

## PRESERVING AND REVITALIZING CULTURE



Land and culture are tightly woven together. Human cultures are shaped by the landscapes that support them: the lifestyles, diets, and livelihoods of pastoralists, hunter-gatherers, fisherfolk, nomads, and agriculturalists have all evolved to suit their local ecosystem. A community's cultural identity, artistic traditions, and spiritual practices are also often deeply rooted in their lands. As such, culture is at the heart of all community land protection efforts: it infuses all aspects of community life, and informs how the community uses, manages, and relates to its lands and natural resources. For these reasons, the community land protection process has the potential to positively impact the revival, maintenance, and inter-generational transfer of local cultures, languages, ceremonies and traditional knowledge.

### WHY IS CULTURE CENTRAL TO THE COMMUNITY LAND PROTECTION PROCESS?

There are several reasons culture is central to, and supportive of, the community land protection process:

- **Personal identity, dignity and empowerment are often linked to a strong sense of local culture.** Individuals' sense of self and connection to the wider community may hinge on shared cultural practices, stories, beliefs, and ways of life. A strong connection to cultural identity often strengthens community members' motivation, personal responsibility, and determination to protect their lands and resources.
- **Burial grounds, sacred sites, and the locations of cultural ceremonies are where a community's religious beliefs meet the land.** The protection of community lands is also often

about protecting a community's connection with its ancestors and spiritual life. In many cultures, spiritual and religious practices are earth-based and tied to specific local sites and natural resources, such as mountains, lakes, caves, and forests. When people lose access to sacred places necessary for cultural rituals, key cultural ceremonies may no longer be performed, forever altering the fabric of society.

- **Exploration of the original rationale behind discriminatory cultural practices can help transform them.** Women's rights are often connected to cultural rules – so much so that failure to discuss culture may result in never getting to the roots of customary norms related to land. "Traditional practices" – such as "widow inheritance" or the recent trend of denying widows the right to remain on their marital lands after their husbands' death – are often modern day, bad-faith "interpretations" of cultural practices that were originally intended to protect women's rights. Thoughtful, carefully facilitated community discussions about discriminatory cultural practices can lead community members to uncover the original positive intentions behind customary practices and help them to update cultural rules to both align with custom and promote the original, more positive rationale behind customary rules.
- **Art, music, theater, dance, song and storytelling can motivate and strengthen community land protection efforts.** Festivals, celebrations, holidays, dances, rituals, and rites of passage can build community cohesion, strengthen social bonds, and enforce positive ethics, beliefs and traditions. When a community's lands are threatened, cultural ceremonies and celebrations can help a community feel strong and united.

- Promoting cultural practices can help a community thrive and prosper. History has shown how forced dispossession from indigenous/customary lands – paired with oppressive tactics aimed at stopping people from speaking their native language or practicing their culture – has led whole groups of people to lose essential parts of their collective identity, and to suffer negative consequences as a result. Positively, efforts to promote or strengthen culture-specific livelihoods, traditional knowledge, local artisanship, and indigenous methods of stewarding lands and resources can help stop cultural erosion and contribute to local prosperity, health and wellness, and an improved quality of life. For example, when youth feel proud of their culture and traditions, they may be more likely to remain in the community as leaders, rather than moving to distant urban centers.

#### ADDRESSING FACILITATORS' PERSONAL BIASES

Facilitators who have been raised in cities and/or who are members of organized religions may be personally challenged by some communities' spiritual beliefs or cultural practices, such as appealing to ancestors or local spirits/deities for their approval or input. **Facilitators must not let their personal viewpoints and religious beliefs interfere with community members' cultural practices and beliefs.** These beliefs are central to a community's relationship to the landscape, and will continue to be, whether discussed openly or not. Facilitators must remain open to – and not judgmental about – cultural practices and beliefs that impact a community's relationship to its lands and natural resources. Facilitators must be aware of their own personal beliefs and biases and make sure that they are allowing the community land protection process to truly reflect the community's cultural traditions.

#### HOW TO INTEGRATE CULTURE INTO THE COMMUNITY LAND PROTECTION PROCESS?

Local culture can be woven into every aspect of community land protection work. As appropriate, facilitators should directly include culture – and discussion of the link between culture and land – during the following community land protection activities:

**When defining the “community.”** Questions of culture and identity politics will arise when discussing how to define the community “unit.” A sense of who “belongs” or “does not belong” is often tied to peoples' sense of cultural, ethnic or tribal affiliations, and all of the associated lifestyles and practices that come along with culture. Relatedly, much conflict often comes from rigid assertions of “this is us, this is ‘not us.’” People may try to define the community as including only “their” culture or ethnic group, to the exclusion of minority groups who also live within the area of land they seek to protect. In such instances, facilitators should stress the positive aspects of inclusion and openness: it is important to have strong cultural practices, but there is also strength in the diversity of cultures living together in a community.

During the community definition process, facilitators should support a community to carefully reflect upon such questions as:

- What are the values that define us as a group of people living in the same area? What are our shared interests, goals, practices, beliefs and ethics?
- Is our community made more vibrant because various cultures or ethnic groups live together in one place? How does the variety of cultures living here give us strength as a community unit?
- How can we live together on our land with people that practice other cultures, while continuing to maintain our own cultural identity?

In Liberia, more and more private homes and large-scale investments are being built next to sacred forests, where youths' rites of passage ceremonies have traditionally taken place. Mining operations are also encroaching into sacred areas where cultural practices occur. In reaction, elders and spiritual leaders have had to make efforts to “remove” the sacred character of the forests and find new venues far from the edges of expanding towns to hold indigenous ceremonies and sacred rites. Such efforts have not been easy; in some regions finding a new, remote area to re-establish cultural activities has not been possible.

**During Visioning.** When communities are discussing the past, they often speak joyfully of the rich cultural practices, ceremonies, dances, celebrations and festivals that used to take place in their common areas. Yet when talking about the present, they often describe how these practices have fallen away (due to conflict/war, colonization, loss of lands, etc.), and express sadness that people no longer organize community-wide cultural events. Facilitators can ask questions about why such practices have fallen away, how the community has changed as a result, and what has been lost or gained as a result of the community failing to maintain cultural traditions. Then, when the community envisions its “desired future,” facilitators might ask if and how the community would like to revive or continue cultural practices related to art, dance, traditional medicines, celebration, rites of passage for youth, etc.

**During Valuation.** The value of a community’s common areas is not purely economic: an accurate calculation of common lands is not complete without including values related to the land’s cultural, spiritual and recreational uses. During the valuation exercise, facilitators can ask community members questions such as:

- What cultural activities take place within common areas? Ceremonies? Dances? Gatherings for youth? Collection of medicinal plants for healing?
- What value do community members place on these activities? If the land is lost, where would these activities take place? What would be the compensation value to request, if an investor sought the lands upon which cultural or recreational activities occur?

It is very difficult to calculate the “market value” of cultural activities – facilitators should aim to help community members understand exactly what would be lost if community members leased their land to an investor – as well as the challenges associated with finding new places for these activities to occur.

**While mapping and zoning community lands.** No mapping or zoning exercise is complete without the marking of burial grounds/cremation areas, sacred sites, cultural and historical sites, and the location of recreational areas. Communities mapping their lands should clearly indicate such areas on their maps (unless their locations are secret, in which case the general area should be noted) and clarify any relevant conservation, access rights or protectionary rules that go along with the way the land is used. When zoning community lands for future use, such areas – and the rules that accompany them – should be clearly included in the zoning plan. Communities

may also want to make zoning rules to protect sites where important cultural resources, such as clay for making pots, certain rare reeds or grasses for weaving baskets, or traditional medicines. Communities may also want to zone areas for cultural sites they would like to build in the future, such as a community theatre and dance performance space, or a place for youth to go for rites of passage ceremonies.

**When harmonizing boundaries and resolving land conflicts with neighbors.** Culture and tradition can play a large role in helping resolve conflicts related to boundary harmonization. For example:

- Longstanding cultural traditions – and landscape-based evidence of those cultural practices – can help provide evidence of a community’s right to claim or use land.
- Communities may have cultural ways to resolve land disputes, such as consulting the spirits of the land and listening to their answers. For example, in some areas of Myanmar, if there is a boundary conflict, leaders cut evenly into a tree at the location of the conflict, then watch how the tree falls as an indication of which community the spirits want to govern the land.
- In some cultures, people must consult with their ancestors before finalizing a boundary agreement with neighbors. There have been cases where, while the living members of a community have agreed on a boundary, the ancestors have not given their approval, and the community has had to re-negotiate the boundary.

One inter-community land conflict in Mozambique was solved through reference to past historical cultural practices. In this conflict, a final point of contention concerned a large stone in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The leaders of the first community argued that the stone was considered to be part of their community. Yet the leaders of the second community maintained that this stone was as a cultural site for their community, where their ancestors had performed traditional ceremonies. When facilitators asked the leaders of the first community if they were aware of the cultural significance of the rock to the second community, they conceded that it was true; the second community’s ancestors had performed cultural rituals on that rock, and had legitimate claims to it, and the beachfront associated with it. With this concession, the boundary conflicts were resolved.

**When drafting by-laws.** Experience has shown that community members are extremely motivated to discuss rules related to culture. In fact, without facilitators intervening to ensure discussion of rules about land governance and natural resource management, community members often focus the majority of their attention on social and cultural rules. Facilitators should use this motivation to build interest and excitement in the by-laws process. Do not discount cultural rules as “less important” than the other categories of rules, as culture and landscape are intimately linked, and many other rules will be informed by culture and tradition, such as rules about the rights of women or minority groups.

During the by-laws process, communities may “remember” long-forgotten or ignored cultural rules that promote intra-community equity, good relationships, and accountability of leaders. If, on the other hand, existing cultural and customary practices are discriminatory or promote non-inclusive, unaccountable leadership, then the by-laws process can encourage a community-led analysis of such rules and discussion of how they might be changed.

**When creating rules and plans that promote sustainable natural resources use and ecosystem regeneration.**

Communities often have hundreds – if not thousands – of years of expertise managing local natural resources sustainably. Some of these practices are so embedded in local identity that they are linked to spiritual or religious beliefs. Facilitators should keep an eye out for spiritual practices that impact the environment; for example, research has shown that sacred areas and the areas around shrines and burial grounds are some of the most bio-diverse places on the planet, as strict rules forbid communities members from entering these areas, or from hunting, gathering and fishing within their bounds. Communities should be encouraged to promote local spiritual and cultural rules that allow biodiversity to flourish.

In addition, cultural practices related to traditional medicine rely on plant biodiversity. Facilitators might suggest that knowledgeable elders meet and create a list of plant species important to traditional medicine, and then ensure that the community’s by-laws ensure that the community maintains an abundance of these plants for local use.

**When diversifying livelihoods and creating a community action plan to make a community’s “future vision” into reality.** A community may seek to promote its cultural heritage or local traditional knowledge as part of its future vision and livelihood strategies. When working with communities to create “Action Plans,” facilitators may encourage goals such as building training centers for youth or performance spaces for local dance and theatre, as well as other projects that can help revitalize local culture.

During the visioning process, community elders often bemoan the youths’ failure to participate in rites of passage or learn craft and handiwork skills that are slowly disappearing for lack of youth interest. During the community action plan-drafting process, facilitators can support the community to make practical plans to revive cultural practices. For example:

- In Ethiopia, one organization helped elders to create an after-school program to teach local youth craft-making skills that are in danger of extinction.<sup>1</sup>
- In Namibia, one organization has supported elders to create a “traditional knowledge training” program, in which elders teach adolescents to be experts in reading the local landscape, natural resources management, and other practices that the youth can then use to seek formal employment in national parks, conservation areas, and tourism outfits.<sup>2</sup>

Such programs have the impact of both passing on culture and providing youth with skills that they can use to earn their livelihoods. Moreover, tourism has created a rising demand for locally produced arts and artifacts: communities with rich cultural traditions of pottery-making, basket weaving, jewelry making, etc., can seek training and support in how to best bring locally produced arts and crafts to regional and international markets.

1. For more information, see <http://melcaethiopia.org/>.

2. For more information, see <http://www.irdnc.org.na/>.