

Biodiversity – Sustaining Ecosystems and Livelihoods

Setting the Context

Biodiversity underpins ecosystem functioning and the provisioning of ecosystem services necessary to create *wellbeing and prosperity for all*. Yet, recent decades has experienced unprecedented biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation. The importance of biodiversity, apart from its intrinsic value, is the backward and forward linkages which pour into areas of sustainability, climate resilience, social development and most of all livelihood creation.

Why Biodiversity Matters?

In a country like India, where close to 275 million people depend on natural ecosystems for day-to-day subsistence, biodiversity conservation and sustainable natural resource use get intrinsically linked to people's rights to secure their livelihoods. A sustainable livelihood not only enables people to become resilient to shocks and stresses (such as natural disasters and economic or social upheavals) but enhances their well-being and that of future generations without undermining our ecosystem. In this way **biodiversity conservation strategies represent important poverty reduction strategies, a link not recognised by India's current development model.**

Forest dependent communities are many times seen as a threat to biodiversity by conservation managers. However, it is poverty, lack of sustainable alternative livelihoods and absence of financial/social incentives for resource dependent communities, along with a lack of integration of biodiversity and livelihood consideration in development planning that are some of the root causes of threats to biodiversity. So much so that often communities react by considering **any form of protection of biodiversity a threat to their livelihoods - creating strife between communities and conservationists.**

The current siloed treatment is pushing India to choose between development and conserving nature. On one hand, acres of forestland are diverted for development projects. On the other nearly, 70% of India's population is dependent locally on these natural ecosystems for subsistence. The consequent rampant ecosystem degradation are negating India's hard-won development gains, taxing our societies and saddling the government with extremely high costs, compromising all efforts to achieve sustainable, inclusive and resilient development

Also accountable, in no less measure, is the inability to effectively translate and replicate lessons from diverse, innovative and successful experiences in participatory forest, natural resource and benefit-sharing programs in the country.

There is an urgent need to develop a shared understanding towards **biodiversity for sustaining livelihoods** and not viewing it as a problem in isolation but integrating it in the larger goal of achieving *wellbeing for the people and the planet*. It is time we create the symbiotic link between biodiversity and the social and economic pillars of sustainable development. An ancient lifestyle is crumbling apart as a reaction to changes to the environment that are beyond the control and comprehension of the local communities. More than ever before the need to support the resilience of these communities that have lived in this landscape for thousands of years has become imperative.

TARAGram Yatra 2014

The post 2015 development agenda offers us an opportunity to transform our view on ecosystem services as an asset for sustainable, inclusive and resilient development such that there is well-being for people and the planet.

With the focus on **India post 2015: A Country in Transition**, this year's Yatra examines how to transition to a sustainable future such that there is well-being for people and the planet. Looking through the lens of Resilient Rural Livelihoods we will be focusing on biodiversity based livelihoods. On-the-ground practices will be showcased through a Yatra to the **Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve**, where **Keystone Foundation** has been working to develop sustainable practices of livelihoods. The current challenges of viewing biodiversity in isolation from livelihood creation or the transference and application of indigenous knowledge amongst others will be discussed throughout the Yatra with an aim of identifying accelerating action points and pioneering solutions.

Through this exercise, we aim to bring this entire program at a national platform to coordinate and strategically use the elements of the Keystone initiative to replicate and scale up such interventions of biodiversity conservation and nurturing sustainable and resilient livelihoods.

Deliberations during the Yatra will be directed to three key stakeholder groups i.e. practitioners, experts, and decision makers. Our focus will be to highlight and discuss the following questions:

- *What are the threats faced by the communities and biodiversity? What is the effectiveness of the current measures implemented to tackle these issues? For example, how do we deal with the stand-off between conservation managers and local community members and the possible threat of the divide widening in the years ahead?*
- *What are the coping strategies adopted by communities to deal with environmental changes? How have they strengthened their adaptability and resilience? What have been positive and negative repercussions on biodiversity?*
- *What are the most cost effective and multiple-benefit solutions to build solutions to serve the twin objective of biodiversity conservation and livelihood creation?*
- *How can we mainstream biodiversity management objectives into economic sector activities? For example, adopting a pro-poor approach what are the innovative biodiversity conservation interventions that can help in developing viable, new markets for ecosystem services?*
- *What are the best case practices we would like to replicate and scale up?*
- *How can we integrate traditional ecological knowledge systems with scientific principles and adaptive management approaches?*