



EXPERIENCES WITH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN INDIA



inter
cooperation

Natural Resource Management
Rural Economy
Local Governance and Civil Society

Box 4: The NTFP Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP) – South and South- East Asia

The NTFP-EP for South and South-East Asia is a joint initiative of the Dutch organisations – ENDS, NC-IUCN and ProFound – in collaboration with the Asian organisations from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and other local and regional NGOs and indigenous organisations in South and South-east Asia. The programme was started informally in 1997 when the organisations felt a need to exchange information, knowledge and approaches at a very practical, 'real' level. This means that expertise in processing, value addition, marketing, policy advocacy and other issues can be shared freely. Meetings, workshops and technical trainings organised are essentially to help practitioners meet. These meetings are rather informal, do not follow many rules and sessions – but allow for free flow of information and experiences. Many times the sharing of the difficulties in different situations in different parts of the region is good enough, and generates debates, brainstorming, etc., on the issue over informal get-togethers. The topics are invariably related to forests, indigenous people, rights, access, products, markets, sustainability of resources, harvesting methods, fighting big lobbies such as timber loggers and oil palm industry, etc. It has been supported at different points of time by different funding agencies.

In the general context of continuous forest depletion and degradation, the group believes in facilitating the exchange of information and experiences between local NGOs and communities in the above countries on local, national and regional levels in the region. This includes support and monitoring of field-level initiatives and joint studies; workshops, regional meetings, training programmes and exposure visits; and liaison and strategic information support. In addition, the network tries to facilitate effective networking at a local and regional level. Members are usually individuals or NGOs working on issues of forest conservation with indigenous people – NTFPs being a major activity. Regional meetings are held by rotation in each country once a year. There are very regular e-mail exchanges and members are in touch with one another. Meetings are quite regular and exchange visits are arranged without much difficulty.

After functioning as an informal network without a structure for some time, a formal structure has been recently introduced. The office of the network is in Manila and the bulk of the task of running the network rests with one person, who maintains the cross exchange of information. One member each plays similar roles for the Philippines and for India.

The Exchange Programme has initiated a newsletter, *Voices from the Forest*, and regularly publishes technical bulletins/booklets useful for local organisations and communities. Apart from information-knowledge exchange, the programme stimulates ideas and helps organisations to work in their respective areas with indigenous people. Documentation is an important activity that is used very effectively. The programme pulls up members going through 'lows' and enables capacities and funding for them to continue.

Source: Snehlata Nath, *Note for CoP Study*, Aug 2005; www.ntfp.org

The NTFP-EP network is an example of a planned informal exchange process around a specific exchange topic and a commonality of purpose. The group demonstrates the interlinking of research to implementation; of 'educated' to indigenous people; and that these exchanges are easy, practical, and adaptable for different types of role-players. The diversity and different levels of engagement of the group are supplemented by efforts to build strong local/national networks as sub-sets of the regional community.

While this group formed, as a result of organisations in South and South-East Asia coming together on NTFPs, the dnrn listserv and discussion group started as a part of a research study on decentralised natural resources management in India. This was a collaboration between research agencies from the UK and India, and three Indian states. After conclusion of the study, the dnrn listserv 'took a life of its own' and continued as a platform for information dissemination, and discussions in the areas of decentralised natural resource management, decentralisation, and the political economy of development.