7.2 Community biodiversity management and empowerment

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Introduction

Empowerment can be defined as a process of transformation that involves enhancing the awareness of poorer people of imbalances in power relations (Chambers, 1993); only then can they make effective choices to transform those imbalances and put these choices into practice. Empowerment is reached when these poorer people conclude such a transformation, are capable of reflecting upon the effectiveness of the choices, and thereby further engage themselves in this process of empowerment.

The complexity of empowerment challenges our basic notions of power, participation, professionalism, achievements and sustainability, and as such coming up with a single and simple definition is not easy. The community biodiversity management (CBM) methodology and its practices are designed and implemented by agronomists and biologists, plant genetic resource (PGR) scientists and rural development workers. Because of their involvement in CBM, empowerment has become part of their day-to-day work and professionalism. Even though for those working with CBM empowerment has become part of their vocabulary, what it means and how it defines our work, remains a challenge. Our goal in this chapter is to gain a better understanding of what empowerment means in the context of CBM.

In order to achieve our goal, we rely on understanding empowerment within development studies. We use as guiding references the works of Andrew Bartlett (2008), and Ruth Alsop and Nina Heinsohn (2005). Their articles guide us through concepts and theory; we learn lessons from them by directly applying them to experiences and/or aspects of CBM. We use their considerations on intrinsic and instrumental empowerment for making a distinction between participation and empowerment. The insights gained by understanding the degrees of empowerment confirm that empowerment within the CBM methodology is a step-by-step process for achieving sustainable community-based structures, which in the end are capable of transforming imbalances in power relationships. The concepts of agency and structure help us to understand that in CBM it is crucial to find the right balance between strengthening community-based capabilities and institutions, and addressing relevant policy and legal frameworks, as well as traditional and informal institutions, norms and values. We explain concepts on empowerment by using examples from the five focal countries addressed in the book (Brazil, Ethiopia, France, India and Nepal). The examples from previous chapters are used again to provide insights into concepts of empowerment.
Case study 1: Community grain, seed and gene banks in Jeypore, Orissa, India

Jeypore, in the state of Orissa in India, is a centre of origin for rice, and is also known for the diversity of its tribal people. It is a place where diversity in people is associated with diversity in farming systems and genetic resources. However, although they maintain valuable rice genetic resources, the tribal people of Jeypore are very poor, partly because of the harsh and insecure conditions in which they practice agriculture. In times of drought, floods or other frequent natural disasters, many households are not able to maintain the seed of their varieties. As a result of the disasters that occurred over the past few decades, the amount of local rice varieties being cultivated by farmers in Jeypore has decreased dramatically. The loss of these local rice varieties meant that the communities had no choice but to cultivate improved varieties.

The M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) began to work in Jeypore in the late 1990s, with the aim of halting the genetic erosion associated with poverty and vulnerability. The Foundation organized communities by setting up grain, seed and gene banks. Through their enhanced social organization, communities in Jeypore began to get involved in activities that supported their livelihoods. One example that reflects how the communities make use of their richness in local rice diversity is the marketing and promotion of the local rice variety Kalajeera, which is greatly valued in urban markets (Chaudhury and Swain, Chapter 4.4). Following the definition of empowerment, MSSRF facilitates a process of transformation that increases the capabilities of poor tribal people to make effective choices in their livelihoods, put these choices into practice, and reflect upon the effectiveness of their choices in alleviating their poverty, while sustaining their cultural and agricultural diversity, distinguishing them from other poor rural farming communities in India.

In situ conservation, communities and empowerment

In the example from Jeypore, MSSRF approaches agrobiodiversity in a process aimed at alleviating poverty. The grain, seed and gene bank is a practice through which MSSRF seeks to contribute to the empowerment of rural communities in their management of agrobiodiversity. This practice is successful because it enhances food, seed and varietal security, and strengthens the autonomy of communities in maintaining their livelihoods. Organized communities are better able to respond to those common uncertainties that previously kept them poor. Furthermore, through such collective organization and the implementation of practices like the seed bank, tribal communities are able to maintain their diversity of local varieties.

In CBM projects, conservation and development organizations, such as MSSRF in Jeypore, often refer in their strategies to the empowerment of farmers and farming communities, which contributes to livelihood development and in situ conservation of agrobiodiversity. In order to refine this common understanding, we formulated the following four assumptions, which describe this relationship between CBM, empowerment, and in situ conservation (see also Figure 7.2.1):
1. The CBM methodology contributes to *in situ* conservation of agrobiodiversity.
2. The CBM methodology contributes to the empowerment of farming communities and their local institutions.
3. Empowerment leads to a situation where communities manage agrobiodiversity in a collective and purposeful manner.
4. The situation in which farming communities collectively and purposefully manage agrobiodiversity in a way that is sustainable contributes to the implementation of *in situ* conservation.

Our focus in this chapter is on the second assumption (that the CBM methodology contributes to empowerment) and the third assumption (that empowerment leads to CBM as a situation). Walter de Boef and Marja Thijssen examined the relationship between CBM and *in situ* conservation of agrobiodiversity in Chapter 1.8. Before addressing the more conceptual aspects of empowerment, the following example from Ethiopia illustrates the relationship between CBM, empowerment and *in situ* conservation of agrobiodiversity.

**Case study 2: Participatory breeding and seed entrepreneurship in Habes, Tigray, Ethiopia**

For several years, Mekelle University in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, has been working with participatory action research in assessing the diversity of local barley varieties; understanding and documenting informal seed systems; understanding gender aspects in innovation and seed systems; and conducting participatory barley breeding. In Habes, a farmers’ research group has been operational for more than five
years, participating in seed sector assessment and contributing to participatory varietal selection (PVS) as part of the barley breeding programme.

Since 2008, Mekelle University has been working with the Integrated Seed Sector Development Programme, which aims to strengthen the capacities of farmers’ groups so that they are technically equipped, autonomous and market-oriented in their seed entrepreneurship (Hussein et al., Chapter 5.9). One of the first actions of the farmers’ research group in Habes was to establish a seed producer cooperative (SPC). In response to the demand for seed of local varieties, which is not covered by the public seed dissemination system, the SPC began to produce and market seed of several local barley varieties. SPC members also participated in PVS, and identified a barley variety that is well adapted to local production conditions, and which has recently been released. Instead of using the common practice of producing seed under a contractual arrangement for public entities or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the SPC began to sell and market the seed in several markets, and exchange barley seed for wheat and teff grain at traditionally set market ratios. The SPC now sells the food grains in the market, and women members are engaged in value addition through processing the grains into kollo and tihni (traditional food products) in order to further maximize their profit. Seed prices set by the public system are fixed at 15% of the grain price; however, the farmers in Habes are able to obtain a much higher rate for their grain (Tedla, 2012).

We can conclude that SPC members in Habes set out their own path in seed entrepreneurship, including local varieties and a new released variety in their variety portfolio. In this way, they assumed responsibilities for the conservation and use of local varieties. The fact that the farmers’ group in Habes was involved in participatory action research for several years led to an increase in their knowledge and expertise in identifying a variety portfolio and a well-defined and innovative marketing strategy within the informal seed system.

In order to learn lessons from the experiences in Habes about empowerment and in situ conservation, we will analyse the following issues:

- To what degree has the SPC been guided in its social organization by participatory action research?
- In what manner did the insights in their own traditional seed system, gained through their involvement in the seed sector assessment, and their experience with PVS, contribute to their decision to include local varieties in seed business and develop a traditional but innovative marketing strategy?
- To what degree has the collaboration with Mekelle University contributed to the empowerment of the farming communities in their management of local varieties (second and third assumptions)?
- To what degree does this empowerment result in purposeful and collective actions that contribute to the conservation and use of agrobiodiversity (fourth assumption)?

Mekelle University is not directly engaged in in situ conservation; however, its involvement in participatory action research and in the Integrated Seed Sector Development Programme have contributed to the empowerment of the farmers’ group in Habes, by enhancing their operational and organizational capacities, including their
management and use of local varieties. We can conclude that through this process of empowerment, the university has contributed to in situ conservation of local barley varieties in Habes.

**Intrinsic and instrumental empowerment**

In order to enhance our understanding of empowerment, we need to be able to distinguish between its intrinsic and instrumental values. Andrew Bartlett (2008) indicates how the empowerment of farmers was and often still is part of a struggle of social movements to free farmers from oppression by landlords, colonial regimes and corrupt governments, and from exploitation by multinational companies. In the field of PGR, scientists, activists, NGOs and social movements, and farmers and their organizations follow the intrinsic discourse on empowerment in the debates on farmers’ rights and access and benefit-sharing. This discourse has resulted in the recognition of farmers’ rights as a principle in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), as described by Andersen (Chapter 6.2). Access and benefit-sharing is addressed in the third objective of both the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the ITPGRFA, as described by Vernooy and Ruiz (Chapter 6.4). Both of these international legal instruments are gradually being put into practice through national legislation.

In the 1990s, development agencies began to approach empowerment as a means to reduce poverty (World Bank, 2001), and empowerment soon became associated with participatory approaches in agricultural development. Empowerment was thus no longer merely of intrinsic value, a topic of social struggle and transformation; it became an efficient instrument for alleviating poverty. Although it remained part of the language of activists and, primarily, social and political scientists, empowerment also became part of the discourse of governments and development programmes, with the World Bank as its representative. Farmers and farming communities were supported in their capabilities to take greater control over their livelihoods. Despite the fact that empowerment was mainstreamed through participatory approaches, many actors have maintained their position in seeking ‘real empowerment’, which for them entails intrinsic empowerment.

When we approach empowerment in CBM to achieve in situ conservation, we follow the instrumental rather than intrinsic discourse. However, due to the complex social, economic, and rather politicized context of PGR, farming communities continue to be challenged by imbalances in power in their efforts to manage and utilize agrobiodiversity. We realize that the intrinsic discourse on empowerment remains vital in the motivation of many professionals and their organizations supporting those communities. As can be concluded in many chapters of this book, this is what motivates them to continue enhancing farming communities’ awareness and capacities; enforcing their organization; and supporting their access to knowledge and information in order face and transform those imbalances in power that effect them in their management of agrobiodiversity.

One of the distinctions between instrumental and intrinsic empowerment lies in how we relate to participation in CBM. Bartlett (2008) makes it very clear. When farmers are given a greater role in the agenda of professionals, for example in defining criteria and selecting material during PVS (such as the farmers’ research group in
Habes), we often refer to ‘participation’. When farmers take control over their own agenda, as the farmers’ group in Habes did with their seed production and marketing, we often refer to ‘empowerment’. It is perhaps simplistic to equate participation to instrumental empowerment, but doing so does help disentangle participation and empowerment in agrobiodiversity management.

**Case study 3: Facilitating the exchange of local varieties in Aquitaine, France**

AgroBio Périgord is a farmers’ group in Aquitaine, in south-western France. Since 2002, it has been engaged in promoting the use of local varieties of maize and several other crops. One of its activities involved establishing and managing a seed bank, as described by Kendall and Gras (Chapter 1.7). The strict variety and seed laws of France, however, prohibit the exchange and sale of local varieties (Kastler, Chapter 6.8). The national farmers’ seed network, Réseau Semences Paysannes (RSP), supported AgroBio Périgord in developing a clever way to operate within this rigid seed system. If farmers want to access a local variety from the seed bank they have to become a member. They are then able to access the seed in legal terms for experimentation. In relation to CBM, the farmers are contributing to the dynamic management local varieties. They must return some seed to the seed bank and, since farm-saved seed is allowed, they can continue to use it even when they are no longer members. In 2011, the seed bank distributed seed to more than 250 farmers covering many regions of France.

**Degrees of empowerment**

Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) define empowerment as the capacity of an individual or group of individuals to make effective choices, and the capacity to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. They formulated this definition in a working paper for the World Bank in which they developed degrees of empowerment as part of an exercise to design mechanisms to measure empowerment. They characterize three degrees of empowerment as follows:

1. whether the person or group has the opportunity to make a choice;
2. whether the person or group actually uses the opportunity to choose;
3. once the choice is made, whether it brings the desired outcome.

We will use the example from France to translate these three degrees of empowerment into the context of CBM. For the first degree of empowerment, AgroBio Périgord decided to promote the dynamic management of local varieties by establishing a seed bank that contributes to farmers’ autonomy and the conservation of agrobiodiversity. For the second degree of empowerment, AgroBio Périgord, through its linkage with RSP, was able to access resources and information to establish a seed bank and develop a clever mechanism that allows it to disseminate seed of local varieties among farmers, even though such exchange with seed and varieties is prohibited. For the third degree of empowerment, AgroBio Périgord developed a simple monitoring system where farmers could provide feedback about the dynamic management of the varieties they obtained; this feedback can then be
discussed, for example, during field days and diversity fairs in order to learn whether the modalities used result in the desired outcomes. This example illustrating the degrees of empowerment shows that farmers associated with AgroBio Périgord are empowered in their dynamic management of local varieties. A CBM case study in Brazil shows where imbalances in power relationships did not result (yet) in desired outcomes, as further detailed here below.

Case study 4: Community struggle for maintaining access to land in Santa Catarina, Brazil

A coastal community of traditional farmers and fisher folk have been maintaining and utilizing their unique landscape, the Areais de Ribanceira, to maintain their livelihood for many years. The community is collectively managing the restinga, a salt marshland that is characteristic of this coastal area, in which they cultivate local manioc varieties, harvest fruits from the butiá palm and gather medicinal plants. The restinga is maintained as a result of the relationship between the farming community and its landscape. However, both the farming community’s livelihood and the landscape are currently under threat of urbanization, owing to the gradual transformation of the area into an industrial zone. In response, the community formed an association, which, in collaboration with the Federal University of Santa Catarina, NGOs and social movements, is seeking ways to transform the landscape into a sustainable development reserve (SDR), a unit within Brazil’s national system of conservation units. Zank et al. (Chapter 3.8) provide more insight into this case study, with the SDR as a conservation unit of relevance to institutionalizing CBM at landscape level.

With regards to degrees of empowerment, the community in Areais de Ribanceira has chosen to engage itself in trying to establish an SDR (first degree of empowerment). It aims to get protection for its livelihood, which is associated with the restinga landscape. Various actors, including the government agency responsible for establishing SDRs, the university, NGOs and social movements, provided technical and legal advice to support the community in the process to establish the SDR. As a result of this support and advice, the community was able to access the required information and resources, which strengthened its capacity to make the choice (second degree of empowerment). Because of strong political pressure to urbanize and industrialize the area, the process of transforming the Areais da Ribanceira into an SDR has been halted. The situation was further aggravated in 2010 by a court order to expel the farmers from a major part of the area. However, the community and their partners continue to put up fierce resistance to this order, and still aim to find a solution that includes the establishment of the SDR. It should, however, be noted that the desired outcome of the process of empowerment (third degree of empowerment) (i.e. the transformation of imbalances in power relationships for the farming community associated with the Areais da Ribanceira) has not (yet) been achieved.

Agency

The term ‘agency’ is based on Paulo Freire’s (1973) ‘agents of change’, in which people take greater control over their lives through conscious action. In a context of changing imbalances in power, agency is about what Bartlett (2008) calls lasting changes
in perceptions and relationships, thus an intrinsic rather than instrumental form of empowerment. Long (2001, pp112–113) emphasizes that collective rather than individual agency results in empowerment, he states that ‘agency is only manifested, and can only become effective, when individuals interact . . . agency entails a complex set of social relationships . . . that include individuals, organizations, relevant technologies, financial and material resources . . . How they are cemented together is what counts in the end.’ When agency reaches consolidation, and perceptions and relationships are transformed, empowerment is achieved (i.e. when self-determination emerges, the outcomes of the transformation processes are determined by the collective and purposeful actions of farmers or farming communities, rather than by development professionals).

We use the example of the relationship between Mekelle University and a group of farmers in Habes, Ethiopia, to understand aspects of agency. During the initial collaboration, the farmer research group contributed to the participatory barley breeding programme by hosting and contributing to PVS trials. We consider this to be participation, since the initiative was undertaken by the breeders and the farmers had to wait for the results of their contribution until the variety could be formally released. However, the interactions between the farmers’ group and the university changed with the LSB project. The farmers manage their own crop and variety portfolio in their SPC and if they wish to include a variety that is released by the university, because of their relationship with the university, they can access basic seed to further engage themselves in seed business. This relationship has been transformed through purposeful action, and in this way empowerment is achieved.

Another example could be where a farming community with a community seed bank similar to the one illustrated in Jeypore is faced with changes in rainfall patterns and seeks support from the gene bank to either restore or introduce early maturing materials in their collection. Consequently, the community develops the capacity to approach a formal institution (gene bank), and through this relationship and its conscious action they increase their ability to cope with changing conditions, which we can understand as an expression of agency.

Case study 5: Community seed banks and the CBM trust fund in Barra, Nepal

One of the practices of the agrobiodiversity project in Barra, Nepal (described by Subedi et al., Chapter 1.2), is the establishment of a community seed bank (CSB). The local facilitating NGO, Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development (LI-BIRD), together with the local CBM committee, explored ways to sustain the community seed bank without the support of a project or external organization. A solution was found in linking the CSB with a CBM trust fund, which is described in more detail by Shrestha et al. (Chapter 2.9). The fund was set up with the aim of providing microcredit to poor farming households; these same households also maintain local varieties. An innovative element of the fund is that it requires farming households who access the fund to commit themselves to multiplying the less popular varieties of the CSB. This allows the continuous regeneration of even the most unpopular materials of the CSB, while the microcredit contributes to social inclusion through value addition. LI-BIRD, together with government and NGO partners, are currently scaling-up this modality in many districts of the country.
With regards to the case study in Nepal, in the context of empowerment, did the CBM process contribute to the development of institutional mechanisms for sustaining the management of agrobiodiversity? This mechanism contributes to the empowerment of a community in organizing itself (agency), and assists it in providing access to financial services to poorer farming households. This illustrates the importance of agency for contributing to empowerment in a CBM process (second and third assumptions in Figure 7.2.1).

Structure

Nevertheless, the transformation of imbalances in power relationships through agency brings us to another aspect of transformation that lies beyond the control of rural people or farming communities and to a large degree beyond those of conservation and development professionals. Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) define ‘structure’ in the context of empowerment as the formal and informal context within which actors operate, covering rules, social forces or institutions (such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity and customs). Structure defines the rules of the game that limit or influence the opportunities that determine actions of individuals and groups of individuals. The presence and operation of formal and informal laws, regulations, norms, and customs determine whether individuals and groups have access to psychological, informational, organizational, material, social, financial, but also human and biological assets, and whether these individuals and groups can use those assets to achieve the desired outcomes. These assets are not independent, several of them interact with one another, and coping with that poses many challenges. When describing structure, the discussion on assets links empowerment to the strategies of livelihood development and community resilience, for which assets and their interactions are vital, as further described in the final chapter of this book.

In the context of informal seed supply, several formal and informal rules emerge concerning the practical management of PGR. In many countries, plant variety protection and seed laws define the room for manoeuvre for farmers, as can be seen in the case studies from Ethiopia and France. These laws specify whether or not farmers are allowed to exchange or sell seed of local or improved varieties, which has direct implications on informal seed systems and farmers’ management of agrobiodiversity (Louwaars et al., Chapter 6.1; Santilli, Chapter 6.7). If, for example, the SPC in Habes wants to market the seed of local varieties, it must adhere to those limitations within the formal regulations; that is, they must keep to formal boundaries (i.e. structure). However, empowerment processes can also be robust, with social norms and traditions, as well as expressions of structure, guiding the SPC in Habes towards bartering instead of selling seed. In this way, local traditions create a solution for by-passing the formal seed laws, or even overruling formal regulations, as can be seen in rural areas or in the markets of Tigray for example. Lipper et al. (2010) describe similar cases for the functioning and organization of traditional seed markets in several countries of Africa.

In the ISSD Programme in Ethiopia, Mekelle University and other universities are documenting these aspects of seed business and are facilitating the implementation of innovative mechanisms at all levels, including that of policy development. They aim to contribute to processes of structural transformation so that farmers are allowed to produce and market the seed of local varieties under specific conditions. In this way,
the university is contributing to empowerment through transformation at the level of structure, which is linked to transformation at the level of agency described above.

AgroBio Périgord in France has been able to develop a mechanism for facilitating the exchange of seed of local varieties among farmers (agency). The Réseau Semences Paysannes, in which AgroBio Périgord participates, supports farmers in coping with the limitations that variety and seed laws impose on small-scale farmers (Kastler and Moÿ, Chapter 6.6; Kastler, Chapter 6.8). In the case studies from both Ethiopia and France, structure poses limitations on the farmers’ groups for achieving their aims, but through innovative arrangements or transformations as expressions of agency they are able find their own solutions, which in the end may contribute to transformation at a more structural level.

Case study 6: Farmers’ empowerment through access and benefit-sharing in Brazil

In Brazil, access and benefit-sharing (ABS) concerning genetic resources is embedded in a legal structure with regulations, as described by Albuquerque et al. (Chapter 6.5). One of the objectives of the ABS Law is to empower farming communities to control access to genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge. It thereby contributes to a process of transformation of imbalances in power relationships, as expressed in the third objective of the CBD and the ITPGRFA, which is the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the use of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge. The ABS Law in Brazil contributes to the implementation of those international agreements. It has created mechanisms for ‘prior informed consent’ (PIC), in which scientists are required to obtain permission from traditional farming communities to access genetic resources and/or associated traditional knowledge, when applying for a permit from the responsible government agency. The question remains as to whether traditional farming communities understand that they have the choice to accept or refuse a PIC initiated by scientists. Furthermore, are the communities capable of making that choice; and if so, in the case of signing a PIC, do they have the capability to assess whether or not their choice has resulted in the desired outcomes? Do the traditional farming communities have access to the resources and information necessary to consider the options and make the best choice within a PIC procedure? In ABS, empowerment is not that much an issue of structure; a key challenge to be addressed is agency, or, to be more specific, collective agency, i.e. the capabilities of traditional farming communities to exercise their ‘rights’ in a collective and purposeful manner. The example of ABS is basically applicable to any country where an ABS regime has been put in place. Moreover, it is an illustration from our world of PGR of the reciprocal relationship between agency and structure in achieving empowerment.

CBM and empowerment: lessons learned

Faced with the challenge to capture the meaning of empowerment in the context of CBM, we matched pre-established concepts on empowerment with experiences in applying the methodology, its practices, related research, and relevant advocacy and policy processes. In Figure 7.2.2, we illustrate the relationship between CBM and the various types of empowerment, which then helps us to identify a series of lessons learned.
A first lesson we learned in distinguishing between intrinsic and instrumental empowerment is that we are now better able to differentiate between participation and empowerment. Many of the actions that are described as CBM practices are of a participatory nature, but we now realize that they do not necessarily contribute to empowerment. We recognize that those practices relevant for achieving in situ conservation result in participation, not in the transformation of imbalances in power relationships required for achieving empowerment. But at the same time, many professionals and their organizations are engaged in addressing farmers’ rights, encouraging custodianship by traditional farming communities and enhancing the autonomy of farming communities in agrobiodiversity management. Those professionals and organizations take an approach that is geared towards intrinsic empowerment.

The degrees of empowerment illustrate that empowerment is a process in which a community, first, should have opportunities to choose; second, should use the opportunities to choose; and third, should be able to reflect on whether the choice has resulted in the desired outcome in terms of transformations of imbalances in power relationships. In understanding the degrees of empowerment, we realize that this cannot be achieved by single CBM practices; moreover, a CBM process should involve several steps for reaching the desired outcome, resulting in the required transformation. In understanding the degrees of empowerment, we are no longer obliged to look at CBM in purely technical or practical terms of conservation, but also in social, economic, cultural and political terms of emancipation of farming communities.

It can easily be concluded that with many of the CBM practices and processes shared in this book, we primarily focus on strengthening the capabilities of local institutions or community-based organizations. Should we then conclude that we solely address agency and perhaps limit ourselves by not adequately addressing structure? Are we therefore conducting a partial job in the process of empowerment, which will restrict our efforts to make significant changes in imbalances in power relationships to make CBM work? To answer those questions requires some nuances. A number of cases in the book show that many conservation and development organizations combine their activities at grassroots level with advocacy work influencing policy.
and institutional discussions. As shared in several chapters in the book, NGOs such as the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF, India), Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development (LI-BIRD, Nepal), South-East Asia Regional Initiatives for Community Empowerment (SEARICE; South-East Asia), Semi-arid Network in Paraíba (ASA/PB, Brazil) and Réseau Semences Paysannes (RSP, France) link grassroots action in CBM processes with advocacy, contributing to policy processes including up- and out-scaling. In this way, these NGOs show that they consciously balance agency and structure in their operations in their efforts to contribute to empowerment. For cases in which universities are engaged in CBM, their research is often associated with participatory and local action, providing both a grassroots and scientific basis for informing or influencing policy processes. They contribute to aspects of agency at local level through their participatory action research, and take on a facilitation role in processes of transformation and learning, which places them in a good position for contributing to empowerment both at the level of policy and decision-makers, and at the level of traditional norms and values.

A good example of this can be seen in the role played by Mekelle University in Ethiopia in facilitating innovation both at the level of farmers’ research groups and seed cooperatives, and at the level of seed policy and regulatory frameworks. In the case of the Areais da Ribanceira in Brazil, the Federal University of Santa Catarina is engaged in supporting the community organization by providing technical and legal advice, and addressing both the modalities required to make the SDR work at the community level, and the overall modalities and design. The strategic role played by NGOs and universities in contributing to the right balance in agency and structure is illustrated in Figure 7.2.2, in which CBM-oriented research and CBM advocacy and policy processes are shown as contributing to the CBM methodology.

With our increased understanding of agency, we realize that by contributing to community-based structures we have taken a collective rather than individual position in terms of agency. Our original reasoning was from a conservation perspective; our argument was that by strengthening collective structures we reach CBM as a more sustainable situation, which is a prerequisite for in situ conservation. This reasoning was reinforced by the lesson learned that in order for agency to be effective in transformation, what matters are interactions and social relationships (Long, 2001). We can thus conclude that our reasoning has a foundation from both a conservation and empowerment perspective.

When exploring the relationship between agency and structure, many of the case studies in the book appear to begin with agency before addressing structure, although we realize that this may be biased by our selection of authors. However, the Brazilian ABS Law is an example of the reverse (i.e. it begins with structure before addressing agency); the major aim of ABS is the empowerment of farming communities. For its achievement, ABS systems depend greatly on the capabilities of farming communities to express and assume their rights (i.e. to make decisions in a collective and purposeful manner, in terms of providing conscious access to their genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge).

For the final lessons learned in this chapter, we return to Figure 7.2.1, which places empowerment in a context of reaching a situation where farming communities manage their agrobiodiversity in a collective and purposeful manner, thereby
contributing to in situ conservation. Revisiting the definition of Robert Chambers that ‘empowerment means that people, especially poorer people, are enabled to take more control over their lives’, we need to understand that we as professionals, together with farming communities, engage ourselves in processes of transformation, with the aim that farming communities take more control over their livelihoods through their agrobiodiversity management. Bartlett (2008) emphasizes the voice of the author in relation to empowerment. When translating his self-reflection into our context of CBM, we realize that we continue to distinguish between professionals and farming communities. We as professionals are always talking about the empowerment of others (i.e. the empowerment of farming communities). If we take the matter of agency seriously in the relationship between CBM and empowerment, then this distinction no longer holds; we as professionals become subject to the development or empowerment processes ourselves. We cannot promote transformations in relationships of rural people, between rich and poor, between community-based organizations and NGOs, universities or governments, or between farming communities and professionals, without also being open to our own relationships with the people we are motivating to take control over their own development and actions in the conservation and use of agrobiodiversity. As professionals we cannot escape from this transformation if we, and our organizations, claim to contribute to the empowerment of communities in their agrobiodiversity management.