

People's Biodiversity Register

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The People's Biodiversity Register is a programme set up to document people's knowledge of biodiversity, intended to protect people's rights to their intellectual property and natural resources. The programme was started in a few Indian villages in 1995 by the Foundation for the Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT). The initiative has now spread to villages all over India. Other countries are also interested in the Biodiversity Register idea.

Biodiversity has emerged as a major global resource for supplying the raw material for biotechnological inventions. Biotechnology is expected to contribute 30 to 40% to the global economy in the twenty-first century. Conservation of biodiversity has therefore been identified as a major issue on both global and national agendas, in sustaining the growth of the biotechnology industry as well as developing new drugs and crop varieties.

The initiatives of indigenous peoples to assert their traditional property rights to land, water, and forests were supported by the International Convention of Biological Diversity in 1993. Some 171 countries signed the treaty. Article 8j and 10c indicate that member states have to ensure that local knowledge and practices are respected and applied commercially only with the consent of the local communities, with equitably shared benefits.

The People's Biodiversity Registers programme includes two major activities: a participatory documentation process in the local language and the recording of people's traditional resource rights, including their options for sustainable use.

Intellectual Property Rights

Rich in biodiversity, folk knowledge and practices, the developing countries had barely thought of capitalising on them, before they succumbed to the inequities being promoted by another international treaty, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariff (GATT). This treaty was enforced in 1995 and has been signed by 130 countries. The economic liberalisation and globalisation perspective of this treaty poses serious threats to biodiversity. Moreover it stimulates the monopolisation of inventions based on biodiversity by industrial nations by means of the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS).

TRIPS compels all member countries to accept strong intellectual property rights on processes as well as products based on biological resources. This implies that the price of drugs, new crop varieties and other biodiversity-based products will be in the hands of intellectual property right holders, most likely foreign, northern corporations. The developed countries are far ahead in their biotechnology innovations and in the process of protecting them through patents.

Developing countries, forced into globalisation and constantly seeking greater market access, cannot but accept the GATT obligations. Much hope has been invested, however, in the earlier Convention of Biological Diversity treaty that includes equitable benefit sharing and technology transfer. This treaty is extremely important and can be used to diminish the negative effects of TRIPS.

Control over information

Weak information systems are the greatest challenge the developing countries are facing in managing their biological resources. In addition, developing countries are making little headway in putting their wealth of living resources and knowledge to modern commercial use.

Most information is highly fragmented and disorganised. Often it relates to the identity of a species and resides with local people who supply knowledge and specimens to the agents of pharmaceutical companies. Meanwhile multinational corporations are forging ahead in developing applications and patenting them. As a result nearly two-thirds of the biochemical patent applications filed in India belong to foreign agencies. The corporations are at an advantage because they have money, technology and better access to information. As a result the best collections on Indian ethnobotany are located in London and Chicago.

People's Biodiversity Register

The objective of the People's Biodiversity Register is to build an open and transparent information system on biodiversity resources from village level upwards. The register can be used to promote the sustainable management of biodiversity resources. Moreover, claims of communities and individuals to knowledge about biodiversity resources and their uses can be supported.

The People's Biodiversity register was initiated in 1995 by a non-governmental organisation FRLHT in Bangalore, South India. It was financed by a long-term grant from the Ministry of Environment and Forests. to the Centre for Ecological Sci-



Photo: G. Utkarsh

Public function to release the People's Biodiversity Register, in presence of the minister

ences, a department of the Indian Institute of Science. Between 1996 and 1998 the Indian Institute of Sciences coordinated the activities of the People's Biodiversity Register at 52 sites in eight states. This was part of a national initiative, the Biodiversity Conservation Prioritisation Programme (Gadgil et al, 1998). The focus was to determine local resources and the conservation priorities of the local people.

Teachers from colleges, schools and universities as well as government officials and NGO workers were among the interviewers. The entire programme involved 350 researchers as well as 200 assistants from village communities. As many as 1000 villagers were deeply involved in the programme as individuals with extensive local knowledge.

The interviews included the identification of biodiversity user groups and knowledgeable individuals. Individual and group interviews were carried out as well as discussions with village assemblies. During these discussions not only biodiversity resources were identified. They also included aspects like practices for the sustainable use of local resources, perceptions and options for development and people's choices in their personal and social life.

Over-harvests and bio-piracy

In general this work carries two important risks. On the one hand the availability of easily accessible databases may promote over-harvesting of certain biodiversity resources by the communities. On the other hand information about biodiversity resources may be used by others without equitable sharing of benefits.

The stock of information on biodiversity resources in the People's Biodiversity Registers has facilitated monitoring and provided measures to check on the use of this knowledge. Establishing rewards for natural resources initiatives has also created opportunities for local communities to participate in conservation programmes.

The information from local registers was computerised at district level and made available to villagers throughout the countryside. The medicinal and seed industries were allowed access to this information for a reasonable fee. Some of the royalties accumulated in this way have been deposited in the biodiversity funds and are intended for the support of local initiatives. It was also intended to enrich these funds by taxing all biodiversity-based products. Of course, these efforts will not be successful without publicity, training and education at the grassroots level through a local self-governance system.

Experiences gained

The registers were accepted by the local

councils as official documents and distributed publicly. This process received considerable attention in the local media and helped raise awareness about these issues in neighbouring areas. It also worked as a signal to local politicians about the importance of local resource management and their responsibilities in this respect.

People in certain villages became aware of the problems related to local natural resources and started to search for solutions. For instance in Kigga village near Sringeri, one trader used to collect moss in large quantities from nearby forests. Aware of the global value of local resources, the people inquired about the price this trader earned for the moss in urban markets. Because he did not give a satisfactory reply, the people refused to give him permission to go on collecting moss. Similarly, people from Mala village decided to ask the government to authorise the local council to charge fees to outsiders for the collection of forest products.

In some areas Village Forest Committees were established as part of the Joint Forest Management programme launched by the government. Some of the funds for this Committee were provided by the researchers involved with the Register. People also looked for ways to reduce the pressure put on the forests by the continued search for firewood. Examples are the search for alternative fuel resources for brick making and the protection of sacred groves and related traditions.

Government and NGO response

The government of India has prepared a draft Biodiversity Act with many noteworthy provisions for discussion in the next parliamentary session. The draft act includes such aspects as local authorities, documentation of local knowledge and resources, and the funds for the conservation of these resources. Under the auspices of a local member of parliament, some NGO's organised the first, and perhaps the only, voluntary public hearing on the contents of the draft.

As the government takes its time to decide on the People's Biodiversity Registers, local NGO's are vigorously spearheading the exercise. These experiences have been widely published in English and the local language. After learning about these activities, many people from all



A knowledgeable folk medicine practitioner, Mr Kunjeera Moolya, being honoured by a local politician

Photo: K.P. Achar

over India have expressed an interest in undertaking similar exercises in their own areas. This has led to the establishment of an informal network called *Srishti-jigyasa Pariwar*, the 'Family of People Desirous to Learning about Nature'. To facilitate this process, the methodology manual and resource materials such as the treaty of the Convention on Biological Diversity have been translated into several local languages.

Some NGO's have also initiated 'Festivals of Biodiversity' to display local cultivars, on-farm gene banks and innovative schemes for traditional crop varieties. Meanwhile other NGOs, including the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, have expressed interest in initiating this movement in countries like Nepal, Brazil and South Africa. People's Biodiversity Registers may become a global movement in the near future.

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