The African Biodiversity Network (ABN): Building a grassroots momentum for protection of African Heritage

MBURU, Gathuru. Coordinator, African Biodiversity Network

Brief History of ABN

African Biodiversity Network (ABN) is a loose network of individuals and organizations coordinated from a Secretariat in Kenya and the Gaia Foundation in United Kingdom (UK) with regional coordinating nodes in Ethiopia and South Africa. It grew out of a commitment to nurture a new leadership in Africa, dedicated to enhancing biological and cultural diversity, and social and ecological justice.

It networks with over 300 individuals and organizations in more than 12 African countries. ABN has strengthened substantially over the last few years especially in East Southern, and West Africa.

ABN dates its origin back in 1996, during the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Leipzig Conference on Plant Genetic Resources where an African group was formed to negotiate on biodiversity-related issues for Africa. In 2002, ABN was formalized and identified Genetic Engineering (GE), Community Rights, Cultural Biodiversity and Seed Security as key issues to be addressed in Africa.

ABN’s distinctive advantage lies in its strong Pan-African regional outlook and international linkages.

Vision

ABN vision is of an independent, self – sustaining and sovereign Africa inhabited by empowered communities, which have capacity and freedom to pro-actively chart their own future with dignity, while upholding their African values. ABN wishes for peace and mutual respect for ethnic, cultural, religious and biological diversity in present and future generations.

Mission Statement

To work for the liberation of African minds and hearts from domination of outside forces; promotion of a membership that reflects Africa’s diversity; and to facilitate respect inclusive participation at all levels. ABN has a strong continent – wide influence to contribute to the struggles and prosperity of all Africans.

Values
ABN has five core values as follows:-

- **Integrity and Commitment** by members to live by ABN values and to be pioneers of the change they want to see.
- **Honesty and Openness** with ourselves, each other, and everyone we interact with.
- Stand in **solidarity** with those working for justice for humanity and nature, especially small-scale farmers, rural communities, indigenous people and ecosystems of the Earth.
- Ensure **transparency** and **accountability** as the underlying principles of the ABN for equal and full participation of all members.
- To recognize as paramount the values and respect for Africa’s **diversity** of cultures and of living organisms (from genetic level to ecosystem diversity).

**ABN Purpose, Aims & objectives**

**To grow the Network / Network development:**
- To consolidate and expand a broad based active and informed network of concerned Africans engaged in common strategies to protect African’s cultural and biological heritage.
- c) To nurture people and indigenous organizations in Africa to build their capacity to promote sustainable practices and community rights.
- d) To catalyze wider action among African civil societies to enhance diversified livelihoods.

**Key achievements**

The following are some of the key achievements for ABN so far:

- **Network growth:** 12 African countries and is thus able to catalyze wider action. Some network partners are extensively networked thus increasing the potential to reach and impact on the ABN supported processes. Together with this, seven local NGOs have been born out of support and collaboration with ABN particularly to focus on areas that no other NGOs in-country were working on.
- **Regional linkage:** ABN has supported regional collaboration in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania with partners implementing ABN’s Campaign for a Seed Diverse and GE-Free Africa”
- **Local Fundraising:** - ABN has supported its partner organizations to secure independent funding for regional collaborative strategies on GE and Seed Security. It has also supported other partners to raise and manage funds to support their work with indigenous communities who are developing capacity to govern their own territories.
Influencing international policy: On average, four ABN partners are supported per year to attend international fora; to raise the voice of Africa in this issue.

Since 2002, ABN has supported more than 21 case studies on its four thematic areas in more than 10 countries in Africa. Such studies have been fundamental in monitoring developments and advocacy on issues of concern among NGOs and CBOs. One landmark study on land has revealed a growing “Second Scramble for Africa”.

ABN has also supported more than 30 regional training activities with an average of 20 participants per training in form of workshops, courses and exchanges in fundraising, proposal writing, financial management, sustainable agriculture, genetic engineering, participatory strategies and ecological mapping. To date, more than 100 people have been supported for learning exchanges in Botswana, Colombian Amazon and India to promote biodiversity protection, sustainable livelihoods and ecological governance.

Information Sharing and dissemination: - To date, ABN has produced 8 Newsletters, 300 mail outs and briefings and sent 250 resource materials to key ABN learning centers to broaden the network and keep a breast on thematic areas within the network and on international developments.

Coalition Building: As a result of the ABN capacity building activities in baseline studies, multi – stakeholder workshops and provision of on-going networking, fundraising and facilities to support continued growth, 6 country partners (Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Zambia, South Africa and Kenya) have formed coalitions for GE moratoria. These coalitions have stood united and are constantly learning from each other through ABN. The coalitions are now taking up campaigns on agro-fuels and the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA).

Regional Collaboration: The ABN has organized a large regional strategy workshop on Genetic Engineering (GE) which brought together Africans from Anglophone and Francophone countries and resulted in a united Civil Society Organization (CSO) declaration on GE, Biosafety and Community Rights. It also strengthened country collaboration and development of Regional Strategies relating to the Seed Diverse and GE free zones campaign. There are growing links with Nordic countries, Asia and Latin America.

Supporting innovative processes for the intergenerational transfer of traditional ecological knowledge such as annual cultural biodiversity celebrations, as part of an advocacy strategy. These gatherings have attracted wider public audience including government officials, civil
society groups thus providing an alternative voice to conventional thinking on “conservation” and “development”. Cultural Biodiversity clubs are now active in about 100 schools across Ethiopia, Kenya, Ghana and South Africa.

- **Indigenous Community Action**: ABN partner organizations, such as Porini and ICE in Kenya and MELCA in Ethiopia; MUPO in South Africa; and RAINS in Ghana are supporting indigenous ecological initiatives. Porini is supporting three indigenous communities to register as community forest associations to negotiate with government for greater responsibility over management of their territories. MELCA and Porini are using eco-mapping to support local people to advocate for community ecological governance of local forests. ICE is working with traditional institutions of governance to strengthen them to face governance, conservation and livelihood challenges facing local communities.

- **ABN supported consultation and participation on policy frameworks** by local communities in Kenya in the review of their constitution, to strengthen the sections on environment, land and to include chapter on culture and community governance. Even though the new constitution was defeated in a referendum, Kenyans were generally agreed that the sections on environment and culture were very progressive.

**ABN Organizational Structure**

**Steering Group (SG)**

This is the highest body in ABN and responsible for decision making. The Steering Group guides and support ABN coordination and maintains an overview of all ABN activities and encourage coherence and strategic clarity.

**ABN General Coordinator (ABN - GC)**

General Coordinator is directly accountable to SG. He provides support to Thematic Coordinators (TCs) for the overall coordination and smooth functioning of the Network’s annual plans.

**Thematic coordination**

ABN works in four thematic areas:
- Cultural Biodiversity (CB)
- Community Ecological Governance (CEG)
- Genetic Engineering/Biosafety Intellectual Property Rights.
Seed Security

Each thematic area is lead by a Thematic Coordinator. These are the people who have shown proven commitment to the subject matter of their thematic areas, shown ability to work with a wide cross section of people from grass roots to policy makers. They are people with outstanding leadership qualities to be able to encourage others to pursue and practise core values of their thematic areas.
TCs keep in contact with each other and use meeting opportunities to build synergy between their thematic areas.

Link persons for TCs
These are the members of the steering group identified for their experience and technical expertise on certain thematic areas to provide guidance, technical advice and solve problems arising from the work.

Host organizations
These provide an administrative hub and legal base for coordinators as well as an office and good working conditions for Thematic Coordinators. Currently, ABN Secretariat is hosted by the Institute for Culture and Ecology (ICE) in Thika, Kenya.

Secretariat
Supports network functioning through fundraising, financial administration and reporting. Also responsible for communication and a co-ordination of all ABN activities.

Advisory group (ABN Elders)
Provides advice to Steering Group and Thematic Coordinators. They represent ideals and ethics of the ABN and leadership inspiration.

Country Partners
These ‘emerge’ through their ability to show commitment for in – country programs. They work on a voluntary basis to promote the objectives of ABN and benefit from liaison with and support from ABN in their national activities. They also help to build in-country alliances and coalitions.