

# Voices for BioJustice:

## Establishing a Community of Practice on Equitable and Sustainable Biodiversity Use and Commercialisation

### PROJECT SUMMARY

An exciting new three-year project on access and benefit sharing (ABS) has been launched with the support of the Darwin Initiative, The Christensen Fund, and others. The project aims to develop a Community of Practice around ABS to provide advice, act as a conduit for voices currently under-represented in ABS policy processes, and develop conceptual and practical tools to help governments, researchers, and local communities deal with challenges and more effectively engage with ABS. The goal is to make the use and commercialisation of biodiversity more equitable and sustainable.

Although the work is of global relevance, the approach is grounded in case studies from South Africa, Namibia, Cameroon, and elsewhere. These are all biologically and culturally diverse regions that illustrate differing social, economic, commercial, cultural and ecological aspects of ABS and the wider policy framework that impacts equity and conservation in the use of genetic and biological resources. A series of workshops, webinars, videos, policy briefs and in-depth research articles will be produced as part of the project.

### The Problem

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Governments have struggled over the last few decades to translate the ambitious objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) into practice. Limited benefits have emerged for indigenous and local communities, only weak connections have been made with biodiversity conservation, and policy-makers have grappled to keep up with rapid advances in science, technologies and markets.

Despite increased attention paid to ABS capacity development, the voices of local communities have not been adequately incorporated into policy and law, in part due to limited awareness about needs on the ground and the realities of natural product commercialisation. At the same time, conceptual understandings of ABS have also not evolved fast enough to provide an underlying framework for effective ABS policy development.

ABS policy has not realized these goals in part due to the inherent complexity of the objectives it serves, but also because policy makers, researchers, the private sector, NGOs, conservation managers, and indigenous and local communities need on-going support in the form of accessible and useful information, technical tools and advice, and communication facilitation between different actors. Although often at the ‘front lines’ of ABS partnerships, and despite enormous sums having been spent on ABS policy processes in the last few decades, many local actors lack hands-on, practical guidance and assistance over time.

## The Project

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The Project will create a Community of Practice that brings the voices of local groups into ABS policy-making, provides support and policy tools, and deepens dialogue around the conceptual and practical challenges of ABS implementation. It also seeks to create innovative and transferrable approaches to building capacity and facilitating the direct, substantive, and authentic contributions of local groups to policy design and implementation, including for policies on emerging technologies with an impact on biocultural diversity.

## Case Studies

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Although the work is of global relevance, we ground our approach in case studies from biodiverse regions that illustrate differing social, economic, commercial, cultural and ecological aspects of ABS.

In Namibia, the Project will work with traditional authorities to explore understandings and experiences with ABS and related laws and policies using *Myrothamnus flabellifolius*, a 'resurrection' plant used for a variety of natural products. We will analyse commercialisation processes, and develop policy tools to ensure that it is sustainable and local groups control and benefit from this process.

In South Africa, the impact of ABS will be explored in the context of the rooibos industry (*Aspalathus linearis*) and other fynbos species. In partnership with historically marginalised producers, traditional knowledge holders, researchers, NGOs, government and industry, we will develop tools, capacity and understanding to create a more holistic, wide-ranging and environmentally and socially sustainable ABS strategy.

In Cameroon, we will work with local communities, traders, exporters, government, and others on four very different cases of biological and genetic resource commercialization that raise distinct issues around conservation, benefits for local groups, and ABS. The impact of industrial-scale commercialization and ABS measures on species with widely different economic, market, cultural, and ecological profiles will be examined.

## The Community of Practice

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The Community of Practice has three parts, focused on

- (1) Bringing the Voices and Experiences of Local Groups into Policy-Making
- (2) Developing Practical ABS Resources and Tools
- (3) Deepening the Dialogue

Envisaged outputs include videos, webinars, policy and information briefs, research reports and journal articles. A wide-ranging resource group will be established and drawn upon to provide trouble-shooting, advice and resources, also serving to deepen the dialogue within the ABS professional community.

Material will be disseminated through electronic and printed media, including a Project website, and national and international policy processes and workshops. Simple, visual, supporting written materials will be produced and disseminated. Webinars will focus on a set of cross-cutting issues with universal relevance, representing confusing or challenging topics identified by local groups, government, researchers and others.

The Project will also develop a component that focuses on sharing lessons across regions with communities, NGOs, and others around the world grappling with similar issues. The exchanges will provide the first steps in forming a network that could be expanded into more involved exchanges in the coming years.

## Who is Involved?

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A range of universities and NGOs are responsible for implementing the project. The project is co-led by the Bio-economy Chair at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and People and Plants International (PPI). Key project partners are Forests, Resources and People (Cameroon), Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (Namibia), Environmental Monitoring Group (South Africa) and Leeds University (UK).

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See also: [www.bio-economy.org.za](http://www.bio-economy.org.za)

