

Case Study: Gunis and Medicinal Plant Conservation Farmers Bio-cultural Protocol

COMMUNITY BACKGROUND

- The *Gunis* (traditional healers) and medicinal plant conservation farmers live in the Mewar Region of Rajasthan, India.
- As their communities' primary health providers, the *Gunis* ensure people's well-being through adherence to their virtues of selfless service and caring for the environment.
- Their spirituality is integrally connected with nature through a sacred relationship and deep sense of kinship and compassion.
- In August 2009 the community developed a bio-cultural community protocol to address the protection of their traditional knowledge.

KEY ISSUES

A. Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity

- *In situ* medicinal plants conservation areas (which include endangered species), home herbal gardens, conservation farming of medicinal plants for local markets, *Guni* Ashrams (nurseries for donation to villagers), and customary norms of harvesting all embody the bio-spiritual values that ensure the conservation and sustainable use of medicinal plants.

B. Traditional Knowledge and Plant and Animal Genetic Resources

- The *Gunis*, which include both women and men, are culturally diverse and have specific types of traditional knowledge, practices, and understanding of ailments and illnesses that are shared between *Gunis* and with their students.
- They have traditional knowledge and practices about medicinal plant resources and
- They also have ethno-veterinary knowledge about livestock breeds and help conserve nearby pastoralists' animal genetic resources.

C. Prior Informed Consent and Benefit Sharing

- The sharing and use of traditional knowledge must be according to their customary laws and spiritual values, i.e. must not degrade the environment or deny treatment of the poorest in society.
- Anyone interested in accessing their traditional knowledge must give full disclosure about the intended uses and engage in discussions with the governing body to acquire free, prior and informed consent.
- Any traditional knowledge provided must be compensated according to their values of reciprocity and equilibrium so that benefits are shared with the environment and involved *Guni's* community.

D. Challenges

- The Government of India is increasingly restricted the *Gunis'* access to some state conservation areas that they rely upon and to which they contribute to the conservation and sustainable use.
- Commercial harvesters are placing too much pressure on the plant resources.

RIGHTS & RESPONSIBILITIES

A. Rights within National Indian Law

- The right to conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity (The Biological Diversity Act, 2002).
- The right of ownership and access to continue traditional collection and use forest products and the right to protect against forest practices that may degrade their cultural and natural heritage

(The Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006).

- The right to give free, prior and informed consent, to negotiate mutually agreed terms to access genetic resources and traditional knowledge, and to receive fair and equitable benefits arising from their use (The Biological Diversity Act, 2002).
- The right to continue their traditional ways of life, knowledge, innovations, and practices that contribute to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity (The Biological Diversity Act, 2002, and The Biological Diversity Rules, 2004).

B. Additional Community Demands

- Further development of Indian domestic laws in adherence with internationally agreed standards.
- Establishment of Biodiversity Management Committees to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of livestock breeds and associated traditional knowledge.
- Securing of the *Gunis'* customary harvesting of medicinal plants to enable the continuance of their traditional ways of life and roles as environmental stewards.
- Introduction of permits for *Gunis* to gain access to strict conservation areas and harvest plants according to a combination of their customary norms and forest officials.
- Recognition by government of *Gunis* and medicinal plant conservation farmers as village conservators or village botanists.

C. Community Commitment

- To uphold their roles as custodians of the forests and medicinal plant conservation areas through the continued use and development of traditional knowledge, innovations and practices that ensure the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and genetic resources.