Community-based environmental education in context: Learning from community-based conservation initiatives from India by Shailash Shukla

Context: Community-based approaches to environmental education (EE) are receiving renewed interest in recent time. United National Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s vision of education for sustainable future strongly endorses the idea of community-based education for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2005). This approach to community-based EE is influenced by socially critical and participatory research and recently adopted by Governments (such as Environmental Protection Agency, USA) to design, implement and evaluate their EE programs. According to EPA(2000), effective community-based EE programs have four characteristics: i) local community’s interests, concerns and strengths are central; ii) collaboration among various actors is essential; iii) informed action is empowering and productive; and iv) various educational tools and techniques should be used at the community level for improved action. These approaches may face several challenges in addressing local environmental issues with a range of stakeholders, including local communities. This challenge becomes more difficult while designing such approaches for rural, tribal, educationally and economically disadvantaged communities of developing countries.

Local communities of such regions, however, have developed their own conservation mechanisms for their survival and in sustainable management of natural resources. These community-based conservation initiatives have been recognized by international agencies (Equator initiative, UNDP, 2002) and conservation scholars (Kothari et al., 2000) for achieving seemingly contradictory goals of biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction. However, the achievement of these goals and effectiveness of community-based conservation programs can be enhanced, if they are viewed as ‘a set of tools’ (Hackel, 1999; p.733) than simply as conservation programs. EE has been suggested as one such useful tools (Hackel, 1999), which can improve the local acceptability of community-based conservation (Pagliola et al., 1998). These recommendations by conservation scholars, however, were not seriously considered by EE researchers. This research was an attempt to bridge this gap by examining local conservation initiatives through conceptual lenses of community-based EE.

Objectives: The purpose of this research was to understand community-based conservation through a new perspective and application of community-based environmental education. Two specific objective of this research were: i) understand describe the community-based conservation initiatives; ii) evaluate the outcomes of these initiatives through principles of community-based EE; and iii) to discuss theoretical implications for re-envisioning community-based EE as a socially critical approach.

Methods and selection of cases: The theoretical orientations of this research were largely pragmatic and interpretivist and participatory- where research participants' views were prioritized and analyzed. Given the complex, distinctive and non-predictive nature of research issues, a case study design approach (Yin, 1993) was considered as an appropriate mode of inquiry. Two community-based conservation cases from India were selected following three criteria: i) A track record of participatory management through international recognition for community-based conservation/development; ii) Evidence of successful use of local knowledge in conservation and/or development (For example, establishment of network of local knowledge experts, local knowledge databases, national recognition for such work) and iii) willingness of

1 By local Community, I mean, the local residents who lived and worked in villages, have common ties with or interest in village environmental issues and engaged in social interaction through common village development activities. These features of communities are derived from Hillery’s (1955) definition of community.
the key persons associated with the initiatives to participate in the study. This research used various data collection methods in close consultation with local communities of Amboli and Baripada. The first case selected was RCMPCC (Rural Communes’ Medicinal Plant Conservation Center), Pune. The RCMPCC was recognized by the Equator Initiative of UNDP as an outstanding example of community-based conservation in the year 2002 and one of the 27 finalists who received such global recognition. It achieved a great success in advancing the cause of medicinal plant conservation through creation of thirteen medicinal plant conservation areas in the state of Maharashtra while creating alternative livelihood opportunities through participatory and collaborative modes such as a community network of local healers and collaborative botanical inventories. The second case of Baripada’s Forest Conservation was selected in close consultation with an international NGO called SRISTI (www.sristi.org). The local villagers of tribal and remote village of Baripada have been conserving Government Reserved Forest of 445.28 hectares since 1993 mainly through community-crafted access, resource-use, and conflict-resolution rules. The State Forest department, after realizing the community spirit, legitimized the informal village forest protection committee into joint forest management protection committee in 1999 and honored Baripada with a cash award of Rs 1 lakh ($2800 CAD). A Rome-based International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) recognized Baripada’s efforts in conservation and self-driven development and awarded them with one of the best examples of ‘local knowledge and innovations’ from Asian region in 2003. Informal and semi-structured interviews (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2000) with the key persons associated with both initiatives were conducted to understand the context and impact of selected initiatives. In addition, researcher closely observed these initiatives as a part of field research which took place in Amboli (one of the thirteen MPCA established by RCMPCC) and Baripada villages from September 2003 to March 2004.

Findings and significance: Both these initiatives demonstrated evidence of effective community-based EE, i.e. localness (e.g. use of local healers and their traditional knowledge, local in-kind support), collaboration (e.g. linkages with other levels of government and Non-Governmental organization), informed action for local conservation and development (e.g. community-based monitoring of resources) and some degree of the use of proven educational tools (assessment of local biodiversity). By applying the principles of community-based EE (which originally evolved in the context of developed country like USA) in developing country like India, and especially among socially and economically disadvantaged communities and regions, this research expanded the scope and theoretical application of this evolving construct of community-based EE. The criteria of community-based exemplified in two CBC initiatives, resonate well with the theoretical premise of socially critical EE (Robottom and Hart, 1993; Sauvé, 1996), except for two mutually missing links. The first is a strong evidence of recognition and use of local knowledge of communities, alongside with formal knowledge systems as strongly exhibited by communities in both initiatives. The second is the role local schools as an important stakeholder, shaping and being shaped by local community’s action and empowerment, as envisioned by socially critical EE. Linkages to school at any level, were almost absent in RCMPCC initiative and was faintly visible in the self-organization of Baripada initiative. The community-based EE that recognizes and builds on local knowledge and ensure active participation of schools can create the ‘discourse of hope’ (Malone, 1996) among school grounds, community-based conservation areas and strengthen the vision of community-based conservation.

By mutually missing link, I mean a criteria or evidence is very weak or absent in either socially critical EE (on the basis of literature) or community-based EE initiatives (on the basis of analysis of two cases).