

CHM+

the CBD Clearing House Mechanism
as a capacity building tool

Commissioned by Ecooperation, The Netherlands,
and Fundecooperación, Costa Rica

May 2002

AIDEnvironment

Rolf Kleef, Robin Pistorius

CHM+

the CBD Clearing House Mechanism
as a capacity building tool

Commissioned by Ecooperation, The Netherlands,
and Fundecooperación, Costa Rica

May 2002

AIDEnvironment

Rolf Kleef, Robin Pistorius

Donker Curtiusstraat 7-523

1051 JL AMSTERDAM

Tel. +31 20 6868111

Fax. +31 20 6866251

Email: kleef@aidenvironment.org, pistorius@aidenvironment.org

Website: www.aidenvironment.org

A846p846

Contents

Summary	3
1 Background of this report	5
1.1 Acknowledgements	6
2 The ABS discussion	7
2.1 Website architecture	8
2.2 Process and themes.....	8
2.3 Results and lessons learned	9
2.4 Conclusion	10
3 Current CHM activities	11
3.1 CHM and information exchange.....	11
3.2 Capacity building	12
3.3 Gaps in capacity	12
3.4 Conclusion	13
4 Creating the CHM+	15
4.1 Ingredients for the CHM+	16
4.2 Information buying power	17
4.3 Recommendations for CHM	17
4.4 Conclusion	19

Summary

Background of this report

This report was commissioned by Ecooperation (The Netherlands) and Fundecooperación (Costa Rica), the coordinating organizations for the Sustainable Development Agreement (SDA) between the four countries Benin, Bhutan, Costa Rica and The Netherlands. In a successful process of knowledge-sharing, using both internet-based discussions and regular meetings, participants in all four countries established an active exchange of experiences and a joint agenda-setting activity in preparation of the COP-VI to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), April 2002.

This approach to capacity building, specifically in developing countries, could provide a valuable addition to the capacity-building activities currently undertaken by the Clearing-House Mechanism (CHM) of the CBD, aimed at scientific and technical cooperation. AID Environment, who designed, implemented, and facilitated the online discussions, was asked to make an inventory of the current relevant experiences within the CHM and national focal points (NFP), and formulate recommendations on how the experiences from the ABS discussions can be integrated in the current activities.

This report provides background information on the experiences of the ABS discussion, and on the activities within the framework of the CHM, and draws a vision on how the CHM could be extended to a "CHM+", with recommendations for next steps.

Recommendations

There is a gap between the current, "knowledge-centric" approach in the form of increasing levels of information standards and exchange, and the "knower-centric" needs of NFPs and parties implementing the CBD to find the relevant knowledge and experiences, both in terms of general participation in CBD discussions, and in terms of establishing a CHM NFP.

Collaborative workspaces and a community of practice of NFPs can create an exchange of experiences and 'mentor-ships' that effectively provide 'stepping stones' to bridge the gap between needs and limited resources, and the wealth of information, documents and standards available.

1 Background of this report

SDA and ABS

In the context of the quadrilateral Sustainable Development Agreements (SDAs), Benin, Bhutan, Costa Rica and The Netherlands have started to support each other in the implementation of Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) regulation as agreed upon during the COP-V of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Under the SDA agreements, the four countries not only donate or receive technical and financial assistance, but also undertake reciprocal obligations by jointly identifying priorities, needs and compromise areas.

Through a specially designed website¹, the four countries started a process of pre-consultation in which they actively shared their experiences and information on the ABS issue. The pre-consultation phase was followed by off-line working group sessions: one in Bonn, Germany, during the Meeting of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Access and Benefit Sharing (on 22 - 26 October 2001), another one in Costa Rica in February 2002.

Capacity building

In the context of the implementation of the CBD, this process represents a unique way of capacity building, with a strong focus on communication between experts using both internet-based tools and conventional means. Experiences generated by this process may well serve as an inspiring example on how to implement rather abstract regulations with cut information *on request* and 'down to earth' experiences.

This approach may in particular support developing countries in their efforts to implement the CBD on the basis of a more 'demand driven' information system. To date, the ABS-SDA online dialogue generated an active exchange of information on ABS regulation and implementation between Costa Rica and Bhutan.

The ABS-SDA debate, although it was a pilot project, was able to meet some of the rudimentary needs of Bhutan and Benin. During the debate, both countries were able to directly communicate with Costa Rican and Dutch experts about their in-

¹ The website is available at www.ecooperation.org/abs

formation requirements regarding the implementation of ABS regulation. All parties showed great interest in continuing this process beyond the project timeframe.

CHM

The ABS-SDA project can shed new insights on the question of how to use the Clearing-House Mechanism (CHM) of the CBD as a capacity building tool, specifically in support of developing countries. The CHM is targeted at technical and scientific co-operation, and aims to support National Focal Points of the countries that are party to the CBD in setting up national "NFP CHMs" that support such technical and scientific co-operation. As a prerequisite to such cooperation, the CHM also covers the exchange of information on the implementation of the CBD, and activities for capacity building.

This report wants to provide backgrounds on both the experiences in the ABS discussion, and on current activities of the CHM, and identify ways in which discussion processes in the form of the ABS discussion can contribute to the capacity building efforts of the CHM, thus creating a "CHM+".

1.1 Acknowledgements

We received input for this report from many different sources. We specifically would like to mention Antje Lorch, for her feedback on a draft of this report, and for her information about the CHM² and the outcomes during COP-VI; Marcos Silva of the CHM at the CBD Secretariat, for his information about the strategic plan and purpose of the CHM; and Jorge Cabrera Medaglia of INBio, for his article about the ABS discussion process³.

² See Lorch A. (2002), "Information exchange in the CBD" *Biotechnology and Development Monitor*, No. 49, p. 9-13, <http://www.biotech-monitor.nl/4904.htm>

³ Medaglia J.C. (2002), "Internet opportunities for policy makers -An electronic conference on Access and Benefit Sharing." *Biotechnology and Development Monitor*, No. 49, p. 7-9, <http://www.biotech-monitor.nl/4903.htm>

2 The ABS discussion

ABS and COP

As mentioned, under the SDA agreements, Benin, Bhutan, Costa Rica and The Netherlands agreed to undertake reciprocal obligations by jointly identifying priorities, needs and compromise areas in the area of ABS. The process of preparation for the COP-VI to the CBD, in The Hague in The Netherlands, offered a clear opportunity to give shape to this agreement.

The COP meetings, and the various preparatory meetings, are meant to generate a learning effect among Parties to the CBD. It appears, however, that the COP process is so broadly defined and complex, that many parties cannot digest the information produced in preparation of COP meetings. The implications are felt during the COPs as especially small delegations with little resources are forced to participate as observers instead of active participants. This has implications for their 'presence' and outreach during the COPs.

Pre-consultation

This problem motivated Ecooperation (the custodian of the SDAs) and AID Environment (a not-for-profit consultancy, based in Amsterdam), to propose to the four member countries to set up an ABS pre-consultation trajectory in the period of September/October 2001, using internet tools and regular meetings. To the members, this modality was new. Even though many of the participants were skilled in the use of email and web browsers, the idea of generating an online discussion with different inputs that would eventually evolve into a final statement, had not been practiced before. In summary, the ABS website was to create, stimulate and sustain a transparent exchange of information and views on Access and Benefit Sharing among the SDA countries.

The dialogue was intended to:

- stimulate communication among the ABS experts of the four focal countries, and generate mutual benefits thereof;
- support the participants in their preparations for the Ad Hoc Working Group on ABS (on 22 - 26 October 2001, in Bonn, Germany);
- and as a follow-up of that, support the participants in the formulation of a joint statement on ABS.

Online forum	<p>2.1 Website architecture</p> <p>A website (www.ecooperation.org/abs) was specifically designed to provide an online forum for participants of all four countries. The architecture of the website allowed experts of different organizations to join the discussion. The dialogue was to be non-stop, covering all time zones. The participants did not have to log in simultaneously, so they could react or contribute to the conference at their own convenience, although they were urged to do this on a regular/daily basis.</p>
Personal profiles	<p>A key feature of the architecture was to allow delegations from the four countries to present themselves in country-specific 'delegation rooms'. These rooms allowed representatives to present themselves through a brief CV and their e-mail address, and to upload their portrait.</p> <p>These functionalities allowed participants to directly contact each other outside the main 'conference room'. Although no statistics are available of the quantity of 'bilateral' contacts, personal comments from the Bhutanese and Costa Rican delegates confirm they increasingly had contact with each other through direct e-mails outside the 'conference room'.</p>
Country profiles	<p>Also, the key documents and links to other references for each country were made available in the delegation rooms. This allowed participants to upload documents to support their arguments made in the conference room. This functionality allowed Costa Rica to enhance its role as supplier of information.</p>
Translation service	<p>Another key feature was an integrated translation service. The discussions were in English, but participants could also contribute in either French or Spanish, by simply marking the language of their contribution. These contributions were sent by email to capable human interpreters, who then put the English translation online in the discussion.</p>
Time frame	<p>2.2 Process and themes</p> <p>The ABS website was accessible as from 26 September 2001. The last contribution was submitted on the 17th of February 2002. This period of almost 6 months was divided into four main sessions: session 1-3 in preparation of the Bonn Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group meeting in October 2001, and session 4 in preparation of the Costa Rican workshop in February 2002, during which the main ingredients of a joint statement</p>

on Access and Benefit Sharing were defined (to be presented at COP-VI).

Themes

Each of the online sessions had a specific theme, both to focus the discussion, and to show progress in the discussion. At first, only three rounds were planned, up to the meeting in Bonn. The first round was dedicated to 'setting the agenda', to create both ownership of the discussion among the participants, and to determine the topics for the other sessions. It was decided that the second round of discussion would focus on an exchange of best practices, and the third on a joint statement in Bonn. At the meeting in Bonn, participants decided to continue with a fourth round, focused on a joint statement for COP-VI in The Hague.

Moderation

The sessions were moderated, to generate a certain qualitative and relevant level of exchange of information and views in the wake of the two live workshops. The philosophy behind this approach lies in the fact that offline and online exchanges of information and knowledge are not mutually exclusive, and in many occasions should be complementary. This message was clearly communicated to the participants beforehand, offering them a clear goal (a joint statement) and timeframe to focus on. Most delegates present in Bonn had made use of the website.

Robin Pistorius (AID Environment, The Netherlands) moderated the first three rounds; Jorge Cabrera (INBio, Costa Rica) took over the fourth round.

2.3 Results and lessons learned

The ABS-SDA debate was able to meet some of the rudimentary needs of Bhutan and Benin. During the debate, both countries were able to directly communicate with Costa Rican and Dutch experts about their information requirements regarding the implementation of ABS regulation. All parties showed great interest in continuing this process beyond the project timeframe.

An initial distrust or lack of faith in the mechanism later evolved into an intensive usage of the website, after the participants became aware of the advantages. Based on personal comments and brief written statements we may summarise them as follows:

- The low threshold of participation creates room for discussion. The themes were defined rather broad and geared towards an exchange of experiences instead of discussion on specific issues.
- Each discussion round was introduced by the moderator with a clear reference to statements by the participants. The moderator's role was to steer, inform and motivate during the discussions. The main interest of the moderator was to identify knowledge gaps among the participants and stimulate others to fill these gaps.
- The participants were approached on a personal basis, sometimes on the website itself during the discussions, sometimes 'outside' the meeting through personal emails or phone calls.
- The exchange of views was further enhanced by the possibility to upload information (documents).
- Participants had ample opportunity to ask questions about the modality of the discussion and the workings of the website. This took away much of the hesitations of the Bhutanese delegation. Benin's delegation continued to perform a low-key role, even after the technicalities (problems with telephone lines) had been solved. Later comments from the delegation, however, revealed that they had followed the discussions in great detail as observers.
- A translation service was installed on the website so that the language barriers between the English, French, and Spanish-speaking participants could be overcome. Interesting here is that after the Spanish participants had initially used the service several times, the discussion took such form that they started to feel comfortable contributing in English.

2.4 Conclusion

The ABS project succeeded in providing the participating countries with a tool to even differences in resources, whilst also developing common grounds for cooperation, and creating initial joint activities to establish working relations among participants.

3 Current CHM activities

Structure and purpose

The CHM is coordinated by the Executive Secretary of the CBD, and overseen and guided by an Informal Advisory Committee (IAC) set up by the Parties to the CBD. In addition, a network of National Focal Points (NFPs) for the mechanism is being established, to address matters relating to technical and scientific cooperation.

Parties implementing CBD regulation, and more specifically, preparing for COPs, often use the CHM structure to present and retrieve relevant documentation. There is no overall structure defined of how a CHM NFP should look like, and due to its decentralized nature, and (generally) a shortage of resources and coordination, the collection of the Secretariat's CHM and the various CHM NFPs has a rather fragmented nature.

The CHM supports technical and scientific cooperation with capacity building workshops and projects, and by participation in thematic areas of the CBD, and offers advice in setting up CHM NFPs.

Articles 18.3 and 17

3.1 CHM and information exchange

The overarching question and problem, however, is a general confusion about the exact purpose of the CHM. In article 18.3⁴ of the CBD, the CHM is intended to be a mechanism to promote and facilitate technical and scientific cooperation. Over time, this has been extended to basically also include article 17⁵

⁴ Article 18.3: The Conference of the Parties, at its first meeting, shall determine how to establish a clearing-house mechanism to promote and facilitate technical and scientific cooperation.

⁵ Article 17: The Contracting Parties shall facilitate the exchange of information, from all publicly available sources, relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, taking into account the special needs of developing countries. Such exchange of information shall include exchange of results of technical, scientific and socio-economic research, as well as information on training and surveying programmes, specialized knowledge, indigenous and traditional knowledge as such and in combination with the technologies referred to in Article 16, paragraph 1. It shall also, where feasible, include repatriation of information.

of the Convention, dealing with the exchange of information. This exchange of information, specifically about policies and laws, also is the focus of most CHM NFPs.

The confusion about the actual purpose of the CHM even extends to discussions whether the CHM should also provide support to raise public awareness, and for educational purposes. And there is a need to also foster methods to include indigenous knowledge in the technical and scientific cooperation.

Information standards

3.2 Capacity building

One of the capacity building activities of the CHM is the creation and maintenance of a Toolkit for setting up a CHM NFP. In this Toolkit, and in other activities, the CHM strongly invests in the creation and definition of technical standards for information exchange (in terms of internet standards, database formats, etc.). Building on such standards, the CHM was able to produce a web interface to browse through the information of the Second National Reports for the CBD, aggregating the information in various forms. Paradoxically, however, this reinforces the perception by many that the CHM is an information exchange mechanism.

Training

An interesting example of capacity building is the approach Belgium has taken towards various Francophone African countries. In a partnership program, Belgium helps these countries set up their own CHM NFP, by providing training workshops and technical services and hosting of the websites. As a result, there is both consistency in the structure of these CHM NFPs, and there is more personal exchange of knowledge and expertise between the NFPs.

3.3 Gaps in capacity

At the moment, the focus of most CHM activities is information-technical, and rather supply-driven, to foster the exchange of information, allowing for some cooperation in joining databases and information, but not yet accommodating collaboration between countries and individuals. Such collaboration is intended to be the next phase in building the CHM.

However, there appears to be a growing gap between the level of the information standards defined by the CHM, and the capacity at the NFPs to actually implement these standards. Some capacity building activities seem to aim at rather low-

level technical skills in website maintenance, and several NFPs are struggling with rather basic technical difficulties, or with defining the exact nature or purpose of their national CHM NFP. At the moment, NFPs ask questions to the CHM at the Secretariat, who then sends them on to other NFPs that might be able to help answer these questions.

At the same time, the ABS discussion between the four countries Benin, Bhutan, Costa Rica, and The Netherlands, was started on the observation that there is a gap in capacity to actually participate in the negotiations and processes within the CBD, and implement the outcomes of the conferences.

Knowledge and knower

There clearly is a distinction to be made between “knowledge” and “knower”. Current CHM activities focus on standards in information exchange, useful for knowledge that can be extracted and made explicit in documented form. This “knowledge as independent commodity” can be made available through websites, databases, skills trainings, and so on.

In the actual implementation work, there also is a need for knowledge that is very hard to separate from the context in, and the experiences through which it originated, and from the “knower”. This tacit knowledge includes insights in the actual implementation processes and the political settings, necessary for active participation in conferences and working groups, and guidance to find the way in the wealth of documentation covering many levels of expertise.

3.4 Conclusion

In sum, the CHM has a key role in informing parties on the CBD implementation process. Currently, it offers no specific support for bilateral or multilateral exchange, in which specific demands from parties are linked to relevant, tailor-made, answers. There is a growing demand for such support structures, and this creates an interesting possibility to extend the current CHM activities, to become a CHM+, accommodating various forms of capacity building by collaboration.

4 Creating the CHM+

There are two levels at which the experiences from the ABS discussions could be generalized for the CHM of the CBD:

- to support the implementation of the CBD in general, and
- to support the work of NFPs to implement national CHMs.

Essential in both is increasing demands for multilateral collaborative support, as was offered in the ABS discussion.

CBD process

At the level of biodiversity experts and the process of implementing the CBD, there is an obvious benefit to having online pre-consultations before real meetings. Especially for the least developed countries, this offers a way to work in a more 'demand-driven' way on their efforts to implement the CBD, with very limited resources.

Through partnerships with more experienced countries, the representatives of least developed countries can prepare better for meetings, and have a kind of 'mentor' available before and during the meetings, who also gets to know the situation in their country. This allows representatives from these countries to more actively participate in the discussions, rather than be limited to observe. Given appropriate means of communication, it also allows these countries to capitalize on the knowledge available within their country.

NFP and CHM

At the level of NFPs themselves, there is an even more explicit demand to exchange knowledge and skills. Currently, the gap between the available means for building a CHM NFP that integrates with the global CHM, and the skills and resources to do so, seem to be widening.

Also, the purpose and scope of the CHM is broadening, making the implementation of a CHM NFP more difficult from a content perspective.

The successful example of the Belgium capacity building activities shows the potential for such collaborative approaches. Again, given appropriate extra means of communication, countries with less experience could benefit from such multilateral cooperation even more.

4.1 Ingredients for the CHM+

Key to the example of the ABS discussion, is the choice for multilateral cooperation, where the partners select their own group of participating countries and people, and their own purpose for cooperation, supported by well-tailored means of communication. We see the following essential ingredients for a CHM+.

Trust	In order to raise inter-activity levels from cooperation to collaboration, it is essential that the partners trust each other. For this, participants need to be “visible”, not only in face-to-face meetings, but also between those meetings in “virtual communication”.
Agenda-setting	Both in the example of the ABS discussion, and in the case of the Belgium capacity building program, the participants together decide on the agenda of activities. Such a structured framework for agenda setting is needed to bridge the gap between the more strategic agenda of the CHM and the concrete needs and demands of the participants.
Process design	Following an agenda-setting activity, participants can then formulate what steps they would like to take, and how the general collaboration will be shaped. In the ABS example, there was a clear interaction with other planned activities within the framework of the CBD, in the Belgium program; it includes for instance technical hosting of the websites of participants to mitigate certain technical barriers for success.
Visible progress	Key to keeping the participants motivated, is a visible progress, on a shorter-term timescale. Again, there is a gap between the strategic plan of the CHM and actual activities of NFPs. Whereas there are various ways to see the progress in the overall CHM work and the information standards established, there is limited visibility of progress in how individual NFPs deal with the creation, maintenance, and integration of their CHM NFPs. A growing number of links to other resources and organizations available suggests there is more cooperation as well, but whether this is beyond the level of querying each other’s information is not so clear.
Lessons learned	An important aspect to get to cooperation, is to create opportunities for individuals to exchange their lessons learned. Given the challenge to share rather tacit knowledge, the CHM could

create opportunities where knowledge is shared *in context* as much as possible. Joint activities, such as an online course or workshop, can provide an environment in which participants are stimulated to share their experiences and link those of others as much as possible to their own situation.

4.2 Information buying power

Currently there exists a wide difference in access to the CHM sources due to varying levels of information technology infrastructure and 'information buying power'. If the Secretariat's CHM and the country-specific CHMs would support capacity building within the network, it would especially support least developing countries with little or no manpower to digest the vast CHM information sources. Experiences with the ABS-SDA dialogue show that these countries are well able to tackle this problem if the right communication channels and (on-line) tools are made available.

As a second line, the growing gap between (technical) capacity available, and the information standards, calls for a 'learning path' for NFPs to establish a CHM. Although compliance with the standards agreed upon within the overall CHM framework is the ultimate goal, it might make sense for countries to start with a simpler website to get acquainted with the dynamics of website maintenance and content management. Only after becoming accustomed to these processes, other topics such as information architecture and information standards in format and categorization become relevant.

4.3 Recommendations for CHM

In general terms, there appears to be a widening gap between the front runners in the development of both CBD and CHM activities, and the countries and NFPs that face growing amount of information and standards to digest. Acknowledging the position of NFPs with limited resources and capacity, and providing 'stepping stones' to allow these NFPs to gradually increase their capacity is essential. Using more or less informal workspaces where NFPs and parties involved in the CBD process can meet and exchange experiences, and engage in a kind of mentor-ship relations, various parallel capacity-building activities can be undertaken, without an increased burden on a single organization, such as for instance the Secretariat's CHM.

Peer groups	<p>The workspaces allow for the creation of peer groups, where only a few organizations or countries meet. This creates an increased environment of trust, where most participants will be at similar levels of expertise and capacity. In such an environment, it is easier to establish an agenda of activities that is geared towards the capacity and resources of the organizations involved, creating more effective action-learning environments, and linking to activities undertaken in the framework of the CBD, and involving more participants than only the specific people officially involved in the NFP or the CBD implementation.</p>
Stepping stones	<p>The workspaces also provide 'stepping stones', with different paths for different organizations to move from "no capacity" to "full CHM compliance". Not all NFPs will be able to implement their CHM NFPs according to all established standards and formats at once, and being able to gather experience in smaller chunks can both allow more countries to establish a basic CHM NFP sooner, and allow for more experience in more basic exchange of information as a step towards full cooperation. Likewise, these 'stepping stones' can allow countries to focus on only particular aspects of the CBD and CHM development processes, that are relevant for their particular situation. This way, observers coping with an overload in information can become participants bringing in relevant considerations and experiences that need to be included.</p>
Community of practice	<p>The various workspaces together form a community of practice (CoP) of NFPs, to exchange lessons learned and best practices in setting up a national CHM. The Secretariat CHM can monitor the ongoing interactions to identify important overall lessons, or emerging gaps in implementation.</p>
Visibility of cooperation	<p>The different workspaces and the overall community of practice provides extra visibility to the various forms of cooperation that exist, and stimulate other forms of cooperation outside these particular workspaces, or even the CHM structure. In existing cooperative relations between countries, the more experienced countries can take on a 'mentor-ship' role, thereby increasing the voice of the less experienced countries in the discussions, and being acknowledged for their knowledge and experiences.</p>

4.4 Conclusion

Providing opportunities for countries and NFPs to come together in peer groups, building on existing cooperative relations, and involving more relevant stakeholders, can create an environment of trust and cooperation that can help countries with less capacity or resources to participate in the CBD processes, and to learn from experiences by other countries.

Bringing these peer groups together in a suitable Community of Practice also allows the overall CHM to foster an environment of cooperation, and focus on more generic or strategic development and support, while more particular support and experiences are exchanged by the participants themselves. The peer groups provide excellent action-learning environments that provide a valuable addition to the capacity-building strategy of the CHM.