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Poverty, Biodiversity and Local Organisations: Lessons from BirdLife International

David Thomas

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David Thomas is Head of Communities and Livelihoods at the BirdLife International Secretariat in Cambridge, UK. He leads on development and co-ordination of BirdLife's Local Conservation Group approach, a programme focused on building capacity and networks for local-level action at priority sites for biodiversity conservation. He also co-ordinates the partnership's work on issues such as governance, equity, rights, poverty reduction and gender, including the development of policy and practical guidelines. He can be contacted at BirdLife International, Wellbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge, CB3 0NA, UK; email: David.Thomas@birdlife.org

Executive Summary

Global targets to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss significantly by 2010 have not been met, and the rate of biodiversity loss does not appear to be slowing. At the same time, targets to reduce human poverty worldwide are also off track. This dual challenge has led to a search for effective mechanisms and entry points through which conservation and development objectives can be addressed together. Both conservation and development sectors, within their own sphere of interest, have advocated the importance of local participation and also of partnership between conservation agencies and local people.

This paper discusses why working with local organisations can be an important entry point for conservation and poverty reduction, describes the global experience of BirdLife International in this context, and concludes with a discussion, based on BirdLife's experience, of some of the issues and constraints which need to be taken into account when addressing conservation and poverty reduction through working with local organisations.

Three examples, one from South America (Bolivia) one from Africa (Uganda) and one from Asia (Nepal), help to illustrate how BirdLife's partners have worked with local organisations as an entry point to achieving conservation and poverty reduction. These examples, and BirdLife International's very rich experience in this approach worldwide, reveal that working in partnership with local organisations ensures that environment and poverty are addressed in a more holistic way, as experienced and understood by local people. It also has benefits in terms of sustainability, efficiency, legitimacy and respect for rights. However, it needs to be part of a broader strategy, particularly one which addresses drivers and root causes of poverty and biodiversity loss at larger scales. Linking local organisations to national and international networks can help to ensure that local voices are heard in such forums.

Local organisations therefore deserve far more attention and backing from development agencies, with funding and support mechanisms suited to their scale and capacities, than has hitherto been the case. What's more, such organisations and partnerships require adequate resources for systematic and sustained support and a much longer-term commitment than allowed for in most donor-funded projects.

Poverty, Biodiversity and Local Organisations: Lessons from BirdLife International

David Thomas

Introduction

The findings of the most recent Global Biodiversity Outlook (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2010) are sobering – wildlife populations are in decline, natural habitats are being degraded and species continue to become extinct. The Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) target to significantly reduce the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010 has not been met, and the rate of biodiversity loss does not appear to be slowing (Butchart *et al*, 2010). 2010 was designated by the UN as the International Year of Biodiversity. It was also a key year for international efforts to address poverty, marking 10 years since the adoption of the Millennium Declaration in 2000 by 189 member states of the UN, and the agreement of a set of concrete and measurable development objectives known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Here too progress is off track (UN, 2010), with the number of people living in extreme poverty actually increasing in Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, and factors such as deprivation, social exclusion and lack of participation worsening the situation.

At broad geographic scales, areas supporting high biodiversity value coincide with the incidence of poverty (Ahlenius, 2004). At a local level, for many people the animals and plants that surround them form an essential part of their livelihood, providing food, fuel, medicines and shelter and contributing to local culture. Wild resources have been shown to provide 20-30% of rural people's income in developing countries, and provide up to 20% of all protein (Kaimowitz and Sheil, 2007). Studies at community and household level have shown that poor people are relatively more dependent on biodiversity and ecosystem services than the wider population (Vira and Kontoleon, 2010). A study of the contribution of natural resources to the national economy in India (the Green Accounting for Indian States Project) found that ecosystem services contributed 7% of gross domestic product (GDP) overall, but that they comprised 57% of the GDP of India's 480 million poor people, engaged in small farming, animal husbandry, informal forestry and fisheries (Sukhdev, 2009). This geographical overlap and the high degree of dependence

of poor people on natural resources has for some time focused attention and effort on the contribution that biodiversity conservation can make to poverty reduction, and the need to engage local people, through grassroots initiatives, in biodiversity conservation (e.g. Ancrenaz and O'Neill, 2007).

Although there are diverse views on how conservation and poverty reduction should be linked (eg. see Adams *et al.*, 2004; Gilbert, 2010), the challenge of meeting conservation and development objectives has led to a search for effective mechanisms and entry points through which they can be addressed together. Both conservation and development sectors, within their own sphere of interest, have advocated the importance of local participation and also of partnership between conservation agencies and local people (Vermeulen and Sheil, 2007). Thus the CBD acknowledges the central role of communities: various articles of the convention emphasise the importance of equitable sharing of benefits and traditional knowledge, and the CBD's ecosystem approach includes the principle of decentralisation to the lowest level of management. Likewise, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment finds that "*Measures to conserve natural resources are more likely to succeed if local communities are given ownership of them, share the benefits and are involved in decisions*" and "*... a number of community-based resource management programs have slowed the loss of biodiversity while contributing benefits to the people*" (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005a). From the perspective of poverty reduction, the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) argues that "*local organisations can be influential agents of change, well suited to address the needs and interests of politically marginalised groups (ethnic minorities, women, landless farmers, slum-dwellers)*" (OECD, 2001).

This paper discusses why working with local organisations can be an important entry point for conservation and poverty reduction, describes the global experience of BirdLife International in this context, and concludes with a discussion, based on BirdLife's experience, of some of the issues and constraints which need to be taken into account when addressing conservation and poverty reduction through working with local organisations.

Poverty and environment

For most people in developed countries the relationship between their livelihood and the environment – how they earn income, feed themselves and their families, obtain drinking water, heat their homes, provide shelter, treat themselves when sick – will be mediated through services provided by others. Doctors provide prescriptions – for drugs often derived from natural chemicals; food is purchased in a supermarket – perhaps produced by farmers in Ecuador, Kenya or Spain; drinking water comes through a tap – from a watershed that is managed and protected by landowners, the water board and local authorities. The environment is critically important to people in developed countries, but their livelihoods are one (or more than one) step removed from it.

That's not the case for many people living in low-income countries. Their livelihoods – and their poverty – are directly connected to their environment on a daily basis. The proximity of the nearest source of fuelwood determines how many hours school-age

children have to spend trekking and carrying it home each day; the quality of the available water supply determines the likelihood that a child will live beyond the age of five; whether sickness in a village can be treated depends on whether the vine or bush providing the traditional medicine – the only form of medical treatment available – can still be found in the forest; and whether a farmer and his herd of goats survive the extended dry season caused by climate change depends on access to browse in a nearby forest or the pastures around a floodplain wetland. At Natmataung National Park in Mayanmar for example "*The forest is a direct provider of food, fuelwood, non-timber forest products for sale, and wildlife for social status and exchange. For those households that are food-insecure, the forest is a source of food (roots and tubers) as well as a source of income (especially collection of orchids and* pyanu*, a high-value tuber). All households depend on wood for cooking and warmth, which the forest provides*" (BirdLife International, 2006).

But the relationship that people have with their environment is complex and locally specific. Consequently, environment and development problems may need to be dealt with at the local scale so that remedies can be designed in ways that are culturally, socio-politically and environmentally suited to each local context. Organisations of which local people are part, as decision makers and actors, are most likely to understand this complexity and find solutions which combine conservation of the environment – and its goods and services – with local poverty reduction. Ultimately locally-driven interventions are likely to be more relevant, and more effective, than policies or programmes devised by national governments, international donors, or international NGOs. Addressing conservation and poverty reduction by empowering local organisations can thereby help ensure relevance to local people, avoiding the perception of conservation as a marginal issue, and the resentment and opposition that can follow when conservation priorities, research agendas and strategies are set by international organisations without local input (Smith *et al.*, 2009).

As a result of many poor people's direct dependence on the environment, they have much to lose when it, and the goods and services it provides, are threatened. The combination of locally-specific knowledge and understanding gained through years of experience and often passed down through generations, together with high dependence on the environment, mean that empowered local organisations have the possibility to identify and implement solutions to complex poverty-environment issues.

BirdLife's Local Conservation Group (LCG) approach

BirdLife International is a global network of national, membership-based civil society organisations – one per country – co-ordinated and supported by a decentralised Secretariat. These national organisations (BirdLife Partners) are present in 116 countries worldwide and together they have identified a network of sites that are globally important for the conservation of birds—Important Bird Areas (IBAs).[1] Nearly 11,000 sites in 200 countries and territories have so far been identified as IBAs. BirdLife Partners have found

1 Important Bird Areas www.birdlife.org/action/science/sites/index.html (Last accessed 12 July 2010).

that for IBAs in developing countries it is particularly important to address together the challenges of conservation and poverty reduction.

The approach of the national BirdLife Partners has been to work with local organisations at IBA sites. Very often there are existing organisations present, whose mission and objectives overlap with those of the BirdLife Partnership. When such organisations do not exist, it is sometimes necessary to support the emergence of a new local organisation. Often organisations are natural resource-focused—associations formed from fishers, tour-guides, or beekeepers for example—people whose income is most directly linked to the health of the environment at the site. National BirdLife Partners work with these locally-based groups to identify, negotiate and make decisions around a shared agenda, and work in partnership towards an agreed set of objectives. Institutional strengthening and community empowerment are often key parts of the collaboration. In the Africa region, for example, BirdLife Partners currently work with 211 local groups at 117 IBAs—covering 16% of the 691 IBAs that have been identified in 21 of the 24 countries included in the Africa Partnership (BirdLife International, 2010a). Worldwide, BirdLife is working with local groups at over 2,000 IBAs, and the network continues to grow.

BirdLife calls this its Local Conservation Group (LCG) approach. This is a hugely diverse approach to conservation, with the structures, governance, membership, and specific objectives and activities of these groups varying with the local context. There are, however, a few features and principles which are generally shared, reflecting BirdLife's own principles as a partnership of democratic, membership-based organisations. One of these is that the relationship between a BirdLife Partner and an LCG is intended to be long-term, not linked to a project timeframe. This reflects the long-term commitment of BirdLife Partners to the sites that the Partnership has identified as conservation priorities, and to the people that live there.

Three examples, one from South America, one from Africa and one from Asia, help to illustrate how BirdLife Partners have worked with local organisations as an entry point to achieving conservation and poverty reduction. The examples show different approaches (working with existing organisations, supporting the emergence of new organisations) and different biodiversity-related economic linkages (international tourism, sustainable use of natural resources, and regional services for recreation).

Bolivia

By working with communities, government and other non-governmental organisations, the Bolivian BirdLife Partner Asociación Armonía has helped to establish the conditions for the Bajo Rio Beni Important Bird Area to be classified as a protected area (a municipal park) and an Indigenous Territory. Bajo Rio Beni is the last site in Bolivia where the endangered Wattled Curassow (*Crax globulosa)* can be found (BirdLife International, 2011a). While still common in the 1930s the Wattled Curassow has since become rare—probably as a result of hunting—and is now confined to small patches of inaccessible seasonally-flooded *varzea* rainforest. Four *Tacana* communities (indigenous people) live in the area, among them the community of San Marcos, comprising about 15 families. When Asociación Armonía started working there in 2003, the community of San Marcos existed on

a mainly subsistence basis, with very little regular cash income. A local school teacher taught children up to 10 years old, but older children needed to travel to town for further schooling—which they could not afford. There was no potable water programme, no sanitation system, and electricity was only provided by a generator on special occasions. Local livelihoods were entirely dependent on the forest, but those were threatened by illegal activities such as logging and hunting of economically valuable species such as Speckled Caiman (*Caiman yacare)*.

To help protect and monitor the population of Wattled Curassow, and to provide a foundation for an ecotourism programme to provide sustainable livelihoods, Asociación Armonía supported the creation of a Local Conservation Group. This LCG seeks to be truly representative of the community because its membership comprises two people from each family in the village. With donor support, a lodge has been established to provide accommodation for tourists and employment for local people, particularly women. As a result, incomes for local wildlife guides have risen significantly (from US$ 2.5-3.7 per day to US$ 5-6.5 per day), in a community which previously had little cash income for medicines or education. Concurrently, hunting and other damaging extractive activities in the IBA have declined. Between 2004 and 2008 a ban on extractive activities from the Wattled Curassow's habitat was upheld (with only one known exception), because the community is now in a position to keep out outsiders, and because tourism revenues have provided an alternative to unsustainable resource use. The initiative has helped to establish the rights of local communities to local forest resources, and has begun to empower them through improving dialogue with decision makers. Through the LCG, the community is increasingly involved in consultations on development policies in the area (the Mancomunidad del Río Beni and the municipality of Reyes) (Asociación Armonía, 2008).

Uganda

Musambwa Islands in Lake Victoria are used as a base for a fishing community of about 160 people, allowing fishermen to access the deeper waters of the lake. The islands are also an internationally important site for the Grey-headed Gull (*Larus cirrocephalus),* supporting the largest breeding colony in Africa (Birdlife International, 2011b). One of the island's major environmental and economic problems was the limited availability of wood for smoking fish so that they could be preserved whilst awaiting transport to the mainland. There were also problems of unsustainable fishing and harvesting of gull eggs. As a result of the transient nature of the fishermen's lives, coupled with inadequate environmental awareness, traditional rules and practices had broken down. For example, it was a traditional practice to harvest only one egg from a nest containing two or more eggs. Sanitation was completely lacking, which meant that the incidence of diarrhoea and other water-borne diseases was very high.

The fishermen had no organisation, and so Nature Uganda (BirdLife in Uganda) supported them to establish a Local Conservation Group (Musambwa Island Joint Conservation Organisation—MIJCO) and worked with them to solve the linked environmental and socio-economic problems in the area. First, Nature Uganda investigated the possibility of improving the efficiency of existing smoking kilns. However, this was found to not be

very cost effective and it would only partly address the problem of the very limited availability of wood. Instead they developed a system whereby the fishermen could pack the fish in ice boxes, using ice supplied by the fish exporters, who transport the local fish to Kampala. This has been a huge success, greatly reducing the need for fuelwood, reducing fish losses through deterioration, and reducing the number of trips from the island to the mainland from five to two per week (transport was one of the most significant costs for fishermen). They have also helped the fishermen to improve sanitation on the island, and to agree bylaws for egg harvesting. As a result of these and other measures, fishermen's net incomes have increased by 18.5%, vegetation is regenerating, the incidence of waterborne gut infections has declined by 95%, and the number of gulls breeding on the island has increased from about 33,000 when the project started to nearly 100,000 in 2007 and remains around that average (Nature Uganda, 2008).

What is more, MIJCO has been empowered to sit on a 'transparency committee' looking at how local taxes and other funds are used by local government. Community members complained that despite paying their taxes, local government was not providing any services in return. On behalf of the community MIJCO met with local government officers who agreed that they could deduct the tax percentage that was supposed to come back to the community. Taxes are now submitted, together with full records indicating the full amount collected, the percentage supposed to go to local government, and the percentage that should come back to the community for local services. Not only has this ensured that taxes collected locally do actually provide local benefits, but it also allows the local community much more control and a greater voice in decisions on how taxes are spent. The money is used for such activities as maintaining the community boat, repairing the latrines and managing the island's habitat. Whilst many environmental and economic issues at Musambwa remain to be resolved, the empowerment of a local organisation has provided an institutional basis for sustained, locally-driven and locally relevant processes to continue in the long term.

Nepal

Many of Nepal's forests are managed by community Forest User Groups (FUGs) in accordance with plans approved by the District Forest Office. There are over 14,000 FUGs in Nepal, and most are co-ordinated and represented by an umbrella organisation, FECOFUN (Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal). Several Important Bird Areas in Nepal are managed in this way, and the FUGs are therefore natural local partners to work with Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN, BirdLife in Nepal) for conservation and development at these sites.

Phulchoki Mountain IBA is located 16 km southeast of Kathmandu. The lower slopes of the mountain support a luxuriant growth of subtropical broadleaved forest and the site is particularly important for the restricted-range bird species Spiny Babbler (*Turdoides nipalensis)* and Hoary-throated Barwing (*Actinodura nipalensis)* (BirdLife International, 2010b). Because of its proximity to Kathmandu many people are attracted there at weekends, to picnic in 'parklands' on the forest's boundary or to enjoy the snow during winter. Much of BCN's support to the FUGs has been focused on enhancing the revenue that they can earn from these visitors. BCN has helped five FUGs to improve facilities and

put in place a more organised charging system. Each LCG identified their own priorities, which included improving the water supply, constructing toilets, building tables, chairs and shelters, fencing and erecting signboards. Their efforts have made a significant difference to the income that they receive. At Godavari Kunda, for example, the community were receiving about Rs 5000 (US$70) from picnickers. Since the improvements to the picnic area they have auctioned the annual lease to run the picnic site to members of the FUG and now receive about 65,000 Rs (US$900) a year. These funds contribute to forest patrolling and FUG management costs, but they are also used for projects in the village—including improvements to the roads and bursaries for school children from some of the poorest households.

These examples demonstrate how working with local organisations can help to deliver on both conservation and development. The localness of the institutions provides opportunities for approaches that are suited to the specific local context. A common outcome of strengthening local organisations, shown by the examples from Uganda and Bolivia, is that they help to *empower* local communities, opening up channels of communication between local people and decision makers. Issues like access to natural resources, planning decisions and formulating regulations are often determined by traditional authorities within the community or by local government. By providing a focus for organisation, LCGs have helped provide communities with better access to these decision makers, enabling them to assert their rights and to have a voice. This empowerment, enabling people at IBAs to show leadership in the development of locally appropriate 'home-grown' solutions to poverty-environment issues, is a key objective of BirdLife's Local Conservation Group approach.

Discussion

It has been BirdLife's experience that working with local organisations can provide an effective entry point for linking conservation and poverty reduction. However, this is not a 'silver bullet' and here we discuss some of the key challenges.

Trade-offs

Conservation of biodiversity and local development priorities are not always the same; trade-offs are perhaps inevitable. Whilst local organisations are adept at weighing up such trade-off decisions, there is a risk (from the perspective of the conservation organisation) that the results may not suit international biodiversity conservation priorities and objectives. As the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment states "*... while "win-win" opportunities for biodiversity conservation and local community benefits do exist, local communities can often achieve greater economic benefits from actions that lead to biodiversity loss*" (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005b). By aligning itself with local organisations which have objectives that overlap with those of BirdLife, and being honest and transparent about the international biodiversity conservation agenda (Box 1), BirdLife aims to resolve trade-offs without harming biodiversity objectives, often through compromise that promises to deliver the best outcomes for biodiversity in the long term.

BOX 1. DEVELOPING A SHARED CONSERVATION COMMITMENT

The Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL, the BirdLife Partner in Lebanon) is using the traditional approach of *hima* to conserve biodiversity, manage resources sustainably, and bring social and economic benefits to local people. *Hima* is a traditional Islamic form of community-based land management. Once governed by tribal chiefs and religious leaders, *himas* were intended to ensure the sustainable and fair use of the land. The modern form of *hima* being advocated by SPNL is governed by municipalities and other democratically elected bodies. It couples the traditions and values of the traditional *hima* approach with the scientific basis for conservation (IBA identification) and promotion of local community involvement, thus bringing benefits for biodiversity and people. One example is *hima* Qoleileh, a coastal site close to the border with Israel and badly affected by the war in 2006. The beaches are the breeding sites for globally threatened turtles; being the most visited public beaches in southern Lebanon, there are undoubtedly opportunities for economic development based on intensifying the tourism industry. It is likely that such development would be to the detriment of turtles and other wildlife. SPNL has engaged with the community here and explained the biodiversity importance of the site. It became clear that the community valued its unique and natural character. Together SPNL and the LCG have sought to encourage forms of development and ecotourism which will help preserve the region's resources and beauty, but still provide employment and income to local people.

Representativeness and accountability

BirdLife is careful not to claim that the local organisations it works with are automatically representative of the community from which its members are drawn. To some extent LCGs may be 'special interest groups'. However, environmental issues championed by LCGs are very often of wider community concern and, through their social networks within the community, LCGs provide a reach that goes well beyond group membership alone, thus providing an important entry point into wider society. In fact, many of the local organisations that BirdLife Partners work with do endeavour to be representative—as shown by the Bolivian example above. In Fiji, the BirdLife International Fiji Programme supported the establishment of five LCGs at IBAs that are community-managed protected areas. LCG members were democratically elected by communities, and include landowning clans, village chiefs, village headmen, government officers (from the department of fisheries and district council members) and men and women from the grassroots community. This creates an institution that is representative of the stakeholders and rights holders engaged in IBA conservation and offers an effective forum for participation from all sectors of the community, providing them better access to district and provincial levels of decision making.

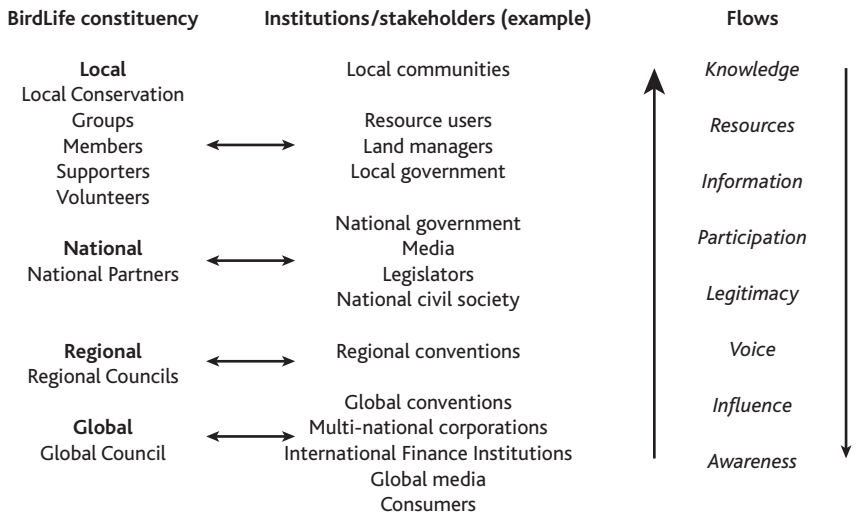
In Paraguay the Paraguayan Pantanal Eco Club LCG at the Rio Negro IBA, Bahia Negra district, reaches out to the wider community through radio broadcasts. It was created in 2003 with the support of Guyra Paraguay (BirdLife in Paraguay). Composed mainly of young people, it promotes the conservation of the Pantanal (one of the largest complexes of wetlands in the world) through education and public awareness. It also promotes support for the indigenous Bahía Negra or Chamacoco Ishir people (also members of the LCG), who depend entirely on the Rio Negro IBA for their livelihood (fisheries and other products). In 2005, the LCG won an award to establish a community radio station. This includes broadcasts by the Ishir in their native language, generates income for all its young

members and provides a mechanism for widespread participation in discussions on the region's management and future (BirdLife International, 2010c).

Scale

Many root causes and drivers of environmental degradation and poverty are often found in national and international processes and policies—legislation, subsidies, trade agreements, rights frameworks and strategies. Local organisations can not easily address national or global problems, but they are more likely to have a voice if backed up by appropriate enabling frameworks (Roe and Bond, 2007). Networks and links from local organisations to institutions at higher scales are important in this respect. This is a major objective of BirdLife's Local Conservation Group approach, and the structure of BirdLife, from local (LCGs, members, volunteers) to national (BirdLife Partner organisations), regional (Regional Committees) and global (an elected Global Council and decentralised Secretariat), provides an effective mechanism through which local messages and experiences can be communicated to decision makers at larger scales, and *vice versa* (Figure 1). As the number of LCGs in a country grows, BirdLife International also supports them to come together to form national networks of local organisations, thereby facilitating greater access to and influence over national policy. The national BirdLife Partner may also act as a mediator between LCGs and national institutions, thus carrying local concerns and solutions to influence national policies.

FIGURE 1: HOW BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL CONNECTS ACROSS DIFFERENT SCALES



For example, the Kijabe Environment Volunteers (KENVO) is a Local Conservation Group working with NatureKenya (BirdLife in Kenya) to conserve the Kikuyu Escarpment Forest Important Bird Area. At a local level KENVO provide local communities with the information, education and resources they need to advance environmentally-friendly businesses, by connecting local entrepreneurs with low-interest loans. They also provide practical training in bee-keeping and eco-tourism guiding, and work with clubs and local

schools to promote conservation education and manage a tree-planting initiative focused on indigenous species. This experience and capacity also works at national level. KENVO currently represents community-based organisations in the Kenya Forest Working Group and has played a key role in influencing the adoption of a more inclusive forest act.

Another example comes from Mexico, where in 2004 the BirdLife Partner, *Pronatura Sur*, helped to form a state-wide organisation of Local Conservation Groups, forest users (*ejidos*) and private landowners. This was in response to a proposal by the state of Chiapas, and in particular of an environmental group in the Congress, to impose a ban on forestry in the state. The ban would have negatively affected local livelihoods and the environment by taking away an incentive for sustainable forest management. By proving that the *ejidos'* forest management was sustainable and technically well managed, the combined groups managed to ensure that the ban was not made effective, thus providing opportunities for continued sustainable use by local communities.

However, despite these positive examples, more needs to be done to strengthen mechanisms for enabling community participation in decision making—both internationally (e.g. within the CBD and other conventions) and nationally; and also to mainstream community approaches into sector-wide initiatives rather than leaving them as marginal. Connecting dialogues at local and global scales has potential to improve decision making and behaviours at all levels, as global decisions are informed by an awareness of local realities, and local attitudes respond to increased consciousness of the global value of local biodiversity and local responsibility for and impact on it.

Targeting the poor

The missions of most official agencies, and NGOs, emphasise either biodiversity conservation *or* poverty reduction. There are few organisations which give these two objectives equal weight, and which truly merge them within their vision, priority setting and practice. BirdLife aims to *"help, through birds, to conserve biodiversity and to improve the quality of people's lives"* (Vision) and *"integrate bird conservation into sustaining people's livelihoods"* (Strategic Objective 4.4), but its priorities are set according to values of and threats to biodiversity, and the differentiated membership of the local organisations with which it works does not necessarily target the most poor. Whilst the poor are often those that are most dependent on natural resources, the membership of LCGs would almost certainly be different if poverty reduction was the explicit, *principal* objective. It is important therefore to be honest and realistic about one's primary purpose. This can be illustrated by BirdLife's work in the Palas Valley, Pakistan. Surveys showed very clearly that a landless ethnic group, the Surkhalees, were also those most heavily dependent on the non-timber forest products, such as morel mushrooms, honey and medicinal herbs, gathered from the forests. It was found that 67% of those with over 2.5 acres of land did not obtain any income from NTFPs, whereas the landless obtained 66% of their income in this way. However, the long-term future of the forests lies largely in the hands of the relatively less-poor landholding *khels* or tribes. In its strategy to ensure the sustainable management of the forests and their biodiversity, BirdLife's attention became focused mainly on supporting organisation and capacity-building of these forest landowners, although it also engaged with broader and more

inclusive community-based organisations. Arguably this will have benefited the poorest in the long term, as their livelihoods are very heavily dependent on sustainable forest management. However, the example demonstrates that working for conservation, or poverty reduction, as the primary objective may entail working with *different* organisations at the local level.

Capacity and expectations

Faced with urgent conservation issues to be addressed, and donors' demands, timescales and requirements for reporting and delivering outputs, it can be all to easy when working with local organisations to put unreasonably high expectations on the overall scale, speed and sustainability of what can be achieved. Without support and genuine partnership, this may lead to their collapse and the distrust and disillusionment of members. Local organisations often need new skills in order to be truly empowered, and to be effective and able to engage nationally or even internationally. For example many local organisations may lack capacity for financial management, may not understand the importance and value of keeping records of meetings and decisions, and may lack the confidence to engage with decision makers. Working with local organisations requires making a commitment to stick with them from slower beginnings and over the long term, gradually handing over responsibilities as these skills are built. This long-term commitment is integral to BirdLife's LCG approach. In Africa, the Africa Partnership is using a common framework for institutional self-assessment by local organisations to identify areas where support is needed, and for monitoring institutional development (BirdLife International, 2007). However, inadequate resources for systematic and sustained support to local organisations often limit the amount of direct support that can be provided.

Political conditions

It has already been suggested that drivers at national and international scale may require local organisations to be vertically linked-in if they are to be effective. However, with a focus on conservation and/or poverty reduction outcomes there may be situations where local organisations are not the most effective entry point – perhaps because of the nature of the conservation issues and social structures. One place where BirdLife has faced such challenges is in Indochina, where limited opportunities for civil society to engage in decision-making mean that the need to promote bottom-up participatory processes is stronger than ever. In addition, economic situations at the conservation site, and hierarchical political structures, may require diverse membership of LCGs to include not only village-level organisations but also local officials and authorities (Pilgrim *et al*, in press). Even where conservation *with* people (participation) is becoming accepted, conservation *by* people (real handing over of responsibilities and empowerment of local organisations) is often far harder for many institutions (both government and many NGOs) to accept.

Conclusion

BirdLife has found that working with local organisations provides an important entry point for conservation and poverty reduction as part of a multi-pronged approach. Working in partnership with local organisations ensures that environment and poverty are addressed in a more holistic way, as experienced and understood by local people. It also has benefits in terms of sustainability, efficiency, legitimacy and respect for rights. However, it needs to be part of a broader strategy, particularly one which addresses drivers and root causes of poverty and biodiversity loss at larger scales. Linking local organisations to national and international networks can help to ensure that local voices are heard in such forums.

In BirdLife's experience of working with local organisations, empowerment—which is recognised as an essential dimension to poverty reduction—has been a significant outcome. When I visited communities at La Ceiba, a remote forest in the Tumbesian region on the Peru-Ecuador border, I asked: "*What has been your greatest project achievement?*". They responded without hesitation: "*Becoming organised.*" Through project support to formation of local organisations, households at this site came together to regulate resource use, and now also lobby government for improvements to local infrastructure, organise co-operatives for better marketing of local produce, and access state services like child nutrition programmes. It has been a common feature of BirdLife's work with LCGs that institutions formed around resource management objectives spin off to address other community development issues, as local communities gain the confidence, experience, contacts and networks which allow them to represent their constituencies on a range of related matters.

Issues on the horizon will provide new opportunities and challenges for local organisations to link biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction, and to redistribute the costs and benefits of conservation across scales. Examples include Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) initiatives, and Reduced Emissions for Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) and other carbon trading mechanisms. Local organisations in the BirdLife Partnership could offer many useful lessons and may provide a starting point for structures to receive and absorb such funds. However, as this paper has shown, local organisations are hugely diverse, and it is likely that many would need to improve accountability and representation, their capacity to manage funds and projects, and the skills needed to be able to monitor and report on outcomes in the way most donors demand. Nevertheless, they provide an important nucleus from which such capacity and governance can be built, and their commitment to finding locally-relevant solutions, which conserve biodiversity and improve local livelihoods, provides an essential foundation of purpose and vision. Local organisations therefore deserve far more attention and backing from development agencies, with funding and support mechanisms suited to their scale and capacities, than has hitherto been the case.

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Fax: (+44 020) 7388 2826
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