

BioSoc: the Biodiversity and Society Bulletin

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PARTICIPATION, PLANNING, POLITICS AND POWER: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN FOR INDIA

All signatories to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) are required to produce a National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) setting out the country's approach to implementing the Convention's provisions. It was quite a surprise that, in 2000, the Indian government – which usually favours a centralised approach to planning – accepted a proposal from an Indian NGO, Kalpavriksh, to coordinate the design and development of the plan and to do so in a participatory manner.

A recent report on the process by *Tejaswini Apte* notes: "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."

A number of participatory planning tools were used to gain inputs from different sectors of society ranging from the well-known – questionnaires, workshops, village meetings – to the more unusual – biodiversity festivals, biodiversity registers and radio dramas. In all, tens of thousands of people were involved in the three year process. The outcome? The NBSAP was developed to schedule and budget (the same budget of just under US\$1 million that had been drawn up for a more conventional, consultant-driven process). More than 70 state, sub-state, eco-regional and thematic plans were prepared, in addition to one national plan. At the end of the process, however, the Ministry of Environment and Forests declined to approve and release the national plan.

What went wrong? The Indian NBSAP process demonstrates that it is possible to transform the way traditional planning is carried out without recourse to huge budgets and vast teams of consultants. It was hugely successful in terms of capacity building, awareness raising, encouraging local action and providing a voice for some of the most marginalised sectors of society. But its emphasis on the marginalised was perhaps its undoing. As Apte points out "The ministry could afford to suppress the plan because it was predominantly supported by 'marginalised' groups". The more powerful groups including the industry, landowners, politicians and trade unions were largely left out of the process.

There is little to be gained in providing a voice for the marginalised if that voice is still not heard. Relationships also need to be built with those whom we want to listen. While, to some, it may be ideologically unpalatable to divert time and resources from providing a voice for the powerless to listening to the powerful, the Indian NBSAP experience demonstrates the importance of striking a balance between ideology and political reality. Without politically astute positioning and lobbying, efforts such as the Indian NBSAP, from which there is so much that others could learn, risk themselves being marginalised and left on the shelf.

SOURCE

Apte, T (2006) *A People's Plan for Biodiversity Conservation: Creative Strategies That Work (and Some That Don't)*. Gatekeeper Series No 130, IIED, London

The report is available to download from <http://www.iied.org/pubs/display.php?o=/14538IIED>

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