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LOCAL ACTION – GLOBAL ASPIRATIONS: COULD COMMUNITY CONSERVATION CONTRIBUTE MORE TO INTERNATIONAL BIODIVERSITY AND POVERTY REDUCTION GOALS?

International targets have been set for both biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction, and the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) emphasises the positive links between these two goals. But there is also a dilemma: while biodiversity conservation is essential for maintaining the ecosystem services on which human well-being depends over the long term, in the short term the costs of conservation can clash with the day-to-day livelihood needs of poor people in developing countries. Nordic countries have made significant investment in community-based natural resource management over the last 20 years. Given this the Norwegian Ministry of Environment recently commissioned a review to examine the extent to which this approach might resolve the trade off between biodiversity conservation and livelihood needs and also contribute to both sets of international targets by generating benefits for poor people *and* for biodiversity.

Community-based conservation has tended to be judged in terms of biodiversity benefits with the broader livelihood and local sustainable development benefits overlooked. The review, which focuses mainly on Southern Africa but also draws on relevant experience from India and elsewhere, shows that community-led conservation can benefit poor people. This can happen directly – for example, through income earning opportunities, local empowerment and increased security of resource access – and indirectly, through the impact that biodiversity conservation has on ecosystem services. But it also brings costs – not least the opportunity cost of land set aside if conservation is pursued separately from production, and the conflict that can arise when benefits from conservation are not distributed equitably within a community.

To date, community conservation initiatives have tended to remain small-scale and isolated. They are generally not mainstreamed – either within the 'formal' conservation sector or within other productive sectors such as fisheries, forestry and agriculture (although there are promising examples). As a result, their impact has been limited. Given appropriate support, community conservation could undoubtedly achieve more than it currently does. Indeed, without local involvement, the international targets set within the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are likely to be at best irrelevant and most likely, unattainable. Unleashing this potential, moving beyond the small, isolated and the site-specific will require considerable reorientation of both donor and government policy including:

1. Better recognition of the role of biodiversity in the achievement of the MDGs and of the potential of community-based efforts to maximise this role.
2. Better integration of community efforts within the formal conservation sector and other natural resource sectors – building on successful co-management experience.
3. National mechanisms for enabling better community participation in policy and decision-making processes at national and international level.
4. Clearer donor roles in community conservation that take into account changes in aid modalities away from projects and towards direct budget support.
5. Sectoral coordination so that conservation policy is not undermined by other national policies.
6. Mainstreaming community conservation into conservation education so that tomorrow's conservation professionals are better equipped to maximise its potential.
7. Fair returns on investment in community conservation including payments for ecosystem services.

There is no blueprint for success. Community conservation, by its very nature, is a local response to local circumstances and thus requires local rules, regulations and institutions. Getting this governance framework right will be essential to ensuring that investments in conservation really do benefit poor people.

SOURCE

Roe, D; Jones, B.T.B; Bond, I. and Bhatt, S. (2006) Local action, global aspirations: The role of community conservation in achieving international goals for environment and development. IIED, London

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