

Participation: Stakeholders and the information they need.
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Introduction

The generation of information on biodiversity has been ample during the last decade, there are numerous publications on the subject and therefore the lack of knowledge is no longer a frequent complaint. Instead the debate is now more oriented towards the pertinence of the information and its use. In this sense, the call to establish participatory mechanisms for the assessment of biodiversity illustrates the limitations of the generation of information for the sake of information itself. This has provided space for the possibilities of generating information based on the information needs of the different stakeholders: the local population, universities, NGO's and governmental institutions. With the recognition of spiritual, cultural, social and economic dimensions of biodiversity, opportunities have emerged for the development of participatory methodologies, and the application of results has become relevant.

Many of these experiences in participatory assessment show progress in the methodologies of information gathering, especially in mapping and censuses, and in some cases monitoring. But it is evident that there are still some gaps in the methods for discussion, analysis and dissemination of information, which relate to the real information needs of the different stakeholders.

The information on biodiversity has a variety of users, ranging from the needs of governmental institutions in the frame of the CBD, to scientific questions and the information required by the local populations.

Experience has taught that the major obstacles for the development of interdisciplinary and participatory work are the problems of communication between natural scientists and social scientists, between scientists and the local communities, and between them and governmental institutions. An interdisciplinary and participatory approach therefore requires training in participatory methodologies and the creation of mechanisms for the integrated discussion of the results through interdisciplinary working groups. It is also important to take into account that working with local communities takes time and methodologies have to be adapted. Time concepts and perceptions of local people have to be taken into account. Many methodologies, such as rapid appraisals show a potential to generate partial information but they are not adequate for involving local inhabitants. Long-term compromises are required and therefore institutions that can offer continuity and permanence are needed.

The biodiversity information needs of the different stakeholders become evident through participatory processes. The 14-year experience of Tropenbos Colombia, a programme supporting research for conservation and wise use of the tropical forest, shows a clear development of strategies and actions towards generating relevant information for each stakeholder, especially the local communities. It has developed a participatory approach that may offer some useful experiences for the discussion.

The case of the Tropenbos – Colombia programme

At the beginning of the programme important information on biodiversity, structure, composition and dynamics of the Amazonian ecosystems was generated through M.Sc. and PhD biological research. In this process local indigenous people participated in a limited manner, mainly as guides. Later on, some ten years ago, a project on indigenous forest management was initiated. The project applied participatory methodologies, including 'own research', which is research carried out by indigenous people themselves on biodiversity, knowledge and use of the resources in their territories. The subjects were chosen by the people themselves according to their interests and information needs. In this way, not only knowledge from a scientific perspective was generated, but also from a traditional local perspective thus creating an opportunity for dialogue between these systems. At present the local people have produced many detailed compilations of parts of their traditional knowledge related to

their territories, the fauna, the flora and its management, as well as ecological and ritual calendars. This information has been complemented by the permanent monitoring, by the people themselves, of the use of resources through consumption in each household. The data collected and the dynamics of discussing them has served as a basis for the formulation of their own natural resource management plans for their territories. The information is compiled into a data base and has also been analysed from the perspective of natural sciences, especially of population ecology, through academic research projects.

The need to generate information on biodiversity, as well as the type of information required, is situation-specific. In the case of Colombia, land tenure and reclamation of ancestral territories are important issues. There is a broad recognition of indigenous rights, and a certain degree of administrative autonomy based on the right of self-governance of the indigenous peoples. The indigenous communities of the Colombian Amazon region have gone a long way in this process of re-asserting ownership of their territories, and the formulation of natural resource management plans for their territories. For this process it has been necessary to show what they know of their territories and the biodiversity it contains, both from the perspective of traditional knowledge and from the scientific perspective. In this context censuses on biodiversity and monitoring of the use of resources have been important themes for co-operation between Tropenbos Colombia and the indigenous communities of the lower Caquetá River. A fundamental task has been the generation of maps on which areas of symbolic importance, such as sacred areas, are indicated, together with areas of origin for each ethnic group, histories of occupation and migration, and present day use areas for agriculture, hunting, fishing and the extraction of non-timber forest products. The maps are accompanied with data from the permanent monitoring of resource use. These quantitative data are important, as they are the basis for control of resource use and decision-making.

Some lesson learnt

This process, developed with the local communities, offers a series of lessons on the kinds of information needed by the different stakeholders and the mechanisms of translation in order to make information on biodiversity useful for decision-making. The following aspects can be mentioned:

- Discussions with local communities on the information generated through academic research show that it is not very useful for them, but the interaction and discussion itself between scientists and local inhabitants can be very fruitful for consolidating reflections within the communities with the input from a different perspective. It also illustrates the tremendous difficulties in communication between local inhabitants and scientists. These participatory dynamics are processes of collective construction subject to permanent adaptation as a result of mutual learning.
- When participation is included it is necessary to recognise the different views and interests of different actors. Generally, participation of local communities is proposed by governmental, non-governmental or academic institutions in order to facilitate data collecting to be used by one of the actors (in many cases academic). As they pay for this participatory research they impose their vision, and other needs and perspectives are not taken into account. Real participation means sharing and trying to understand the others' perspectives and needs. It is important to recognise that indigenous communities have relevant traditional detailed knowledge of biodiversity, among others on classification systems, habitat, ecology, animal behaviour, population dynamics, phenology and seasonal changes. In order to make this information available and to strengthen it, the allocation of grants for local indigenous researchers has shown to be an adequate and powerful mechanism.
- When a participatory process is going to be initiated it is important to consider that it will be a long-term process of permanent dialogue and it is important to clarify the way this process will be facilitated, and which mechanisms of dialogue and dissemination of information will be implemented.
- Although traditional mechanisms for monitoring resource use still exist, the quantitative daily monitoring (a methodological input from the academic actors) has shown to be a very useful

complementary activity for the local population as traditional mechanisms tend to disappear and people want more 'democratic' forms of decision-making.

- Monitoring can be very sophisticated. The experience shows that it is possible to generate useful information through the daily registration of resource use on biological, ecological, social and economic aspects. In other words, people are perfectly capable to fill in forms with 4 to 20 columns, depending on the information required by them. Furthermore, they assume long-term compromises with such procedures, which are considered meaningful for local decision making.
- Monitoring and daily registration of the use of resources constitute a solid basis for the analysis of population dynamics from the perspective of the natural sciences. The results can be used to define sustainability and to decide on control mechanisms by the relevant authorities, which may be at the level of the household, the local community and regional or national governmental institutions.
- The database of the permanent monitoring of resource use has generated useful information for the communities, but it is a time consuming process that requires careful facilitation in order to generate the information required by the communities.
- It is important to generate strategies of interdisciplinary and participatory collaboration and to bring together the decision-makers, policy makers and local population through permanent working groups. Occasional meetings and workshops are not enough.
- Mechanisms of horizontal interactions should be promoted. Local inhabitants share the same interests and language, and communication among them has proven to be very effective.