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Viability of community participation in coastal conservation: A critical analysis

Kanak Mishra

Assistant Director, International Collaborations, O.P. Jindal Global University, India

kmishra@jgu.edu.in

Abstract

Coastal regions have served as sites of social and economic development for many nations, especially the Third World. This cultural interface has been employed by the less developed states to attract commercial tourism, spiritual recreation, and large-scale fishing in the region. The dire social, economic, and political conditions triumphed over worrying environmental consequences. The *Sustainable Development Goals* of the 2030 Agenda are born against the backdrop of this despicable overexploitation. Sustainable Goal 14 envisions sustainably managing and conserving marine and coastal ecosystems against detrimental impacts of pollution. This endeavour is to be pursued in the consistency of national and international law based on the best available scientific information. The overzealous emphasis on scientific edification systemically devalues local knowledge and participation in the conservation drives.

The prospect of the restoration of coastal regions sans community representation is at best futile and unimaginable. The paper attempts to explore an alliance of these international sustainable goals with the developmental objectives of the local communities dependent on these regions. The fruitfulness of this coalition can be advocated through the examples of Bangladesh and Indonesia, which are both coastal dominated economies. The adoption of community-oriented development in these regions has to be adjudged in relation to the environmental assessments of coastal areas, the political will of the governments on these issues, and institutional capacities to resolve the environmental concerns. A critical evaluation of the consequential effect of these themes would facilitate arriving at an equitable proposition. The solution would encompass the spirit of emancipation and bestow the agency on people to be responsible for these regions. In the end, the recommendations put forth in the paper can be endorsed as a paradigm for other sovereign states (*emphasis added* on less developed states) for conservation of ecological zones, along with alternative livelihood models of sustainable development.

1. Introduction

For decades the Third World countries have been bearing a disproportionate burden to spearhead environmental struggles around the world. However, the progress and credit for these movements have been invariably associated with the initiatives undertaken by the First World countries. Such a skewed approach can be ascribed to the imposition and propagation of the Western-centric model of development, which creates an illusion of economic growth and improvement of living standards [1]. By treading on this path, they have been unwillingly led to gates of overexploitation and destruction. The Sustainable Development Goals (henceforth referred to as SDGs) were born to counter this narrow perspective and herald a dialogical space that promotes a balanced approach to environmental



conservation.

Since the focus of the paper lies on coastal management, it will essentially elucidate its arguments concerning SDG 14. The goal is to conserve oceans, seas, and marine resources which specifically targets two objectives: reduce marine pollution and restore at least 10% of coastal areas in consistence with national and international law. However, nowhere do these goals envision the participation and involvement of local communities in achieving these resolutions. The paper aims to bring forth decisive arguments which highlight the significance of community participation in the process of environmental conservation. In this endeavour, the paper also critically analyses the disadvantages of the system. Concluding with advancing the proposition of focusing on the practical applicability of the above-stated principle with the help of four case studies.

2. Community Participation

2.1 Advocacy for Public Participation

While *prima facie* it seems that the issue of community-based management of natural resources has solely to do with national and international institutions allowing the involvement of local communities at the implementation stage in the end. However, what misses the eye is that the issue of community participation has been historically dominated by governments, local elites, and industries [2]. Contemporarily, to add to the mix we witness an alliance between these dominant proprietary parties and international organizations working in the capacity of donor institutions, lending agencies, and conservation organizations. This profitable partnership has enabled to reinforce the exclusion of marginalized communities from not only the decision-making stage but also the implementation stage. By projecting the façade of community participation, these agencies have effectively clamped down on any possible benefit that could be received by these communities. This section attempts to deconstruct these misapprehensions by investigating the historical, legal, environmental, and political context of community-based management. It is pertinent to note that these contexts vary across regions depending upon the local situations. Further, it engages with the current problems faced by this system to advocate for a “bottom-up approach” that is in congruence with a holistic idea of development.

The idea of community-based management is based on the fact that local communities have a significant interest in the sustainable use of resources; that they are more knowledgeable about the nuances of ecological processes and by utilization of this traditional knowledge they would be able to manage the environment more efficiently. It is imperative to mention that these communities do not subscribe to the anthropocentric school of thought on sustainability, but rather associate with an ecocentric view that “promotes and values all life in the environment.” This view has deep-rooted significance in the cultural values of these communities which links the environment with their way of life. In recent years, the combined efforts of NGOs and local communities played a critical role in putting the viewpoints of these local communities on the radar of national and international agencies.

The representation through such initiatives has led these communities to achieve political recognition to challenge the narrative presented by the aforementioned dominant groups. There are dual factors as to why these local groups pursue a political voice which is: identification of other stakeholders and access to the legal domain. These factors do not function in exclusive realms and have a consequential effect on one another. This reflects in the fact that if a prominent stakeholder is involved it would be influential in the protection of their legal rights, and a group’s socioeconomic standing determines if they would find representation in the legal arena. We begin with the analysis of the first factor which enables the local groups to gauge an understanding of the interest of different groups as to why they are trying to gain control over the coastal region. Even if it seems that interacting with these national and international forces is inevitable, the “mapping strategies and techniques” adopted by local groups are different throughout the world.

It is in this context the linkage between politics and law becomes important as both heavily influence each other. This is where the above-mentioned assertion of political authoritarians also holds water as a group(s) social and economic standing plays a pivotal role in understanding the Court’s attitudes towards each of the parties. After gaining a significant political stand, the local communities

move towards the agenda of getting them recognized as legal entities designated to protect coastal regions. In recent years even though we have seen a positive impact in this direction as both national and international legislations have mentioned the importance of the involvement of local communities in the conservation process. However, the reality is far from the truth as the language of community management has been often misused to relocate resources from these communities to cater to the interest of scientific institutions, corporates, military administration, etc. The task has been enabled by the establishment of a formal national and international apparatus assigning them the role of primary agents for environmental intervention.

But this connection is not as overt as it seems because these institutions have made an active effort to adapt, adopt, fund, and implement the principle of community participation. Since the principle has achieved international mandate, it has to be met with national compliance otherwise it would lead to the issuance of sanctions against the concerned State. However, there is an unnoticed alliance of convenience at play here which reinforces political and economic inequalities. To discern this connivance focus should be drawn to priorities given by national governments to budget allocation, programs, and funding and how they inculcate the local knowledge pools in their legislation. The international agencies don't undertake the task of assessing if these domestic laws enforce the principle and resolve the problem of expropriation of resources. To both, the mere act of enactment is sufficient to save one from sanction and the other from imposing one.

2.2 Advantages of Community Participation

Despite concerning the myriad faults with the implementation of the principle, its merits surpass it all. The benefits are manifold as it spreads across environmental, cultural, and political dimensions. Primarily, the process of inclusion should not come at the implementation stage where these communities are just handed down a plan of what they have to do and follow. The majority of the time, these so-called rational scientific plans lack the insight of specialized local knowledge which can not only turn disastrous for the environment but can also lead to ripping the communities off their livelihood [3]. Moreover, for effective execution of the programs and to derive its long-term benefits one needs to obtain the consent of the communities. It would ensure that minimum contestations are raised over a strategy and more acquiesce in favour of the pitched strategy.

In political terms to make the state structure more “democratic and less hierarchical,” state power needs to be administered to the local citizenry. The need for this reallocation is also necessitated by the fact that generally, citizens are now becoming more critical of the governance. To safeguard their interest and for the fulfilment of their demands, they consider it better to be ensembled in the project rather than watch it from the periphery. This democratic intervention aligns with the scientific research as it is conducted by institutions that might not be aware of the ecological intricacies of the coastal region. The outcome that arrived from working together also dismantles the denigratory association associated with local knowledge. It removes the probability of possible hijacking of the process by elitist predicaments.

This brings us to the concern expressed by the communities regarding the “top-down” approaches. The problem is associated with the process of Environmental Impact Assessment that has been adopted by legislations worldwide to assess the environmental impact of a project. By triumphing the issues of confidentiality, public participation charted its territory at the beginning of the procedure [4]. However, the methodology ratified for public consultation doesn't sit well with local communities as the individuals considered for this participation already have a monopoly over the majority of the resources of coastal regions. They have little to no concern concerning the conservation of the region. Furthermore, once the final environmental statement is out it hardly gives a preference to the public opinion on the ground as the concerned project helps to further the agenda of national progress and development. And who has even won against that!

Further, the celebrated legal postulate i.e., the precautionary principle also encompasses the spirit of public values. The ever-changing circumstances require the local communities to be in continuous interaction with other stakeholders to facilitate a space where they can discuss the possible outcomes for the conservation of the region. However, a possible drawback that can be encountered

would be the highly subjective nature of the precautionary principle. Due to the dearth of the requirement of scientific evidence, it provides each party to pursue their version of what should be prevented and what can go ahead. Thus, we circle back to the same problem of avoiding contestations. Another opportunity that this principle provides us is to redefine and restructure the mainstream definition of development. The alternative framework should take into account the perspectives of different stakeholders that have an interest in the coastal region. Rather than focusing on what would be beneficial for the rich and dominant parties, emphasis should be made on how to empower the local marginalized communities by providing them access to their rightful resources.

3. Case Studies

As observed until now that these international principles and ideas have found a way into national legislation, it would be interesting to see what is the effect of these legislations on the 'on-ground' situation. The section deals with case studies from Bangladesh and Indonesia. Even though these Third World countries are not the paradigms for the application of this principle, they unquestionably symbolize the potential that can be capitalized by their fellow states to adopt a path of sustainable development.

3.1 Bangladesh's Tryst with Community Participation

The Coast of Bangladesh consists of the delta of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river systems and is home to rich fisheries. The country is majorly dependent on its coastal economy for survival. There has been an increase in the pressure on the coastal region due to the problem of overpopulation and it has also led to a substantial section of the population moving to unsafe offshore islands for settlement [5]. Every year the country deals with disasters of epic scale ranging from cyclones to tidal surges and to add to the misery is the washing down of pollutants on the coastal shore. The strategies that have been formulated by the government are inadequate to deal with the problems related to the coastal regions. They extend the application of mainland conservationist policies to coastal regions that are inefficient to achieve benefits for coastal residents.

The unique conditions were ignored by a highly hierarchical bureaucratic system. To rectify the situation there has been a radical revamping of the system to enhance community participation. They have introduced a seven-step plan that includes project site selection; integration and community study; issue selection and prioritization; contact building and spotting of local leaders; formation and strengthening of core groups; education and mobilization and setting up community organization. This also ensures that alternative methods of livelihood can be proposed in place of activities that are not sustainable for the long term. However, often this clause is misused by the governments as they primarily impose this clause without even making an effort to assess the situation.

While a bottom-up approach is considered essential for sustainable development, that is hardly the case with Bangladesh. The bureaucratic system is overly centralized which assumes that scientific planning and experts are better suited to assess the development of coastal regions. They have the requisite knowledge and wisdom and are indeed the benefactors for the marginalized communities. But ultimately this system has failed to stand the test of time as it is expensive and unnecessarily time-consuming. Some of the leaders have smelled the problem in the room and they have started to lobby against this time. Their prime consideration is the issue of "double-vulnerability" of a marginalized coastal community that is both uneducated and poor. To ensure the participation of these communities they not only need to be empowered educationally but also economically and politically.

3.2 Recounting Indonesian Implementation of ICZM

The Indonesian coastal regions are the world's biggest sea biodiversity owing to their rich ecosystem like coral reefs, seagrass, mangrove forests, etc. The concern herein lies with the ignorance regarding the intersectoral impact of policies. This is especially in consideration of sectors that are closely related to each other such as tourism and the development of the coastal region. To resolve this issue Indonesia

adopted the concept of Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) which works in close relation with the conservation policy and regulation. The concept essentially considers the interrelated relationship between the natural environment and human activities [6].

The Indonesian Constitution confers the responsibility upon the state to utilize natural resources like land, water, and forest for the welfare of the people. The results of all such initiatives should be public justice and equity. But Indonesia deals with the same problem as Bangladesh i.e., the top-down approach. There is no inclusion of local communities in the decision-making process. It acts as an impediment for citizens to provide constructive and timely feedback on government policies. Another aspect related to this case is the explicit amalgamation of sustainable goals with issues of economic welfare. They advocated for alternative means of livelihood for those dependent upon the fishing sector. However, the policy backfired on them since the policy only focused on local communities and not on large-scale industries that have the greatest share in causing environmental degradation. Moreover, the government suggested that these local communities should enter into partnerships with persons who are strategically more capable. But this wishful intent is disastrous for the communities as they will be left to the mercy of big industrialists to bargain even for basic shares in the business.

4. Conclusion

The motive behind undertaking this research was to emphasize the need for the involvement of local communities in achieving realistic and sustainable solutions for coastal conservation. Through traditional knowledge and environment-friendly techniques, local communities can contribute at the national and international levels for reducing marine pollution. The research brought forth the gaps in the existing treaties and conventions regarding how to involve local communities in coastal conservation. In due course of the research, through case studies, the paper brings out the various challenges in transitioning towards a locally-driven approach to sustainable development that makes room for culling out beneficial and inclusive community-based solutions.

The sheer irony associated with the principle of community participation is that its endorsers cannot escape the vices that accompany this idea. While there seem to be a plethora of academic interventions regarding this idea, there is hardly any literature available that gives perspective on the 'on-ground' implementation of this principle. The shortcoming lies not only at the end of academia but also at the national and international agencies that to satiate their greed have chosen to look the other way. It would be emphatically fallacious to view this issue only from the lens of the right of indigenous people over their resources or enforcement of democratic framework or human rights. The major theme concerns the cost of environmental impact due to the lax approach of agencies towards this issue. It is not an exaggeration to state that the situation is becoming worse by the day and the bare minimum effort is not going to float us through the situation. The governments of the world need to awaken to the reality that if we don't act now then the loss can become irreversible forever.

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