills at planning workshops and widened their networks.

Awareness-raising

Positive outcomes ranged from small, localised effects to wider, state-level impacts:

- In Nagpur, Maharashtra, three schools participated in local conservation planning exercises. But the initiative subsequently expanded to 20 schools and 600 students as an educational activity, as an off-shoot of the original effort, thanks to an enthusiastic group of teachers.

- Some key outreach tools produced by the NBSAP went far beyond their intended use and were valued as resource materials. The NBSAP newsletters, Folio magazine (a special issue on biodiversity, produced in a tie-up with a national newspaper), and the Call for Participation (CFP) brochure were among the popular resources. For example, the Sikkim Forest Department used the Folio to train its staff. A grassroots NGO working in Cudappah, Andhra Pradesh, gave away 400 copies of the CFP to create biodiversity awareness at grassroots level. In North Coastal Andhra Pradesh, where small NGOs have little access to information, the newsletters, Folio, CFP and the methodological guidelines distributed to coordinating agencies, all became important resources for their ongoing work.

- The popularity of the interactive radio series in Karnataka prompted other institutions to ask All India Radio for similar series on biodiversity issues. Subsequently a similar interactive series on wildlife and national parks in the state was broadcast.

- An NBSAP biodiversity festival in Sirsi, Uttar Kannada, inspired a Seed Festival by the grassroots-based Malenadu Home Garden and Seed Exchange Collective, with 100 women from 7 villages participating. The Seed Festival included a seed and forest produce exhibition, a competition for the display with most seed diversity, and a seed exchange: "*A [seed] variety in one village is often not there in another, and people think it has disappeared. The seed exchange allowed them to discover that all these varieties still exist, that they have to continue growing them, and that they have the power to control seeds… It may not be cutting edge science, or a huge network with huge results. But it is a small thing which has started to make a difference in people's lives,*" said a festival coordinator.

Local implementation

Local participation and ownership of the planning process encouraged some independent local implementation of the plans.

- In Rathong Chu Valley, Sikkim, garbage management and the reduction of yak grazing in Khangchendzonga National Park were among the plan priorities. Implementation of both was taken up by the Forest Department and a local NGO.

- In Karnataka the planning process included a case study by a local NGO to assess the status of a polluted water tank in the town of Tumkur. Subsequently the NGO

produced and distributed a booklet on the tank, and involved thousands of members of the public in a tank de-weeding programme.

TRANSFORMING FUTURE PLANNING INITIATIVES: LESSONS FROM THE GROUND

The successes as well as the failures of the NBSAP process offer valuable lessons for transforming the way public planning processes are carried out in the future in both environmental and non-environmental sectors. Only a select few lessons are presented here (see Apte, 2005a for more detail).

Strategic use of a complementary cluster of tools

A cluster of tools that complement each other is valuable for reaching out to a cross-section of stakeholders. Identifying appropriate tools to target specific sectors (rather than simply to generate mass appeal or attract the largest number of people possible) is essential to a planning process that aims to include diverse groups.

Every state developed a different method of reaching out to stakeholders, and made independent choices about what planning tools and strategies to adopt. Karnataka's process was an excellent example of the strategic use of a complementary cluster of tools to reach out to diverse social sectors: experts wrote commissioned papers; NGOs prepared field case studies; students and teachers were involved in preparing School Biodiversity Registers; general public opinion was solicited through newspaper articles and interactive radio drama; and direct local community input was obtained through the School Biodiversity Registers and field case studies. There were also six thematic meetings around the state involving representatives of various sectors, including government officials and NGOs.

Conversely, the national media campaign failed to develop a strong sector-specific approach. Part of the reason for this was the desire to send out a homogenous message about biodiversity and the NBSAP across the country in order to attract people to participate and give their ideas and practical assistance to the process. The idea was to reach out to people across dozens of languages, ethnic groups, social strata and occupations, from hunter-gatherers to computer analysts (see Figure 1). Though some of the media initiatives spoke specifically to certain sectors (eg. articles in English dailies spoke to an English-speaking, middle-class readership), the few sectorally-oriented approaches tended to be opportunistic rather than strategic. A person closely involved with the Media Campaign put it this way: *"On the one*

hand, we were telling ourselves that we want each and every citizen of India to participate. On the other hand, the messaging itself was not sufficiently formulated…. So the homogenisation of this national mass campaign was wrong. When you have this kind of homogenisation, you do not get your targets in place….How does biodiversity affect students in Delhi? I am sure it does, but we have to figure out how… Our identification of constituencies and targeting of messages was not well worked out."[5]

Information dissemination: creating stakeholder ownership of a participatory process

People need to identify with, and feel ownership over, a process in order to participate meaningfully and value the output. In different contexts ownership can hinge on different things, such as:

- the type of coordinating agency selected
- the kinds of resource materials or decorations used in a biodiversity festival
- the opportunity for teamwork
- the use of dialects
- the type and timing of information disseminated to participants

The future implementation of the 71 individual plans depended on generating ownership of the process: there was no in-built mechanism or guarantee of implementation from the government. The idea was that a wide base of ownership would create pressure or momentum for the plans' implementation. Information dissemination both as **build-up** and **follow-up** to a participatory activity is important for generating ownership of a participatory process. In contrast, feeling 'left out of the loop' or 'not in the know' is likely to create disillusionment or even suspicion.

Insufficient prior information (eg. not circulating an agenda prior to a stakeholders' meeting) and poor follow-up information (eg. a lack of updates on further activity or implementation) were common complaints at the sites studied. Insufficient prior information can have the following negative effects:

- *Low commitment levels*: People need to know the implications and the benefits (including non-monetary benefits) of participating in a process, to decide if it is worth contributing their time and expertise. This is particularly important when targeting smaller NGOs and institutes which are usually pressed for time and

5. The national media campaign also had some notable strengths, such as its operational flexibility and the production of information-based media tools that became useful resources for stakeholders much beyond the NBSAP process (Apte, 2005a).

resources. A process which seems to lack clarity about its purpose is likely to put people off.

- *Quality of inputs*: 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 what they are going to say.

The importance of **follow-up** information seems to be especially under-estimated and should be included in the work plan of a coordinating agency as a separate activity, requiring the allocation of time, resources and responsibility. Sufficient follow-up information is needed to:

- *Maximise impacts*: Follow-up is crucial for maximising the initial impact of a biodiversity festival or meeting, and 'cashing in' on its value by keeping people interested and involved.

- *Create feelings of empowerment and ownership over output*: In Sikkim, almost two years after the village level planning process, 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 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, 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 (in 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 the empowerment and ownership created by the meetings.

The strategy required for 'build-up' and 'follow-up' information depends on the location and context of the planning process. For example, at village level it may be sufficient to restrict 'build-up' information to talking about the forthcoming process at a village meeting, or putting up posters at strategic locations. On the other hand generating wide public ownership of a process in urban areas is likely

to throw up very specific challenges for information dissemination (as reflected in experiences in New Delhi and Nagpur). Unorganised urban citizens often tend to be relatively unconcerned or apathetic about conservation and environmental issues. In such a context a very large effort would have to be made to elicit a successful response; information dissemination building up to, or following up on, participatory activity may need to assume as much importance as the participatory activity itself in terms of strategy, time and resources. For example, the challenges of using the media in an urban (or even semi-urban) setting are huge; it is easy for a message to be lost or forgotten in the flood of media images and sounds that urbanites are almost constantly exposed to.

The value of voluntarism

Voluntarism can be the 'spirit' of a process

Contributing to a process in the spirit of voluntarism can generate wider ownership of the process and the product, and can make the overall goals of the planning process more sustainable in the long-run. A number of interviewees mentioned that the 'spirit' of the NBSAP process was defined by its voluntary approach. As an interviewee in North Coastal Andhra Pradesh put it, "*With [more] money, many people who are interested in the funds would come and contribute their skills – but after the money was over, they would disappear. But with less money, people with commitment who understand it is a voluntary programme, will participate and will be there even after the planning is over. So that is more sustainable. With more money, the plan would turn into a project. After the money was over, the plan also would be over and would be shown as an output of the project. But now we are looking at it as a continuing process*." About 70% of the North Coastal Andhra Pradesh process, which focused mainly on tribal villages, was funded by local groups or individuals in the form of food, voluntary work or personal travel costs.

The NBSAP's emphasis on voluntarism had much to do with the nature of Kalpavriksh, the NGO which coordinated the effort. Kalpavriksh's working philosophy revolves around:

- voluntarism and collective activities;
- minimal and equitable pay;
- non-hierarchical structure;
- collective decision-making and transparency;
- working on a shoestring budget; and

- staying small (the concern being that an expanding organisation would find it difficult to retain a non-hierarchical structure with a stress on low budgets and voluntarism).

Underlying this philosophy is the belief that a simpler lifestyle is most harmonious with ecological sustainability. The NBSAP is by far the largest project handled by Kalpavriksh in terms of resources and scale, and the practicalities of managing a time-bound, nationwide project often impinged on its ideals of staying small and simple. However, the main point to emphasise here is that this philosophy greatly influenced the way the NBSAP process was conceptualised and carried out, in terms of its voluntary spirit as well as its ideology of transparency and cross-sectoral inclusiveness. The voluntary nature of many of the NBSAP planning activities is directly linked to the next point.

Big does not always mean expensive

The NBSAP process managed to challenge the assumption that huge amounts of money are needed for such a process, and demonstrated what is possible to achieve with limited resources.

Before the Ministry of Environment and Forests accepted Kalpavriksh's offer to coordinate the planning process, the NBSAP was to be prepared in the conventional fashion by a group of consultants with a budget of approximately Rs. 4 crores (US$ 916,588). But Kalpavriksh proposed spreading this budget across the country to conduct a decentralised process. A strong commitment to keeping budgets low and contributing voluntary time was the basis for envisaging the sharing of this amount among about 71 coordinating agencies. This equated to approximately US$ 9,166-US$ 11,457 per state site and US$ 1,146-US$ 2,291 per sub-state site for completing a three-year participatory planning process: peanuts compared to most national planning processes. Compared to the scale of the Core Group's ambition, the resources available were very small.

What was expected of the coordinating agencies and of the process was shaped to a large extent by the work philosophy outlined above:

- Coordinating agencies were requested to treat the funds as seed money, and extend it as much as possible through their own resources. (Though a few coordinating agencies did not accept this approach and operated mainly within the allocated budget).

- Selection of Core Group members also reflected the expectation of voluntary work—many members contributed far more time and effort than they had originally been contracted to do. The initial agreement of each member doing a week's work per month for two years, for relatively low fees, turned (for many people) into an almost daily involvement for three years for no extra remuneration.

But idealism can be impractical!

However, in the face of practical realities, some of the above philosophies proved far too idealistic and short-sighted, often creating stressful situations that undermined the process by trying to stretch resources (time, funds, human resources) to their limits. The most obvious example of this was budgeting for only a relatively inexperienced part-time Media Campaign Manager instead of an experienced, full-time person, to conduct a large-scale national media campaign. This proved to be a key weakness of the media campaign. In a similar vein, relying on free hosting of the NBSAP website contributed to the mid-way collapse of the initiative. In some places a shortage of manpower meant that coordinating agencies could not disseminate the national media tools (NBSAP calendars, posters, etc.) properly. An internal evaluation report of the NBSAP noted that there was a lack of resources for some key activities such as reaching out to potential participants through expensive media like television advertisements; publishing the state and sub-state action plans; and organising more orientation and training for coordinating agencies (Kothari *et al*., 2002). The value of voluntarism and spreading budgets thinly needs to be balanced with the practical requirements of achieving desired goals.

Politically astute positioning is important

At the end of this process, which had been initiated and supported by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, the ministry refused to approve and release the national plan prepared by the Core Group. The ministry was reportedly displeased with parts of the plan, including the statement that India's current development paradigm is environmentally unsustainable. It appointed a separate committee to review the plan, but did not allow the Core Group to access the findings of the committee. It also instructed the Core Group not to make the plan public which was ironic since it had been prepared through a national, public process. Having waited almost two years for the ministry to release the plan, Kalpavriksh and the Core Group independently printed and publicly released their version of the plan (Technical and Policy Core Group and Kalpavriksh, 2005) in several cities, starting with Delhi in October 2005. While the ministry was under no obligation to accept the exact plan that emerged from the planning process, it had an obligation to make the findings

of the process public, and to finalise a mutually acceptable plan which respected the fact that the plan recommendations had emerged from the inputs of thousands of experts and grassroots community members across the country. The position taken by the ministry in this case is indicative of a larger malaise of non-accountability and non-transparency which seems to have been on the increase over the last few years. It is not clear exactly what form the final plan will take, but it seems clear that the ministry will submit its own version of the plan to the government without further consultation with, or inclusion of, the Core Group.

From the point of view of lessons for the future, a key question is: why, after a three-year people-driven process, did the ministry so easily have the final say? Much of the answer may lie in the fact that the NBSAP process did not have any political strategy in place. The ministry could afford to suppress the plan because it was predominantly supported by 'marginalised' groups. The NBSAP process did not manage (and made relatively little effort) to take on board the power wielders: big sugarcane farmers, tea garden owners, industries, trade unions and politicians. The process consistently and sincerely concentrated on including the voices and aspirations of the marginalised. This is reflected in a comment by a Core Group member with reference to the industrial sector: "I *think there was a semi-conscious stand we took – that environment is marginalised to begin with, and industry calls the shots. So is it more our concern to get those voices who are marginalised, or spend our energies on getting voices who anyway call the shots? … I [also] think there was a latent feeling in us [the Core Group] that in trying too hard to collaborate, we would be selling out. We had a 'building bridges' orientation to the State, but we didn't have it with reference to industry.*"

A significant lesson that emerges from this experience is that given the often fickle nature of bureaucratic commitments, it is necessary to balance a focus on marginalised voices with politically astute positioning, lobbying and creating a support base among powerful interest groups during the course of the decentralised planning process. In other words, a wider support base is needed, consisting not only of the voiceless and marginalised, but perhaps just as importantly those who unequivocally have a voice and are emphatically not marginalised. This may be ideologically unpalatable; in some cases it would simply prove unfeasible in terms of the conflicting demands of fundamentally opposed interest groups, especially because the bottom-line of biodiversity conservation and livelihood security must not be compromised. It would also necessarily take away some time and energy from the important task of including marginalised voices. But in the end, the impor-

tance of politically astute positioning and lobbying in order to push for official acceptance of the final plan should not be underestimated and needs to be incorporated into the overall strategy of a plan-making process.

CONCLUSION

Environmental governance that gives a central role to people is a key feature of strengthening and deepening democracy in the future. In the Indian and international context, India's NBSAP planning process was unique and ambitious in its focus on intensive decentralisation and multi-sector public participation. The lessons that emerge from the NBSAP process have the potential to help transform future participatory planning processes (especially large-scale processes) in environmental and non-environmental sectors. The process demonstrated that large-scale planning can be conducted by civil society without the vast budgets usually associated with such processes. The experience of using tools and strategies to reach out to diverse social sectors and marginalised voices and to generate broad ownership of the process offer valuable insights into the 'nuts and bolts' of participatory planning. While governments may pay lip-service to participatory planning, the political acceptability of 'uncomfortable' plan recommendations and observations can remain in doubt. Therefore incorporating a political strategy into such a process and gaining the support of powerful lobbies is important for securing official support for the final plan.

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