COMMUNITIES AND BIODIVERSITY: LESSONS FROM SOUTH ASIA

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In this paper the authors have profiled a number of community-led conservation initiatives underway in several South Asian countries. Faced with degraded landscapes and resulting impoverishment, the local people who are most affected by the loss or increase of biodiversity are taking action. Altogether, the initiatives show that decentralized and site-specific decision-making, which considers the livelihoods of people and provides impartial information to those affected, is fundamental to success. Neema Pathak is a member of Kalpavriksh, an environmental research and action group. She has coordinated a directory of protected areas in Maharashtra state in india, and jointly coordinated a project on community involvement in wildlife management in South Asia. She is currently putting together a detailed directory of community conservation biodiversity areas in India. Ashish Kothari is a founder-member of Kalpavriksh. Over the last two decades he has coordinated or worked on a number of processes relating to conservation, local communities, and development. He is the author or editor of over 10 books, and is on two expert commissions of The World Conservation Union (IUCN). He is currently coordinating the Technical and Policy Core Group of India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan process.

Revathi Devi is 75 years old and has a hectic job schedule. She has to be out any time of the day or night to make sure that no one is stealing what she so zealously guards. She is a forest guard appointed by the village **Thapalya-Mehra** in the Kumaon hills of Uttar Pradesh, northern India. Until about a decade ago the hills here, which form the catchment of various lakes and rivers, stood largely denuded.. Then several villages in this region with the help of NGOs decided to regenerate, afforest, and protect them, thus conserving their water resources as well? Around Thapalya-Mehra today, with land prices rocketing due to urban land developers promoting holiday resorts, there is a tremendous pressure on the farmers to sell their land. This village presents a very different picture to an onlooker. The villagers follow strict rules and regulations for the use of the forest, have enough resources to use, and have stood united and strong in the face of strong external pressures, such as the land development lobby.

Bhaonta-Kolyala are two small villages in Alwar district of Rajasthan, western India. Up until the late 1980s the entire region in which these villages exist was severely drought-prone. Forest resources, which were critically important for the majority of the pastoral community, were disappearing. Out-migration from the village in search of jobs was high. Then, with the help of an NGO, Tarun Bharat Sangh, the villages revived their traditional system of water storage called *johads* (a kind of checkdam), recreated their *gram sabha*

(village council), and started protecting a large patch of nearby catchment forest. That was a decade back. Today Bhaonta-Kolyala and several hundred villages in this region have turned this water-deficit area into a water-surplus one, and seasonal streams into perennial ones. With crop production shooting up, people have largely stopped emigrating for employment. In most of these villages, decisions about the management of natural resources are taken with little governmental input. In early 1999, villages of the Arvari river catchment have formed an Arvari Sansad (parliament), for discussing ways of managing the entire catchment area sustainably. This *sansad* has decided to declare the Arvari catchment as a people's protected area. It has banned hunting and live tree felling, restricted water-guzzling crops likesugarcane, prohibited the use of chemical fertilizers and synthetic pesticides, and so on.

In **Rekawa Lagoon** in southern Sri Lanka, fisher-folk once watched indifferently as their own members as well as outsiders overfished the waters, mined the corals for brick kilns, and poached turtles and turtle eggs. Intensive aquaculture was also tempting. However, villagers were aware that this had backfired in the northwestern part of the country, with the initial boom turning to disaster and despair as coastal ecosystems were destroyed and virus attacks were commonplace. With the help of NGOs and Colombo University researchers, the residents formed a fisherfolk association that laid out rules and regulations for fishing and banned coral mining. They then experimented with stock enhancement to increase the population of native prawns, which would fetch them higher economic returns while protecting the lagoon ecosystem. By empowering itself like this, the association now plays a significant role in the decision-making process for the region, including influencing developmental activities that could have an adverse impact on their livelihoods.

In **Jardhargaon,** a typical Himalayan foothills village in Uttar Pradesh, northern India, the story is even longer. About twenty years ago the villagers took charge of the heavily degraded slopes above their village. Appointing their own forest guard, paid by each family of the village, they ensured that no cutting and grazing took place. Today, the villagers are proud of the returning wild animals and the fact that their forests are among the most diverse in this region. But forest management is not the only transformation that is taking place here. Agriculture, too, is being revolutionized. Enchanted by the initial increased productivity from "modern" methods of farming, "'improved" seed varieties promoted by the government, and concomitant use of pesticides, fertilizers, and other external inputs, the villagers had largely lost their own traditional systems of sustainable agriculture. However, eventually some villagers realized that despite their hard toil, the productivity of the land was gradually decreasing while investment was increasing. Thus they started the *Beej Bachao Andolan* (Save the Seeds Movement), and through many journeys to the remoter villages, they have been able to collect many varieties lost elsewhere in the region (up to 250 of Rice, 170 of *rajma* beans, and others). Several farmers are now at various stages of switching over to biologically diverse, sustainable agricultural practices.

Hushey, one of three villages in Central Karakoram National Park (CKNP) in Northern Pakistan, is now one of the few homes for Asiatic Ibex. The pastoral communities here heavily depend on the surrounding ecosystem for survival. Habitat destruction was causing a serious decline in the population of the Ibex. In 1982 the Agha Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) entered the area with the objective of sustainable development and afforestation of the area. Based on the existing local traditional knowledge and practices, village organizations were formed. Savings schemes and development activities were started and villagers started reforestation and protecting the habitat around their villages. In the 1990s IUCN-Pakistan suggested after many discussions with the villagers that asustainable trophy hunting of the ibexshould be started in the area such that major benefits from such a programme go to the local villagers. Now 75% of the proceeds from such hunts come to the community and 25% goes to the government. The community share goes into a corpus fund that is being used for other village development activities. Control over grazing has reduced

habitat destruction, and the IUCN staff is helping the village organization to monitor the population of ibex.

Saigata is a multi-caste village in Maharashtra state, central India. About 20 years ago the villageRS realized that the forests in their vicinity had completely degraded. People were struggling with their daily fuelwood and fodder requirements, and increasingly, they were having to purchase them in the market. Under the leadership of a "lower caste" youth, Suryabhan Khobraghare, the entire village united to revive its forests. Considering the strong hierarchy of the Indian caste system his leadership was remarkable in itself, Twenty years later the village has a full-fledged forest and uses it in a manner that it thinks is sustainable. The village is also proud of the returning wild animals in the forests. Issues of alternative livelihoods are to be addressed.

In the lofty Himalayan mountains of Nepal lies the famous trekking route to Mt. Annapurna, one of the higher peaks in Nepal. For years the villages on this route were largely passive onlookers and occasional labourers for the trekkers. With increasing tourism and local population, this ecologically sensitive area was facing serious problems of littering, over-extraction of fuelwood, and over-grazing. In 1986, over 7000 sq. km. were declared the **Annapurna Conservation Area** (ACA), and an NGO, King Mahindra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC) was entrusted the task of managing it. KMTNC initiated the ACA Programme with the objective of regulating tourist activity and making it directly and economically beneficial for the local people. KMTNC also initiated community-based conservation. Over the last 15 plus years, villagers have formed various institutions for conservation, tourism management, village development, and so on. They have carried out plantations on community lands to meet fuelwood and fodder requirements. Hotels, run by villagers, only use solar and other alternative sources of energy. The economic status of the villagers has significantly improved, as has the status of forests and wildlife.

In the 1950s and 60s, **Mendha,** a small Gond tribal village in Maharashtra, central India, was being subjected to the same kind of exploitation and extortion by outsiders that many *adivasi* (tribal) villages in India have been. Slowly the forests belonging to the village were taken over and villagers' access to it restricted. At the same time, the government itself started extracting valuable timber, gave permission to the paper industry to extract bamboo, and allowed big contractors to extract non-wood forest produce. Sometime in the 1970s, the villagers became involved in a mass struggle against a proposed dam that would have submerged their forests and homes. Having won that victory, the tribals decided that they would like to do something to regain control over their lives. Under the guidance of a NGO, Vrikshamitra, the villagers formed a *gram sabha* (village council), and formed a Forest Protection Committee. They agitated to stop destructive commercial practices in the 1800 hectares of forests surrounding their village. They demanded that government officials reveal all development schemes and monetary allocations and sit with them to decide what should and should not happen in the village. Today the *gram sabha* is so strong that any program, government or non-government, can only be implemented after discussions with the villagers and acceptance by them. Year-round employment has been ensured, and the village has become a symbol of the growing movement for tribal self-rule in central India.

GOVERNANCE AND BIODIVERSITY

The above is just a small sampling of numerous such examples across the South Asian region. Altogether these initiatives point to the emergence of a drastically different system of governance of natural resources than the one in place today in the countries of the region (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka).

Most of these countries share a similar history of natural resource management , with the exception of Bhutan and to some extent Nepal. They have all had a strong history in and tradition of natural resource conservation both by the ancient aristocracy as well as common masses. Religious sentiments as well as the practical need for management of common resources on which many livelihoods depended led to the evolution of systems like sacred groves, sacred ponds, water management structures, migratory grazing patterns, specified times for hunting or fishing, blanket protection to certain plant and animal species, and so on. Many of these customs and knowledge systems survive even today. However, until recently, centuries of centralized rule (colonial and post-colonial) had all but destroyed the ability of local communities and ordinary citizens to manage their own lives.

In the colonial period large areas of land were taken over by the state, except in Nepal and Bhutan (which were never under colonial rule). Taking control over these areas was easy. Because the communities mostly followed a system of common custodianship over the land and water, , these areas were considered "unowned" in the colonial mindset . Thus, people's rights to resources, and the responsibility to manage them, were greatly abridged.

Despite the formation of independent governments, free of colonial rule, the laws and policies, even new ones, continued to display a colonial mindset in most South Asian countries.Governments tended to vest decision-making power in centralized agencies. Till recently governments also continued seeing natural resources as raw materials for industries and commerce and restricted villagers access to these resources. For example, aided by fisheries policies that encourage commercialization, powerful contractors, using mechanized and destructive fishing techniques, have marginalized traditional fisherfolk who use simple and sustainable techniques of fishing. Forest resources have been subsidized to ridiculous levels: for example, in central India, until recently, bamboo was being given to industries at Rs. 1 a ton, while tribals in the same region would pay the same price for a single bamboo pole. All this has largely alienated local communities from their traditional resources and led to the breakdown of their sustainable use and management practices.

Yet in many parts of the region, especially in India, some traditional systems remain strong even today, or are being mixed with modern practices in innovative ways. In many instances, such as the ones described at the beginning of the article,, local communities have taken *de facto* control over the surrounding ecosystems. Such decentralized natural resource management has only recently entered the state agenda, even though the slogan of "people's participation" has been long part of the state vocabulary. Gradually, there is a change towards more people-centric, democratic laws and policies (more on that below). Unfortunately, such changes are often contradicted by the open market policies that are being followed by most governments, in which the controls are being shifted to the private corporate sector.

Traditionally, the situation in Nepal was a little different because most of the land belonged to a handful of powerful landlords and the local people were largely at the mercy of these landlords and the ruling king. Nationalization of forests in 1950s, in fact, is believed to have helped in equitable access to these resources. Very little is known of any traditional systems of natural resource management at the level of the common masses, except a few such as the *shingi nawa,* under which villagers appointed one of the residents as forest guard and paid him in kind. Some of this past has been used in initiatives that have made Nepal amongst the most progressive countries with respect to people’s participation in natural resource management. Donor agencies have also had a major hand in this, having funded several forestry and ecosystem regeneration programs. This includes the famous Community Forestry Program under which, in 1987, the government intended to hand-over about 1.8 million ha to the local communities. How much has been actually handed over is not known.

In Sri Lanka the policy makers and researchers believe that the country has been under various colonial rulers for so long that there no longer exist any traditional communities or systems of resource management. People's participation in ecosystem management is a fairly new concept in official circles, and is also largely being promoted by donor agencies. Many people-sensitive programs have been initiated in coastal areas and forests, by the state, by donor agencies, or by NGOs and researchers.

Very little is known of the natural resource management practices that are followed in Bhutan. It is known however that they are largely dependent on the views and authority of the monarchy. The present king appears to be sensitive to environmental and livelihood issues. Information, however, is hard to come by for this country.

LESSONS LEARNED

Increasing research into community-based initiatives is providing insights regarding the course that natural resource management should take in the South Asian region. One major question is: how are community efforts different from the conventional conservation practices? What makes these initiatives succeed or fail? The following lessons are important:

Decentralized, site-specific governance: One common factor in most successful (?) community initiatives at natural resource conservation is the fact that they are decentralized, site-specific, and varied in their objectives and approaches. This is unlike most government or big NGO efforts, which are largely top-down with uniform policy frameworks and guidelines. Decisions taken at faraway centres rarely take into account the local concerns. For example, in the Indian village of Mendha (Lekha), the local people did not want forestry operations in their forests as they preferred a diverse forest to monocultures of commercially valuable species, but it took them years to get the government to agree.

Integrating conservation and livelihoods: In addition, government efforts tend to concentrate just on the conservation aspect. In reality, conservation of natural resources cannot be alienated from livelihood and other community development issues. For example, some villages inside Kailadevi Sanctuary in Rajasthan, western India, fall under the severely water deficient zone. For a long time, the basic need for water was completely ignored by both the conservation as well as development authorities. This being a protected area (PA), people's access to the forest resources to meet their basic day-to-day needs had been abridged, and yet people were expected to take part in the conservation program when they were dying of thirst! In contrast, in Bhaonta village (see above) the NGO first focused on meeting the basic needs of people for water and employment. Subsequently the people themselves realized the importance of conserving the catchment forests. This may be why community-led initiatives are often multi-faceted, where conservation of resources is a part of livelihood insurance, and linked with social and cultural dynamics. The ACAP and Hushey experiences also demonstrate that an overall yet ecosensitive community development is an important aspect of the benefits that are envisaged for the community.

While a community views all developmental, land use, cultural and other processes as interconnected, the government's orientation is vastly different. It is organized in a highly compartmentalized manner with different agencies handling different aspects of governance. Very often these line agencies do not coordinate with each other, or worse, work at cross–purposes. As a result, there is no integrated development or conservation plan. In addition, the resources get dispersed between these agencies and hardly lead to the benefits that they are intended at. By forming the Arvari *sansad,* the people in Bhaonta-Kolyala (see above)

and other villagers situated along the catchment of river arvari have tried to manage their natural resources by basing the boundaries for the management on ecological rather than administrative considerations. People in Mendha have acted as mediators between various government agencies, ensuring that these agencies pool all the available resources for village development. In ACAP, instead of handling villages individually, the entire area has been declared as a Conservation Area. The expectation is that this will ensure that economic and market policies and programs support the efforts of the local community. In India and other countries, with the realization that integrated conservation and development programs will be far more effective than purely conservation ones, governments are initiating "ecodevelopment" measures in a number of areas, including protected areas such as Kailadevi Sanctuary.

Conservation at landscape level: Conservation cannot be separated from other developmental processes both at the local as well as national level. Changes in one can lead to serious impacts on the other, often contradicting each others' objectives. For example the mining policy and the conservation policy may be contradictory; in turn, both may conflict with the laws related to empowerment of local institutions. This calls for a detailed landscape-level or regional planning. Such planning begins with local people planning for their area and then consulting with larger level authorities that, in turn, help to coordinate the efforts of individual villages.

Transparent, equitable decision making: The process of decision-making is an important aspect of any governance, local or national. Most of the community initiatives have shown the success of transparent, equitable, and well-informed decision-making. In a successful community initiative emphasis is given to equal representation of all sections of society, and often to each household, in information-sharing and subsequent decision-making. In Saigatha and Jardhargaon, despite a strongly hierarchical village structure, impressive unity has been achieved on the matter of forest conservation through institutional structures that work with transparency and full participation. This, however, further emphasizes the importance of decentralization because such openness and equitable participation is more likely if the decision-making units are small and local. In both the Hushey and ACAP examples, the entire area is divided into smaller units, and then, the user groups make the management plans for their respective areas.

The power of information: Merely having the power to make decisions is not enough. It is vital that the decisions are made by well-informed participants. In Mendha and Saigatha, villagers realized this. They have thus evolved a system of exchange of information with outsiders through group meetings and discussions. Locally these are called *abhyas gats* (study circles). Through such interaction, they became aware of the long-term damage of commercial exploitation to their forests even though the immediate gains were very high. They have also helped to solve complicated issues, such as the illegal extraction of resources, encroachments, and so on. In Jardhargaon information from both within and outside, garnered by the NGO Beej Bachao Andolan, was crucial in initiating the switch back to traditional seeds and agro-practices. In Rekawa the fisherfolk have benefited from the scientific information and training on stock enhancement of the lagoon. Unfortunately there does not yet exist a widespread (national) system to provide such information to the villagers, and so often people are not even aware of developmental plans or any other schemes envisaged for their areas, or the impacts of these schemes.

The role of the "outsider": While the local community is certainly the most important actor in conservation initiatives, there has been a critical role played by one or more external interventionists in all the above-mentioned cases. This points to the need for synergistic

linkages between the local communities and the national and international levels. These linkages are especially important where local communities, or sections within them, are fighting against serious injustices (traditional or new). Thus emerges a very important role for local government officials, that of extension workers providing information and support to local people, but on equal terms. As faciliatators, such officials, or NGO representatives, can bring in wider perspectives not so easily perceived by the villagers given their limited experiences and access to outside information. In turn, the officials or NGOs could learn from the detailed site-specific information that the local people have. Marrying different levels of knowledge and learning has been a critical outcome of the initiatives profiled above, and many other community based programmes.

Outside agencies and individuals can also bring technical and other skills that would enhance a community's ability to achieve sustainability. At the Biligiri Ranganaswamy Temple Sanctuary in southern India, for instance, NGOs and scientific organizations have helped the Soliga tribals to achieve sustainable harvesting of medicinal plants through biological monitoring, and to do local processing and conversion into products so that the proceeds they get are much more than when they sold the plants as raw material. Such examples are increasing significantly in the region.

Fighting the industrial juggernaut: A well-informed and empowered community, which has a stake in conservation, can even challenge powerful commercial and developmental forces. There are numerous examples where communities have fought and won against destructive project proponents, where even government authorities have felt helpless. For example, Mendha villagers were able to stop the paper mill from destructive exploitation of bamboo; villagers in Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan, India were able to stop limestone mining after the PA management failed to do so; in 1997, tribal groups fought and won a legal case against a luxury hotel in the Nagarahole National Park in Karnataka, India; a nation-wide agitation against mechanized trawling by traditional fisherfolk has forced the Government of India to stop issuing licenses to trawlers; similar agitation convinced the Supreme Court of India to stop all further expansion of industrial aquaculture along India's coasts; Rekawa fisherfolk managed to change construction plans over the Lagoon; Bangladesh fisherfolk have managed to stop the government from licensing mechanised fishing; and so on.

Local values of biodiversity: Often it is feared that the local people do not know the value of biodiversity and thus cannot conserve it. Over and over again the community initiatives have proved this fear wrong. In all the above examples and others, people have strongly opposed the commercial plantations of single species by the forest department. Villagers believe that a monoculture is neither beneficial for nature nor for local livelihoods. A diverse forest provides life-sustaining produce throughout the year. Even in the official Joint Forest Management (JFM) program, in India, which is based on harvesting of timber and the sharing of sale proceeds, several communities have argued that a more important benefit is a continuous supply of non-timber forest products. In Nepal, too, this has been a major argument extended by communities that have been handed over forest management.

Legal authority and security of tenure: Communities can go only so far in making their initiatives work. To sustain them, it is critical that there be facilitative laws and policies. In many of the above-mentioned initiatives, communities have relied on customary laws and social sanctions. Yet, in the absence of statutory legal authority, they face problems. For example, they often feel helpless when outsiders cut their forests because they have no legal powers to punish them. There is, therefore, a strong need for some form of legal or statutory authority to be given to village-level institutions, and for long-term security of tenure over

the natural resources that they are managing. There is a very strong tradition of customary law, handling natural resources, in many parts of India; this has become sidelined or corrupted by the imposition of formal national or state law. A truly decentralized governance system would have to be sensitive to the diverse customary or community-made rules that are relevant to natural resource management, facilitating rather than displacing them. In Hushey valley, AKRSP and IUCN have tried to ensure that management plans and their implementation are according to the existing traditional systems and laws. At the same time it is also important that there is a wider state or national legal authority to curtail destructive community activities. Such authority might help control situations like those in some parts of northeastern India, in which tribal councils or individuals with full control over forests are selling them off to industrialists, often with the active help of state governments.

Tackling inequities: Many local communities are ridden with internal inequities that relate to caste, class, gender, and so on. These can be significant deterrents to natural resource conservation and management or any other democratic process. Legal empowerment and recognition of local initiatives should not mean that distant centres of power are simply replaced by local ones. There are many examples where local communities have tackled this problem on their own (for instance, the egalitarian principles on which Jardhar's irrigation and grass-cutting practices are based, or the relative equity in decision-making in Saigata and Mendha). But there are probably many more cases where this has not happened, and in these situations, some external intervention is required. At ACAP, due to a strong commitment to social equity on part of KMTNC, there has emerged some conflict with traditional hierarchies. While in the short run this may prove disruptive, over a longer period this could well lead to a more egalitarian and sustainable society. However, one important lesson from many such initiatives is that the relationship between equity and conservation is by no means simple.

One issue that needs to be tackled, therefore, at the outset of any new conservation initiative iswho in a community has a right to make decisions, or receive benefits, and in what proportion? All members of a community may not be concerned with or dependent on the surrounding resources. On the other hand, there may be people who do not reside in the vicinity but depend heavily on the resources, such as migratory graziers. “Primary” stakeholders need to be identified, based on dependence, proximity, and willingness to participate, and so on.

Sustaining the initiative: Ensuring the ecological, social and financial sustainability of community initiatives is of utmost importance. In some community-initiated efforts such as Mendha and Jardhargaon ones, villagers have consciously decided not to take substantial outside funding/aid, but rather try to generate funds locally. In Mendha, villagers give 10% of their wages to the Village Development Fund. They have also tried to ensure that government funds meant for the village actually reach them. However, barring India, one worrying factor in South Asia is the substantial national dependence on external funding agencies for conservation programs. This often leads to lack of sustainability. In Hikkaduwa Lagoon in Sri Lanka, a donor-led program tried to unite a highly fragmented community to conserve the coral reefs and marine areas. However, with no local leader or self-initiated local institutions to carry the initiative forward, it collapsed as soon as the donor withdrew. A contrasting case is the Hushey valley where the hunt and other proceeds go into a corpus fund that could sustain the initiative once outside agencies pull out.

Ecological sustainability, too, is not necessarily ensured by local action. In most community initiatives cited above, ecological improvement is “perceived” by the local communities as well as outside researchers and intervenors. However, there is usually no long-term monitoring and evaluation of these efforts. Some exceptions include the initiative in the

Hushey valley, where community monitoring of Ibex populations has been initiated, and at Rekawa where prawn stocks are being regularly assessed. One of the most interesting initiatives is at the Biligiri Ranganaswamy Temple Sanctuary in southern India, mentioned above, where Soliga tribals have been aided by NGOs and scientific organisations to monitor the impacts of their extraction of medicinal plants. However, even in these cases, there is virtually no assessment of long-term trends in biodiversity as a whole.

Is the state redundant? Despite statutory powers, communities often realize the difficulty of managing natural resources on their own, especially given the internal and external social dynamics, and powerful political and commercial forces. These communities envision an active role for the state as a partner in the management of resources, but on equal terms and in the capacity of a supporter and guide rather than a ruler or as police. However, because of a bitter history of negative interaction, government agencies will have to overcome a great deal of distrust that exists among the people in order to be seen in a supportive role. .

CONCLUSION

What we have mentioned above are only some of the issues related to community based biodiversity conservation in South Asia.. Community initiatives across the region strongly indicate that it is time for governments to take serious steps towards a more participatory and democratic conservation regime. However, arriving at a participatory conservation model (or several models) is not an easy task and will require strong will and patience on part of many stakeholders. Participatory approaches need to tackle many hurdles, and sometimes take years before any positive results are shown. In addition the relevant laws and policies will have to be flexible enough to take into account the local specifications, yet at the same time firm enough to counter destructive forces. There already exist numerous examples of such moves, that could be assessed for their success and failures. Lessons learnt from these examples could provide important leads to policy makers and implementers, including community members.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Kothari, A., Pathak, N., and Vania, F. 2000. *Where Communities Care: Community Based Wildlife and Ecosystem Management in South Asia.*iInternational Institute of Environment and Development , London, and Kalpavriksh, Pune.

In addition, a series of 10 case studies and theme papers are being published on this topic. For details, please contact the authors.