



Ethiopian Biodiversity Institute (EBI)

Policy Brief on Biodiversity Related local Community Knowledge: A Neglected Category of Wisdom

May 2024
Addis Ababa



Biodiversity Related Local Community Knowledge: A Neglected Category of Wisdom

1. Summary

Community knowledge holds immense value in biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. It encompasses a wide range of wisdom of practices, innovations and technologies that have been refined over generations. Integrating this knowledge into policies and strategies is not only a matter of preserving cultural heritage but is also important for addressing the multifaceted challenges associated with biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. Recognizing and valuing community knowledge can significantly contribute to more inclusive, effective and sustainable biodiversity conservation efforts.

In Ethiopia, exclusion of community knowledge from policy-making processes has led to inadequate conservation measures and limited community involvement, hindering the long-term sustainability of the country's biodiversity and impeding socio-economic development.

It is imperative that policy-makers recognize the importance of community knowledge and take proactive steps to integrate it into decision-making processes, ensuring the long-term conservation and sustainable use of Ethiopia's unique genetic resources and associated community knowledge in particular and biodiversity resources in general. This policy brief highlights the urgent need to integrate community knowledge into national policies and strategies so as to enhance conservation efforts, promote sustainable resource management and foster socio-economic development while preserving cultural heritage.

2. Introduction

The knowledge held by local communities, often referred to as community knowledge or indigenous and local knowledge (ILK), has proven to be vital in biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. Ethiopia acquires enormous biodiversity which is inextricably linked to local community knowledge. Ethiopia's rich biodiversity plays a crucial role in providing ecosystem services that are vital for the well-being of its people, sustainable development of the nation and environmental and social health at different levels. However, the conservation of this invaluable natural heritage faces significant challenges due to natural and anthropogenic factors, including adverse impacts of climate change. One of the reasons that has contributed to this end is a failure in making use of the diverse community knowledge in conservation and development endeavors, resulting in a failure to tap the wealth of traditional wisdom and practices that ought to be passed from generation to generation. In consequence, hitherto conservation interventions have often been disconnected from local realities as portrayed by limited community involvement leading to inadequate resource management and the associated loss of cultural heritage.

To overcome the deficiency and harness the potential of community knowledge, it is essential to develop a comprehensive policy and legal framework that explicitly recognize its value and integrate it into decision-making processes. Such framework could support the documentation and use of community knowledge while actively promoting its use in biodiversity conservation and sustainable development initiatives. By doing so, Ethiopia can sustain the collective wisdom of local communities, enhance conservation efforts and promote sustainable resource management while preserving cultural heritage.

In light of the above considerations, policy recommendations are put forth to guide the integration of community knowledge into policies and strategies in Ethiopia. This policy brief presents the rationale, policy options and key policy recommendations that improve the integration of community knowledge and wisdom into biodiversity policies and strategies.

3. Rationale

Ethiopia's biodiversity and ecosystem services are highly threatened by natural and anthropogenic factors. The problem is compounded by the failure to integrate community knowledge in policy-making processes. This has resulted in limited community involvement with the consequence of implementing inadequate conservation measures that ultimately resulted in loss of biodiversity and associated cultural heritage.

The limited attention dedicated to community knowledge *vis-a-vis* policy-making processes poses serious challenges that jeopardize biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.

The major challenges include:

1. **Inadequate promotion and integration of community knowledge:** The insufficient consideration of community knowledge during policy-making processes has led to a lack of understanding and appreciation for traditional practices that have proven effective in conserving biodiversity. Local communities possess a deep understanding of their ecosystems, including the interdependencies between genetic diversity and the sustainable use of resources. By overlooking community knowledge, policy-makers miss-out on valuable insights that could inform more effective conservation strategies.
2. **Limited community participation:** Due to overlooking of community knowledge, local communities who generated and developed the category of knowledge are often left out of policy and decision-making processes. This limited involvement undermines the sense of ownership and responsibility that communities have towards their natural resources. Full involvement of communities in policy development and implementation is, therefore, essential for fostering a sense of stewardship and ensuring sustainable management of biodiversity.
3. **Unpreparedness to adopt local sustainable practices:** Community knowledge encompasses traditional practices and techniques that promote sustainable resource management. This includes, among others, traditional agricultural methods, water management systems and natural resources governance. However, there exists an evident lack of preparedness to integrate local knowledge in different spheres of operations pertaining to biodiversity conservation and sustainable utilization. Insufficient integration of community knowledge results in missed opportunities that could enhance effective integration of sustainable practices into policy frameworks. Therefore, it is

compulsory to be prepared to integrate local knowledge, innovations and practices in all ventures of conservation and sustainable development.

4. **Inadequate recognition of local peoples' adaptative strategies environmental changes: ecosystem-based resilience and adaptation:** Local communities have knowledge and wisdom to adapt to environmental changes and maintain their livelihoods in challenging conditions, i.e., they demonstrate resilience to continually changing situations. The adaptive strategies are principally based on knowledge of on climate adaptation techniques such as crop diversification, soil conservation and water management. Integrating community knowledge into policies and strategies is a necessary prerequisites to enhance resilience of communities at local level and beyond.
5. **Erosion of cultural heritage:** Traditional knowledge and practices are an integral part of the cultural heritage of local communities. Overlooking community knowledge from the perspective of policy-making does not only disregard the cultural significance of this knowledge but also contributes to the erosion of cultural identities. Therefore, recognizing and valuing community knowledge is essential for preserving cultural heritage and promoting biodiversity conservation.

Addressing the above challenges requires considerations for integrating local community knowledge into national policy and strategy-making processes. By recognizing the values of community knowledge, policy-makers can tap into the wealth of traditional wisdom and practices, enhance conservation efforts, promote sustainable resource management and foster long-term socio-economic development while preserving cultural heritage.

4. Policy Options

1. **Issuing a Stand-alone Policy :** A stand-alone local knowledge policy formulation refers to making a dedicated policy that facilitates the integration of community knowledge into various sectoral and cross-sectoral issues, thereby fostering biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. Promoting local knowledge favours the active participation of local communities, the integration of traditional practices, capacity building, institutional support, the safeguarding of local community rights and monitoring mechanisms. Valuing community knowledge, bridging scientific and local wisdom, and empowering local communities will enable Ethiopia develop context-specific conservation strategies that promote sustainability while respecting cultural

diversity. In other words, through stand-alone policy formulation, Ethiopia will be better positioned to empower communities, strengthen conservation efforts and promote sustainable resource management. Furthermore, the approach will enable policy makers to design more inclusive, effective and culturally sensitive conservation strategies that benefit both biodiversity and its people.

2. *Mainstream community knowledge issues into other policy tools:* Mainstreaming community knowledge issues into other policy documents involves integrating community knowledge considerations into existing policy documents related to biodiversity conservation, environmental management and socio-economic development. This approach aims to embed community knowledge considerations across various policy areas, ensuring systematic incorporation into decision-making processes. By mainstreaming community knowledge issues, policymakers will be motivated to adopt a holistic approach to biodiversity conservation and development, leveraging traditional wisdom alongside scientific knowledge to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Key aspects of mainstreaming community knowledge issues include the integration of community knowledge into policy frameworks, aligning traditional practices with modern conservation strategies, promoting collaboration between local communities and governmental bodies, and strengthening cross-sectoral coordination. By incorporating community knowledge considerations into existing policies, Ethiopia will be in position to exercise a comprehensive and inclusive approach to biodiversity conservation and development, recognizing the valuable contributions of community knowledge and its holders.

3. *Maintaining the Status Quo:* To maintain the status quo in Ethiopia, the current approach needs to be continued without engaging in policy formulation with the intention of integrating community knowledge in conservation and sustainable development endeavors. Nevertheless, this option could lead to a progressive exclusion of community knowledge from policy-making processes, leading to significant biodiversity conservation challenges, limited community involvement and missed opportunities for sustainable resource management. Furthermore, maintaining the status quo will hinder progress towards more inclusive and effective conservation and development efforts, necessitating careful consideration of the trade-offs.

Opting to maintain the status quo will put Ethiopia at the risk of neglecting the valuable knowledge and ages old practices which assisted the country to acquire recognition from the global community as a centre origin and diversity.

5. Policy Recommendations

- 1. Prioritize stand-alone policy formulation:** The development of specific policies that explicitly recognize the value of community knowledge is critical to integrating traditional wisdom into national policies and strategies in Ethiopia. Prioritizing the formulation of a stand-alone policy will pave the way for utilizing the local knowledge component for conservation and sustainable development, empowering local communities, bridging the gap between scientific and community knowledge and adapting to local contexts thereby promoting resilience and sustainability.
- 2. Integrate Community Knowledge into Existing Policy Documents:** Although the formulation of a stand-alone policy is crucial, it is equally important to integrate community knowledge related issues into existing and forthcoming policy documents. This approach will enhance a complete and systematic integration of traditional knowledge in all policy areas, fostering a holistic approach to biodiversity conservation and development that leverages scientific and local wisdom to achieve sustainable results.
- 3. Depart from the Status Quo:** It is by no means appreciable to maintain the current approach that excludes community knowledge from policy-making processes. The prevailing trend perpetuates biodiversity conservation challenges, neglects the valuable knowledge of local communities, and hinders progress towards inclusive and effective conservation and development efforts. It is, therefore, essential to move away from the *status quo* to unlock the full potential of community knowledge for sustainable development in Ethiopia.