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Biodiversity conservation, communication and language – is English a solution, a problem or both?

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Abstract: Biodiversity conservation is becoming a global agenda operating on an equally global arena. The name of the game is communication and collaboration across cultures and languages, facilitated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), especially the Internet and email. Part and parcel of globalization, biodiversity conservation networking is increasingly facilitated by the use of the English language… but this cannot be separated from a certain promotion of Western values. To what extent can ICTs be used to increase understanding and awareness of the intricate connections between culture and language? How important are languages when we seek to understand the connection between biodiversity conservation and culture? How important are languages when we seek to involve people in conservation

Globalization can prompt the exclusion and marginalization of diverse categories of people, especially among the least powerful in developing countries and countries in transition. At the same time, decentralization can contribute to the integration and participation of some of these people in new processes, including for decision-making in matters of natural resource management. In the latter – increasingly facilitated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) – the role of language and literacy, and their relationship with culture, have been given scant attention. It is a fact, for instance, that ICTs facilitate the marginalization and homogenization of languages, while it is an open question whether they also contribute to language growth and survival.

Within the context of development cooperation and natural resource management, the Community-Based Natural Resource Management Network (*CBNRM Net*, www.cbnrm.net) uses ICTs to communicate with its global membership. *CBNRM Net* is thus concerned about how globalization and decentralization are influencing traditional and modern CBNRM practices. How, for instance, is the present massive use of ICTs, relying largely on the English language, affecting languages and literacy in the area of environmental knowledge in CBNRM, and in natural resource management more generally?[2/]

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2/ For more on what *CBNRM Net* is and how it operates, see Soeftestad and Kashwan (2004), available on the *CBNRM Net* website at http://www.cbnrm.net/library/documents/.

Environmental knowledge, communication and language

The anthropological literature abounds with examples of the cross-cultural variability in perceiving, classifying and naming the environment and the relationships among its constituent parts. The Kwaio of the Solomon Islands, to give just one example, "… label fresh water as one substance, salt water as another; … place birds and bats in one category, in contrast to moths, butterflies, and other flying insects; … class fish and marine mammals together, and … label with a single term most colors we would call blue and black" (Keesing 1981:85). To understand this, including the relationship between language and culture, it is necessary to take a deep dive into the culture itself.[3/] Given the vast cross-cultural variability in cultural classification of the natural inventory, it is clear that, when searching for traditional environmental knowledge, it makes an important difference if this is done using English or the vernacular language.[4/] In the former, one is at high risk of missing – or certainly glossing over – some important facts and relationships.

The global work on biodiversity conservation involves an extremely diverse set of participants, all influenced by their own culture, training, work, interests and languages and who are part of one or more overlapping networks. Analyses of the communication between the members of these networks, using network analysis,[5/] reveal some interesting patterns, among them that:

1. The networks consist of a number of centrally and peripherally located nodes that link the members (individuals and organizations),
2. A few members have agenda setting roles, while the large majority are at the receiving end; they contribute data and knowledge but only as and when requested,
3. While the flow of knowledge tends to be from the periphery to the center, decisions more likely flow the other way; and
4. The organizational rationale and values underpinning the networks, together with the language of communication, are likely to be Western and dominated by the English language.

One factor in this overall communication scenario that few so far have given much attention to is what *languages* are used, by whom, when, and for what purpose. The very historical facts and global processes that create and maintain the kind of communication and networking structures that we are striving to make more human and participatory, are themselves responsible for the fact that English is fast becoming a global *lingua franca*. This is true in the case of biodiversity conservation as in development cooperation more generally. In other words, this is a package deal. The culture and values of communication, and the resulting networks, come packaged with the English language. Thus, the use of English in the evolving globalization process needs to be given more attention. This aim is not necessarily to find ways and means of replacing it with other former colonial languages (including Arabic, French, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish) that play important roles at regional levels. Rather, we should give much more attention to the *impacts* that the use of these foreign languages have on: (1) minority languages and cultures, and (2) our ability to understand and represent these cultures, together with their accumulated knowledge and worldviews. These two aspects are closely related.

In contemplating needs for action, a deeper understanding of the above mentioned impacts and evolving processes is crucial. The agenda seems straightforward: we have to work at several levels to ensure the necessary equity, democracy, governance, participation, and transparency in the global communication and information structure. These global processes cannot (and should not) be reversed. In doing so, however, we face the dilemma

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3/ See, for example, Daniels (1994), DeVito (2002), Fishbone (1985), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2003), Goody (1977), Goody and Watt (1963), and Littlejohn (2001).

4/ Two examples of this are: (1) researching the traditional use of a particular plant, bird or animal, and (2) searching for ways of involving local or minority cultures in protecting species.

5/ See, for example, Barnes (1972).

(as some would have it) of using these very means of communication, namely ICTs, to our advantage. *CBNRM Net* attempts to respond to this.

CBNRM Net and dictionaries

If ICTs (specifically Internet and email) are key vehicles through which globalization and use of the English language is spreading to all corners of the world, ICTs can also be used to counter this trend. For instance, *CBNRM Net* is preparing dictionaries of key terms relating to, among others, traditional natural resource management and is making these available online (presently in HTML, and eventually also as PDFs). *CBNRM Net* advocates a balanced approach to standardizing terminology for the majority languages, while at the same time proactively locate, define and/or construct – as the case may be – relevant terms in local and minority languages.

Two outputs of this work are already available. The first is a working paper (CBNRM Net 2004) that models the use of English in cross-cultural settings on traditional environmental knowledge and natural resource management, analyzes the impact of this communication on local and minority cultures, presents a methodology for addressing these issues, and provides some preliminary data on translations between languages of select terms and words. The second is a number of dictionaries between English and select languages.[6/]

In this initial phase the emphases is on identifying a set of core CBNRM and NRM-related terms and words, and providing translations for a large number of languages. One purpose for this is to facilitate comparisons across languages. The following two-way dictionaries of key terms in natural resource management are currently available: Arabic – French, Akposo (Togo, Ghana) – English, Akposo – French, English – Ewe (Ghana), English – French, English – Hassanya (Mauritania), English – Portuguese, English – Italian, English – Setswana (Botswana), English – Spanish, and Ewe – French. All the dictionaries are contributed by members of *CBNRM Net*. Further dictionaries are in the process of preparation, and contributions from CMWG, SLWG, TILCEPA and CEESP members are very welcome. We need to coordinate existing work (in particular work by TILCEPA), search for complementarity and synergy, and develop a joint program of action.

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6/ The paper and the dictionaries are available on the CBNRM Net website, at: hwww.cbnrm.net/members/papers.html and www.cbnrm.net/resources/dictionaries/, respectively. The paper is on a password-protected part of the site (non-*CBNRM Net* members are advised to write to mail@cbnrm.net to request membership in *CBNRM Net*).

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