

Summary Report of UNEP-supported Side Event at the 9th Ad Hoc Open-Ended Working Group on Access and Benefit-sharing (WG ABS 9) in Cali, Colombia

April 9, 2010

Natural Justice

UNEP supported Natural Justice to host a side event at the WG ABS 9 in Cali, Colombia, on March 25, 2010. The side event was entitled, “Participatory approaches to implementing the IRABS through community empowerment, including launch of ABS sustainable forest management study”. Based on the increasing recognition of the critical need to enable indigenous peoples and local communities to effectively engage with ABS agreements, the event aimed to discuss innovative participatory approaches and tools that can be used to empower communities to take ownership over and within ABS processes. After discussions on March 24, it was decided that two colleagues would join the event to launch a study on ABS and sustainable forest management.

Balakrishna Pisupati (UNEP-DELIC) introduced the event, outlining the importance of the participation of communities in international processes such as ABS. Suhel al-Janabi (GeoMedia) and Olivier Rukundo (CISDL) presented on a recent workshop and a study on ABS and sustainable forest management, including how ABS measures can support the involvement of forest-based indigenous peoples and local communities.

Holly Shrumm (Natural Justice) began by giving an overview of some of the international instruments that call for the participation of indigenous peoples and local communities in decision-making and implementation of environmental laws and policies. She discussed the use of role-playing games in raising awareness in communities about international and national environmental laws and policies, including the well-being game and scenario case studies that Natural Justice has been developing and using in community workshops. These tools help raise awareness about different situations that a community may face within the context of environmental frameworks such as ABS, REDD, and protected areas, encourage reflection on local interests and priorities, and promote constructive dialogue and collaborative decision-making.

She also discussed the use of participatory methodologies in gathering and communicating information critical to the engagement of communities in ABS processes, such as traditional knowledge of plants and animals (taxonomy, distribution, etc.), local demography and natural resource use patterns, and locations and meanings of cultural and sacred sites. One approach is participatory mapping, which includes GPS, GIS, and 3-D modelling. These tools have been used by many communities and NGOs in South Africa, Australia, and Malaysia, among others, and ensure that the communities themselves collect data on natural and cultural resources. They engage youth in the documentation and transmission of traditional ecological knowledge and provide concrete data to other stakeholders such as researchers and national parks authorities in “languages” they can understand. Another approach to gathering and communicating information is participatory video and photography, which is also very useful in local

empowerment processes. Since traditional knowledge is typically passed on orally or through intangible cultural expressions such as songs or festivals, this approach enables communities to express their narrative and visual understandings of their worldviews and ways of life. Participatory video and photography not only promote inter-generational transmission of traditional knowledge, but also engage typically under-represented groups such as women and youth and facilitate dialogue between communities and other key stakeholders.

Hjalmar-Jorge Eichhorn-Joffre (Natural Justice consultant) then discussed the theoretical background of participatory community theatre, citing its foundations in Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed methodology. He facilitated three short activities with volunteers from the audience to illustrate how the methodology can be used to engage communities in a process of internal reflection, communication, and visioning.

Overall, participatory methodologies such as these help bridge the typical "language" barriers between traditional knowledge and Western science, and between communities and government and conservation agencies and researchers (and other stakeholders in ABS processes). They help raise awareness within communities of the contexts and potential impacts of environmental laws and policies and empower them to engage with them according to their unique contexts and priorities.