Chapter 5:
TRANSPARENCY

In an equal conservation partnership, there is no room for deceit or withholding information. It is the conservationist's responsibility to clearly communicate conservation goals to community members, explain why certain choices are made and what effects they might have. It is important that community members are involved in making choices, from conservation interventions to hiring of local staff. Community members must be provided with opportunities and avenues to seek explanations and share their advice and misgivings regarding conservation programs. Transparency requires that communication be maintained not just with community leaders or local program coordinators, but the average community member.

Transparency has various dimensions, and has high importance in community-based conservation efforts. It is ethically desirable, helps in improving program efficiency and adaptive improvement of interventions, building trust, and avoiding factionalism and favoritism.

The ethical perspective

In the most general sense, transparency implies disclosure of our purpose, and clear communication of our goals to the community. It is important that we initiate discussions with community members by declaring – and periodically reiterating – our main purpose, which is to promote biodiversity conservation with their support and involvement. Not quite the way we initiated our discussions with the herder who had killed a snow leopard (see Chapter 4: RESPECT).

Transparency implies there is no room for deceit. It also renders unacceptable the deliberate withholding of information regarding the interventions, especially their potential weaknesses and uncertainties.

It is also useful, where appropriate, to openly discuss potential conditions of discontinuation or failure of interventions, partly because such a situation can otherwise lead to discontent, and even cause internal divisions. Transparency implies that any potential negative impacts of the intervention on the community be clearly stated and discussed, in the real spirit of non-malfeasance.

As discussed earlier, communities are not homogeneous entities. There are power imbalances among people, and there is always the reasonable possibility that community-based conservation efforts benefit some people more than others. Transparency in the process and interventions can help achieve greater participation and equitability in the distribution of responsibilities and benefits among community members (also see Chapter 6: NEGOTIATION).

This implies that periodic communication be maintained not just with community leaders or local program coordinators, but also the average program participant, and even the non-participant community member. These interactions need not always be formal, and, in fact, tend to be more productive in informal settings.

Another important aspect of transparency is that community members should be able to make suggestions and share their misgivings, either in a group or even individually. They should be able to do so without any fear of reprisal. If warranted, their confidentiality needs to be respected – paradoxically in the interest of transparency.

Community members should be able to seek answers and explanations from us regarding the conservation programs. We have a professional obligation to share information with them, and being communicative and approachable is a fundamental step in enabling effective information exchange and accountability.

Transparency in praxis

Truthful and open communication is important for building trust, and for creating integrative interventions (see Chapter 6: NEGOTIATION). Transparent, collaborative monitoring of program performance, together with a sense of ownership, also makes the adaptive improvement of conservation interventions much easier (see Chapter 6: NEGOTIATION and Chapter 8: RESPONSIVESS).

As mentioned earlier, declaring and periodically reminding the community about our main purpose is a first step in transparency. Incidentally, it also helps in reiterating the conservation requirements and linkages of any community-

based intervention, something that is not always strongly conspicuous in the interventions, or easily retainable in peoples' memories (see Chapter 6: NEGOTIATION).

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Another aspect of transparency is the clarity of shared objectives, norms and rules of any intervention, and the roles and responsibilities of the conservation organization, the community, and individual members of the community. This is discussed in detail later (Chapter 6: NEGOTIATION). For now, it is useful to keep in mind that transparency does not imply making a single set of rules and trying to implement it uniformly. As discussed earlier, every initiative is ideally tailored at the level of the community, and it is at the individual community level that there is clear identification of roles and responsibilities.

Transparency in choice

Sometimes, choices need to be made from within the community. For instance, while one tries to cover as many of the households as possible in community-based conservation interventions, there are situations when maximizing participation is not desirable: e.g. while trying out a new intervention, when it is prudent to work with a small but representative sample from within the community.

How do we decide whom to work with? Preferably, we don't, and it is the community that makes such choices collectively instead. This helps prevent inadvertent factional alliances, and it helps rule out perceptions of favoritism.

Local communities commonly face such issues of choice. These come in the form of occasional employment from the government or other livelihood opportunities to the community where the demand outstrips supply. Or they come in the form of responsibilities that a few of the households are asked to shoulder on behalf of the entire community.

Most local communities have fair and transparent systems to deal with this. They work on rotation or through drawing lots between households. In situations where individual skills or characteristics required by our experimental design or other program needs are deemed necessary, communities can also potentially adopt mechanisms for incorporating qualifying benchmark skills or conditions into the selection system.

Where such systems are available, it is best to explain the requirement to the community, and rely on their system to make the choices amongst households or individuals. In cases where the suitability, transparency or equitability of such local systems is in doubt, it is still important to involve the community, assist in framing the rules of selection, and to respectfully ensure that those rules are followed in making the choices.

The same principle applies to the hiring of people. We often hire individuals from the local community to assist with research and conservation work. Some of them, in fact, have grown over time into becoming highly effective conservationists in their own right.

More often than not, we make the choice of which community members to hire. Though we may seek the advice of community leaders, elders, or generally knowledgeable people, the selection and choice is the conservationist's. At least, this is how I worked initially. When the program was relatively small, it seemed to work. When it started growing larger, there were problems.

In some communities, we were no longer allowed to do this. They had rather strong and equitable systems of distributing opportunities amongst the households, and insisted on us following them. The system worked on rotation, and, in some of them, the beneficiary could hold the privilege only for a specified period of time, say a year or two, after which, the job would shift to another household.

Not surprisingly, this wasn't easy to accommodate. Not every individual has the same interest, or is equally capable. And the lack of continuity meant that constant effort had to be invested in orienting the person to the job requirement.

Our system wasn't working. But nor was the community's. Community leaders were pointing to the unfairness to the households when we made the choice. I was pointing to the problems we faced when they were choosing. Finally, through discussions and negotiation, we worked out an integrative solution (see Chapter 6: NEGOTIATION).

In the new system, the communities still make the choice, and they do so transparently and equitably. However, their final choice is from a truncated pool of households that have potential candidates specifically suited for the job at hand, based on the requirements we provide them. These usually include standards of competency in language and communication skills, level of education, and the extent of travel and fieldwork likely to be involved. The community doesn't insist on any time period to be imposed on the terms of hiring. If a particular hire doesn't work out, we go back to the community representatives to discuss the issue. The problem is resolved amicably through a new hire, following a similar procedure where the community plays an important and transparent role.

While removing a program staff member belonging to the community, it is similarly useful to ensure that the community representatives are fully involved in a perceptibly fair and respectful process of removal. Helping protect the individual's dignity, if not their job, becomes even more important because, unlike in a regular job, the individual does not go away after removal, but continues to live in the same community.

Providing the person a chance to explain, and if removal is mandated, encouraging them to resign rather than be removed, allows a face-saving avenue. Unless the problem is due to some serious and unacceptable misconduct, it is best to rest the blame on circumstances or a mismatch of needs and skills rather than the individual's incompetence. Otherwise, a seemingly small issue like a staff change can potentially have a disproportionate effect on the larger relationship with the community.

The potential positive influence of local champions on the community for conservation or other pursuits tends to erode when financial rewards gets involved, even if entirely legitimate.

There is the related issue of what I have earlier referred to as local champions. It is useful to recognize that, more often than not, behind the successful implementation of conservation interventions at the community level is usually the disproportionate influence of one or more individuals from the community.

There is often the temptation to hire such individuals. This is certainly a convenient short-term arrangement, might sometimes be useful, but is not always a good idea. The potential positive influence of local champions on the community for conservation or other pursuits tends to erode when financial rewards get involved, even if they're entirely legitimate.

Fortunately, these local champions tend to also be amongst the more self-sufficient members of a community, and are often less in need of livelihood opportunities. Like Makhan (see Chapter 1: PRESENCE), they are often motivated by the pride of being involved in programs of societal relevance, and by their relationship with the conservationist, rather than by a desire for personal gain.

Dos:

- Disclosing our purpose and clearly communicating conservation goals to the community
- Reiterating our desire for beneficence and non-malfeasance
- Maintaining transparency whenever making choices, such as the selection of households for a pilot intervention, or hiring of community members as program staff
- Interacting periodically with a broad set of community members, not just leaders or local program coordinators

Don’ts:

- Withholding information from communities, especially about potential negative impacts of conservation interventions
- Making decisions and choices without consulting the community
- Hiring local champions as paid program staff