

Understanding and facilitating a biocultural community protocol process

16

by **HOLLY SHRUMM** and **HARRY JONAS**

The Regional Initiatives on Biocultural Community Protocols have led to the development of a dedicated toolkit and website on biocultural community protocols.^{1,2} The toolkit is comprised of the following four parts:

- Understanding and using the toolkit
- Documenting and developing a biocultural community protocol
- Using a biocultural community protocol
- Reflecting, reporting and revising

The website contains further background information on key methods and tools, examples of protocols from around the world, and supplementary resources such as publications, films, and e-learning modules on legal frameworks. This article highlights a number of considerations from the toolkit about facilitating a protocol process.³

Key considerations before facilitating a biocultural community protocol

Before beginning the process of documenting, developing and using a biocultural community protocol, facilitators should have a solid understanding of how the community defines itself, cultural and internal dynamics, local institutions, and participation and representation. Considerations about how to facilitate a protocol process include understanding the role of the facilitator, managing expectations, timeframes and information, supporting community catalysts, and seeking agreement about roles and responsibilities in the protocol process.

These are not hard rules or step-by-step requirements, but could be considered good practice guidelines to adapt to the local context and the skills of the facilitator. They can be explored in a

¹ For more information on the Regional Initiatives on Biocultural Community Protocols, see: <http://naturaljustice.org/our-work/regional-initiatives/biocultural-community-protocol>

² See: www.community-protocols.org

³ Download the full toolkit at: www.community-protocols.org/toolkit

Box 1: Documenting, developing and using a community protocol

Overall, the process of documenting, developing and using a community protocol should:

- Be defined and controlled by the community
- Be empowering and rooted within the community's values and procedures
- Create a space for trust, respect, sharing, reflection and learning-by-doing
- Include the full and effective participation of as many community members as possible
- Encourage dialogue and learning between generations, between different groups in the community, and with other communities with shared heritage, resources or knowledge
- Value and build on the diversity of knowledge, skills and capacities in the community
- Emphasise the inter-linkages between social-cultural, material and spiritual well-being
- Increase awareness of relevant legal frameworks and clarity on how the community would like to engage with them
- Inspire community mobilisation around key issues
- Lead to tangible change in accordance with community plans and priorities

number of different ways, including through workshops, open-ended discussions with certain groups and focused meetings with community leaders (Box 1).

Contextualising 'community'

Ensuring clarity about who and what comprise the community is integral to the protocol process. Outsiders commonly use the term 'community' to refer to people living in a geographically defined space without much consideration of what joins them together or what may separate them. People generally know the boundaries of their own community and where another one begins. This understanding of boundaries is governed by relations between groups that are often historically determined. It is fluid and can change over time, particularly in the context of new threats or opportunities. Individuals can also have multiple roles, identities and alliances. Above all, the community must define itself and determine how to address external issues.

Cultural and internal dynamics

Culture plays a critical role in the protocol process and should help define the approach and tools that you use as a facilitator. Much like identity, it can only be fully understood and meaningfully conveyed by the community itself. If you are from an outside organisation, establish a working knowledge of the culture and internal dynamics, for example, by informally exploring key topics of importance to the community such as natural resource management practices, customary laws and values, perceptions of ownership and stewardship, traditional authorities and governance systems, gender and family structure, dance, music, folklore and spiritual beliefs. The aim is not to document them for the sake of it, but to eventually focus on the most foundational and pressing issues that the community would like to address in the protocol.

Every community has unique internal dynamics that are determined by relations between individuals and groups. Pretending that there are no politics or tensions may seem easier at the beginning, but is a short-sighted approach which is likely to backfire. Some degree of conflict is inevitable, especially when livelihood security and well-being are at stake. The protocol process should not be used as a tool to create divisions or to advance the political power of certain groups within the community. Above all, it should instill a sense of unity and common vision.

Local institutions and governance

Another fundamental aspect of a community protocol is who decides and how decisions are made about the community and surrounding environment. Also known as governance, this is a matter of power, responsibility, human relations, participation, legitimacy, transparency and equity. A comprehensive discussion about governance structures should feature strongly in the protocol process itself. Focus on exploring stories and

Box 2: Guiding questions about community institutions and governance

- How are important decisions made in your community?
- What are the core values that guide decisions?
- Who is involved in making decisions? Who is considered to be the community authorities?
- How can or do you participate in the process?
- Do you feel you have sufficient opportunities to voice your concerns and opinions?
- Would you like to change anything about the existing system or structure?
- How do community institutions relate to local government officials?
- Could you share an example of a good decision? What were the main factors that led to it?

personal experiences rather than allegations of the validity of decisions. In some situations, community institutions may not seem equipped to deal with new challenges. In other situations, long-standing community practices may be highly effective at dealing with new threats or opportunities. Assumptions either way should be withheld (Box 2).

Participation and representation

Participation and representation are essential to biocultural community protocols. As much as possible within the local culture and situation, the protocol should strive to include the full spectrum of perspectives, especially those of women, youth, the elderly and others who are often excluded from decision-making processes (Boxes 3 and 4). Although it is not possible to include every single person, a participatory approach contributes to building greater consensus and collective learning. It also helps people feel personally invested in the process, which increases potential for effective social mobilisation and tangible change. Conversely, a community protocol that has been developed with little consultation and without using any participatory methods would raise significant concerns about representation and legitimacy. It could also lead to feelings of exclusion, internal conflict and divisions, and ‘elite capture’.

Box 3: Guiding questions to enhance participation and representation

- Who should be involved in the different stages of developing a biocultural community protocol? What roles and responsibilities could they undertake?
- What social, cultural or political barriers affect different members of the community? How might they affect people’s capacity or willingness to participate in activities related to the protocol? How can these be accommodated in an attempt to facilitate broad participation and representation in locally appropriate ways?
- Are there certain times of the year, month and/or day that would be more appropriate for different people to be involved? Discussions and activities around the protocol should aim to work around the community’s schedules and routines, rather than vice versa.
- People respond differently to certain learning, documentation and communication styles. For example, some learn better through watching others, looking at text or listening, and others learn better through physical movement. How can discussions and activities around the protocol be facilitated in culturally appropriate, diverse and engaging ways?

Box 4: Accommodating different groups within the community

Guidance on accommodating different groups within the community such as women, youth, the elderly, and people with disabilities or behavioural challenges:

- Remain sensitive and patient
- Avoid appearing to be condescending or patronising
- Understand that each wants to contribute to community processes
- Have confidence in their abilities and unique contributions
- Ask in advance when they might be able to participate in activities such as workshops or data collection
- Hold separate meetings or workshops for specific people or groups
- Pay close attention to behaviour and levels of participation during community activities

Understanding your role as a facilitator

Facilitation can be challenging yet highly rewarding. It requires skill, sensitivity, flexibility, and willingness to learn and adapt to changing conditions (Box 5). The role of the facilitator in workshops, community meetings, group discussions and other forms of gathering includes, for example:

- drafting an agenda and list of participants to be invited;

Box 5: Qualities and actions of a good facilitator

- Be an active listener
- Play a supporting role
- Respect the local culture and traditions
- Maintain an atmosphere of respect and openness
- Foster trust and confidence
- Be consistent and clear
- Remain neutral and level-headed
- Keep up positive momentum
- Take notice of subtle changes in energy and tone
- Develop positive rapport with a range of community members
- Keep the broader objectives in mind and help focus discussions on key issues

- identifying key discussion points;
 - securing logistics and materials;
 - arranging for translation;
 - setting the ground rules;
 - following the agenda and time constraints;
- and
- keeping a record of discussions.

Seeking the support of community catalysts

In addition to your own role as the primary facilitator, you will require the support of other community members who demonstrate certain qualities such as:

- Leadership
- Sense of commitment to the greater good;
- Reliability
- Initiative
- Ability to work well independently and in teams
- Open-mindedness
- Flexibility
- Willingness to learn

These individuals could be considered 'community catalysts' or people who have the potential to inspire and create significant change. Although they may not necessarily serve as official representatives of the community, there are countless different roles that they could play, including facilitating workshops, presenting at local schools, contacting the media, or organising a delegation to visit a local government official. They should be comfortable with taking responsibility for

Box 6: Key questions for discussion with those involved in the protocol process

- What is the purpose of the protocol?
- What is our role? What does the process involve?
- What are the costs and risks?
- What are the benefits?
- How would it be useful to our community or group?
- How can we plan for and respond appropriately to unexpected opportunities or consequences?

a certain part of the process and reporting back to others involved, including yourself and the community leaders.

Managing expectations

One of the most important parts of facilitating a protocol process is to manage the expectations of those involved (Boxes 6 and 7). This includes individuals and groups both within the community and amongst external actors. Establishing a sense of realistic expectations at the beginning and throughout the process can help prevent disappointment and cynicism. It can also provide a mechanism for reflection and evaluation at different stages of the process.

Managing timeframes

There is no set rule or formula for how long it takes to 'do' a biocultural community protocol. The timeframe for the whole process of documenting, developing, using and reflecting upon a protocol will vary widely depending on the local context. Each part of the process could be affected by a range of factors and unavoidable circumstances, both positive and negative (Box 8). For many communities, a protocol is seen as an ongoing and evolving process that is part of their long-term plans and strategies. The protocol may thus have no clear 'beginning' or 'ending'.

As far as possible, the timeframe should be determined by the local situation and by the community's priorities and capacities. Although practical considerations such as available funds and human resources must be taken into account, timeframes should not be determined primarily by external interests or donor requirements.

Box 7: Key considerations and caveats to help manage expectations

- A protocol is not a panacea. There is no guarantee that all of the issues contained in a protocol will be sufficiently addressed or resolved.
- The likelihood of realising a community protocol is influenced by a wide range of factors. However, it is often most significantly affected by internal factors such as community cohesion, strong leadership and governance structures, and agency and initiative.
- Unexpected opportunities or consequences may arise that are directly, indirectly, or not at all caused by the protocol process.

Box 8: Factors that may affect the timeframe of a protocol process

- Reasons for undertaking a protocol in the first place
- Agency, motivation and capacity for mobilisation
- Internal cohesion and clarity of leadership and decision-making systems
- Available resources (financial, human, time, material)
- Existing experience with key methods and tools
- Existing research or documentation of key issues that will be included in the protocol
- New development project, law or other external pressure that will significantly affect the community
- Natural disasters
- Illness or family losses
- Elections or changes in political administrations

Managing information

Facilitating a protocol process comes with the responsibility of managing a lot of information collected through workshops, meetings, interviews, desktop research and so on. As it will form the basis of the protocol itself, it should be documented and organised in a way that makes sense and is appropriate in the local context. Some information such as locations of sacred sites or potentially lucrative resources may be sensitive or confidential and require extra precautions. Being aware of how you would handle this responsibility from the outset may improve the overall process. Documenting the protocol process itself is also useful to help verify certain information to ensure accuracy, provide evidence of a particular outcome or agreement, and facilitate community validation of the consolidated protocol.

Seeking community agreement for the protocol process

Drawing on the guidance above, ensure that the community is clear from the outset about the protocol process and about the role of the facilitator. First, the process should be driven by and for the community, with support from the facilitator. Even if there is a considerable amount of organisation and resources being invested, it is still the community's protocol and it is essential that they have ownership over the process. Second, ensure clarity on roles and responsibilities for various tasks, including documenting and consolidating the protocol. If certain community members or catalysts commit to key roles, it will become an initiative of the broader community, distinct from and larger than your role as facilitator.

CONTACT DETAILS



Holly Shrumm and Harry Jonas
 Natural Justice: Lawyers for Communities and the Environment
 479 Jalan Sang Kancil
 Kota Kinabalu 88000
 Sabah



Malaysia
 Emails: holly@naturaljustice.org
harry@naturaljustice.org
 Websites: www.naturaljustice.org
www.facebook.com/naturaljustice
www.community-protocols.org