

Of the people, for the people, and by the people

The public participation process that was begun with the National Conservation Strategy continues in Sarhad where the provincial strategy is being written only after consulting the people for whom it is meant.

While driving the link road from the Indus Highway near Kohat to the small district centre of Karak, you seldom see another traveler; the road is often as barren as the landscape through which it passes. This is the northern fringe of the Salt Range, with interbedded layers of blood-red 60 million-year old mud and bleached white limestone. The ridge crests are so dry and windswept there is almost no soil, let alone any plant life that would support even the hardiest of goats.

The road passes this barrier by crossing the grain of land at its weak point, either a nullah or some geological discontinuity that opens a crevice that the civil engineers could use to gain a foothold.

This link also crosses another barrier that is just as real – a barrier that looms few of the people who constitute the Frontier government have traveled the link road to Karak. The planning processes are too centralized, and the villages too remote to consider in day-to-day terms. And the people outside Peshawar suffer for it because they have no say in the policies that are prepared for their benefit.

The window opened ever so slightly in 1992 when the National Conservation Strategy (NCS) was completed. The process of developing the NCS had been far more open to public involvement than any previous government policy development exercise. When the government in NWFP indicated its desire to develop a provincial strategy to implement the NCS, it also chose to open up to an even wider audience than the NCS, the process of formulating the Sarhad Provincial Conservation Strategy (SPCS).

From the beginning, the SPCS team in Peshawar saw the work as a dual process. The first is the development of the strategy itself which is to take two years. The second involves starting programmes that need not wait two more years to begin: environmental pollution issues will emerge as high priority tasks at the end of the strategic planning process in any event. Cleaning up the Kabul River, for example, falls into this category and a report was completed in late August which presents an Action Plan to the government.

The SPCS will be completed by July 1995, approximately two years after it was begun. This does seem like a rather long time, given that the NCS priorities were so clearly defined. So why does it take two more years to develop a provincial strategy? The answer has many parts, but a principal consideration is the need to dramatically broaden the base of people who are involved in and aware of its existence, preparation and contents. In other words, the process of developing the strategy is clearly just as important as the product itself.

Also, many of the institutions which are to help in the preparation of the strategy are new, often understaffed, and with limited albeit growing capacity to undertake the preparation and implementation of the results. It would be very easy for IUCN – The World Conservation Union – or any other group for that matter, to enter into a partnership with the provincial government, quickly write a strategy under the terms of contract, deliver a product and move on to new tasks. But such an approach would be a failure. The product would be there for all to see but its implementation, in any meaningful fashion, would be unlikely.

From day one in the SPCS Unit, it was considered absolutely crucial that the strategy be developed using a multi-phased public consultation process. Consultation would ultimately lead to the involvement of the people of institutions in NWFP.

In practical terms, the plan was fairly straightforward. We would begin in Peshawar with some Sectoral meetings to introduce ourselves. A team would then visit each district in NWFP to extend the awareness of the SPCS process as widely as possible. To stimulate discussion an inception report was prepared with an Urdu summary that was distributed in advance. People would then be invited to a meeting to react to its contents, which were the team's preliminary ideas about what would be included in the final strategy – conceptual cannon fodder, in effect.

Beginning in January 1994 from Peshawar, the team in association with the Deputy Commissioner of each district worked its way through NWFP in eight months. The final sessions were held in August in Chitral and Kohistan. In most cases our team of forerunners would arrive at least a week in advance to organize the meetings. Only in the case of Hazara Division did we use the services of the Sungi Development Foundation, an active IUCN member, to set up the sessions.

It is very important to point out that this sort of structured public meeting is a good first step, but it is only the beginning of a full-fledged public involvement process. However, when you consider that it was the very first time that the government undertook such a process for public policy formulation, it is a giant first step.

As for the results, well a number of generations can be made. In every case bar none, the team learned well in advance about many environmental issues that it had not predicted would arise. Similarly, they met people who were desperately interested in working on these issues, either individually or through NGOs, who the Government of NWFP had not previously been aware of or had prior contact with.

The team was quite careful to avoid raising expectations about rapid action on the immense list of environmental issues, yet there was a flood of requests for more consultation and involvement. Consequently, two significant additions have been made to the SPCS workplan to adapt to the needs expressed.

Once the report on the regional consultations is complete, a second round of district sessions will be held to illustrate the province-wide range of issues in each district. In other words, each district gathering will be exposed to each of the other districts' problems and any indigenous solutions that have been proposed. Some of these sessions will be held in even smaller towns to further broaden the base of contact with people and NGOs. Given that there are approximately 8,000 villages in NWFP, we will only just be beginning to scratch the surface, of course. But it is a significant beginning.

Once there is a degree of confidence as to the list of problems, the actual work of developing the strategy in more detail begins. This, too, will be as participatory as possible, using working groups from the line departments of government plus relevant NGOs to help in the process. When a draft is complete, approximately in February 1995, the district process will begin once again. Hopefully this time a more substantive workshop setting will be used, involving as many people as possible. These will take place using regional languages, local facilitators and maximum audiovisual assistance. Only then will the strategy document begin to be given final shape.

Equal attention must be paid to the implementation process as to the normative ideas or structures that are included in the strategy and its implementation in themselves become those of preparing a 'culture of participation' in which

governments open up to people and value their input, and people feel comfortable expressing ideas and begin to expect that the government will listen and act.

This is a very big task and good governance will not be achieved overnight, but creating capacities in government and in people to actually tackle the sustainable development issues, region by region, is the single-most significant accomplishment that the SPCS is striving to achieve.

Following the July 1995 release of the strategy there is now approval-in-principle from the Swiss sponsors for a three year transition-to-implementation phase. This will allow a continuity of effort in public involvement and capacity building, the core themes of the SPCS. Then we would have even more work to do, but a very great many more people will be geared up to do it! And the road to Karak will be one more frequently traveled.