

ABN

The African Biodiversity Network is a regional network of individuals and organisations seeking African solutions to the ecological and socio-economic challenges that face the continent.

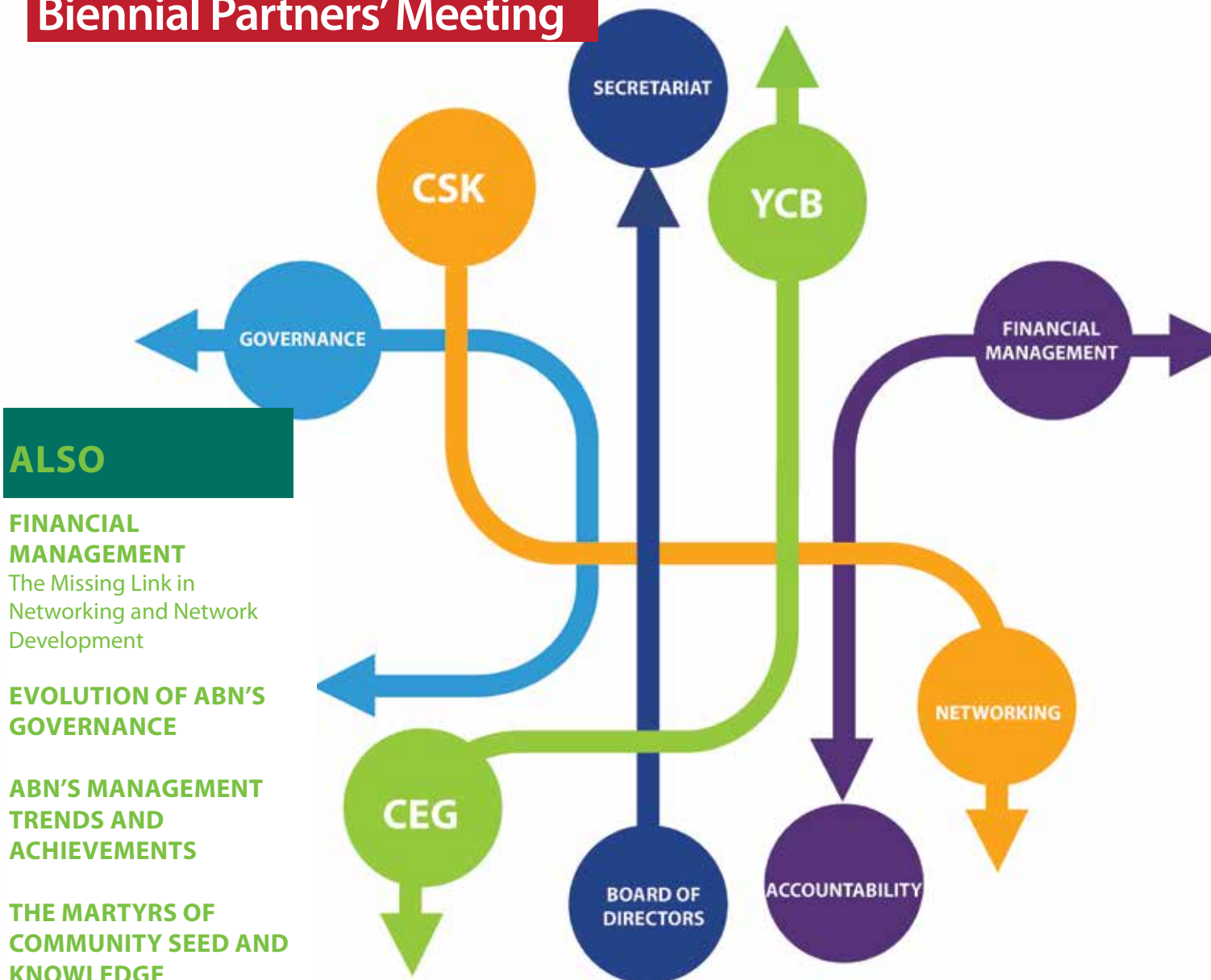
NEWS

JULY 2015

Becoming a Network

An overview of ABN's 2015

Biennial Partners' Meeting



We have the ability to provide clean water for every man, woman and child on the Earth. What has been lacking is the collective will to accomplish this. What are we waiting for? This is the commitment we need to make to the world, now."

-Jean-Michel Cousteau



ABN

NETWORK EDITION
JULY 2015

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The Journey so far:

Reflections of ABN Partners



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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

A network is an interconnected mesh of shared values and principles by diverse Partners towards a common - objective. In ABN's context, it is a living embodiment of life; threading together the environment, sacred sites, seed, culture and all things sacrosanct.

This issue celebrates the network within and without ABN. It recognises the sacrifices of the many who have advanced ABN's cause as a champion of biodiversity in protecting African lives and livelihoods. The newsletter traces the ABN journey thus far and what makes it tick; namely, the structures in place that ensures its smooth running. These structures include good governance and prudent financial management among others. We also have a moving narrative on what it takes to be a Martyr of Seed and Community Knowledge.

On behalf of the ABN Secretariat, I take this opportunity to thank everyone who has made ABN a success over the years in one capacity or the other. I also wish to also extend our sincere appreciation to the ABN Board who have tirelessly committed themselves to support us in a technical capacity. Shout out to all the Partners who managed to attend the 2015 ABN's Biennial Partners Meeting.

A recurrent theme at the meeting was the lack of communication and documentation across the board. We request Partners to improve on this with reference to the fruitful discussions we had at Bantu Lodge as this will be useful for enhancing our Networking and Network Development. The Thematic Coordinators and the entire team at the Secretariat are willing to accord you the support you require as long as we remember to share at all times and hold each other accountable.

Last but not least, we urge Partners to assist in scouting like-minded organisations for wider and deeper support to the unique but very important work that we do. We are available as needed to keep the debate concerning our work going and we look forward to your continued support and partnership.

As agreed, let's all put the *w-o-r-k* in the *net* to raise ABN to greater heights.

Enjoy.



Karen Nekesa Samukoya
Communications and Advocacy Officer, ABN

SNIPPETS

WHEN YOU BELIEVE



When you believe in a cause, when you really believe, when you really, really believe ... then you are ready to lay down everything, including your life, for the cause you believe in. And when you do, you become a martyr. A Martyr of Seed.

NETWORK MATTERS

At the heart of any serious network is a sense of ownership and camaraderie shared by all constituent partners. Manifestations of this include information sharing, harmonising 'depth' with 'spread', partners being an embodiment of the network, youth inclusion and documentation.

POINTERS TO RUNNING AN EFFECTIVE ORGANISATION

From a financial management perspective, the following are key to the wellbeing of any organisation: an appropriate financial policy and procedure framework; an appropriate and functional board; competent finance staff; and timely, accurate and intelligible financial information.

ON DECISION MAKING AND THE NEED FOR A SECRETARIAT

Informed decision making calls for a coordinated approach from all concerned partners. Piggy backing on partners' past experiences and the need to ensure collective decision making and regular review of progress and feedback to and from the partners, a Secretariat is thus able to realise the network's mandate.

GOVERNANCE FOR THE PARTNERS, BY THE PARTNERS

Representation, more representation and even more representation- arguably, in governance, there is no such thing as over-representation. Evolving governance, in principle, is the one that relishes on tapping relevant synergies by drawing on the representation and participation of all partners towards actualising its vision.

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FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Quinoa [keen-wah, kee-noh-uh] or the 'Mother grain', as the Incas called it, is a grain crop of the amaranth family which is mainly cultivated in Peru, Bolivia, and Chile for its edible seed. A crop with a high protein to carbohydrate ratio in contrast to other grain products, quinoa is essentially gluten-free and contains iron, B-vitamins, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, vitamin E and fibre. It is one of the few plant foods that are considered a complete protein as it has all the nine essential amino acids.

ETHIOPIA AT A GLANCE

Ethiopia is Africa's oldest independent country and the second largest population wise. It is one of the two African countries (the other being Liberia) to never have been colonised, though it was briefly occupied by Mussolini's Italy.

The country served as a symbol of African independence throughout the colonial period and was a founder member of the United Nations and the African base for many international organisations. The headquarters of the African Union (formerly, the OAU) are located here.

Ethiopia is the only country in Africa with its own alphabet, abugida, an alpha-syllabary which consists of 209 symbols and 25 letter variants.



65% of Africa's population is below the age of 35 years. Projections show that, by 2020, 3 out of 4 people in the continent will be 20 years old on average. This forms a strong argument for youthful inclusion in governance, decision making and biodiversity.



Are GMOs safe?

Most developed nations do not consider GMOs to be safe. In more than 60 countries around the world, including Australia, Japan, and all of the countries in the European Union, there are significant restrictions or outright bans on the production and sale of GMOs.

<http://www.nongmoproject.org/>

FEEDBACK

Do you have any questions you'd like to ask or comments you'd like to make? We would love to hear from you. Email us at abnsecretariat@africanbiodiversity.org or write to us at African Biodiversity Network P.O. Box 6271-01000 Thika, Kenya. You can also interact with us on our Facebook page [africanbiodiversity](https://www.facebook.com/africanbiodiversity) or follow us on twitter [@africanbiodiv](https://twitter.com/africanbiodiv)



The Missing Link in Networking and Network Development

JANE KINYA opines that prudent financial management is key to a network's sustainability. Key factors likely to hinder an organisation's success include corruption and conflict of interest. Her panacea for curbing these ills includes the development of a comprehensive financial policy.

Effective financial management is not just a prerequisite for good relationships; it is also critical to the proper functioning and performance of an organisation.

The necessary preconditions to attain effective financial management include: an appropriate financial policy and procedure framework; an appropriate and functional board; competent finance staff; and timely, accurate and intelligible financial information.

Unfortunately, many Not-for-profit organisations are still struggling with issues of financial management. In this issue we look at two key contributors to this struggle.

The first struggle emanates from having/using policy frameworks/guidelines that are neither responsive to their organisational needs nor reflective of the organisational changes; that is, at times financial policies have not been understood and internalised by all stakeholders including the board, staff and members.

Indeed, it is not surprising at times to find that policies were 'borrowed' from other 'similar organisations'. One is left to wonder just how similar two organisations can be without having something unique in each! Although we can borrow Best Practices since we cannot keep reinventing the wheel, it is important that such practices are acclimatised/customised to fit the uniqueness of each organisation.

Tied to the above is that, at times, the development of such policies is not an organisation's own initiative but rather, is by an external push for compliance from either funders and/or government's legislation; thus probably having the policies being done in a hurry in order to beat a deadline and so on. In contrast, policy guidelines are a living document that we interact with to guide our day to day operations. Policies provide a source of reference for those involved in financial affairs.

The second struggle is lack of an effective working relationship or integration of finance and other organisational

key functions/departments; with the main culprit being programme management. Most of the resources in NGO setting are expended by programme staff but quite often, organisations do not develop a clear link between financial management and programme management.

Lack of forging proper links between finance management and programme management has led to; organisations not being faithful to contractual agreements, late reporting, delays in communication, lack of information sharing as it is not clear who should get what and when, late disbursement of funds, huge unspent funds with no clear explanations, non-harmonised reporting between finance and programme management, fraud, poor procurement practices, and at times, small conflicts or a strenuous relationship.

During the recent ABN Biennial Partners' Meeting, both the ABN Secretariat and the Partners agreed to strengthen matters relating to finance and operations in order to improve our effectiveness. A few things related to policies and practices that have not worked so well but can be improved were highlighted. All partners committed to sharing their policy manual with the Secretariat henceforth. In summary: is there a finance policy manual; how is conflict of interest addressed; how about corruption; are there procurement guidelines; what about compliance with statutory regulations; auditing; sustainability; M&E; and gender representation?

It is necessary for all organisations to follow and adhere to all procedures and guidelines in financial management in order to operate and achieve their organisations mandate. A network with partners and allies that do not observe these guidelines is bound to mismanage each and every resource.

The procedures and guidelines will ensure that organisations are accountable, transparent and fair in whatever intervention they undertake. This calls for proper governance at all levels including inclusion in decision making.

Jane Kinya is the Finance and Administration Manager, ABN

Evolution of ABN's governance

NJOROGE KARANGATHI article gives a brief history of ABN- from whence it all began to where it is presently. He stresses on the importance of having clearly defined structures for the well-being and success of the network. The thrust of his narration is on the need for active participation and inclusivity in governance, more so, gender representation in decision making.

One can hardly understand ABN's origin and governance without a background on its evolution since inception. Initially, ABN was conceptualised through a need to have African voices on issues concerning biodiversity. The pioneers of ABN happen to be colleagues who had known one another through conservation work in various countries in Africa as well as in Europe like the Gaia Foundation and Grains.

Initially the Gaia Foundation played a critical role of coordination, resource mobilisation and secretariat service. More recently in 2012, ABN Partners (SwedBio, and Hivos), facilitated a substantial evaluation by an external evaluator and the evaluation report recommended the ABN Secretariat to be based in Africa. ABN pioneers deliberated and dialogued and settled on Kenya to host ABN. The need to register ABN as an entity emerged during the dialogue process and after consultation with legal experts, a resolution was reached to register ABN as a Trust under the Ministry of Lands in Kenya. As a Trust, final decisions are made by the Board of Trustees.

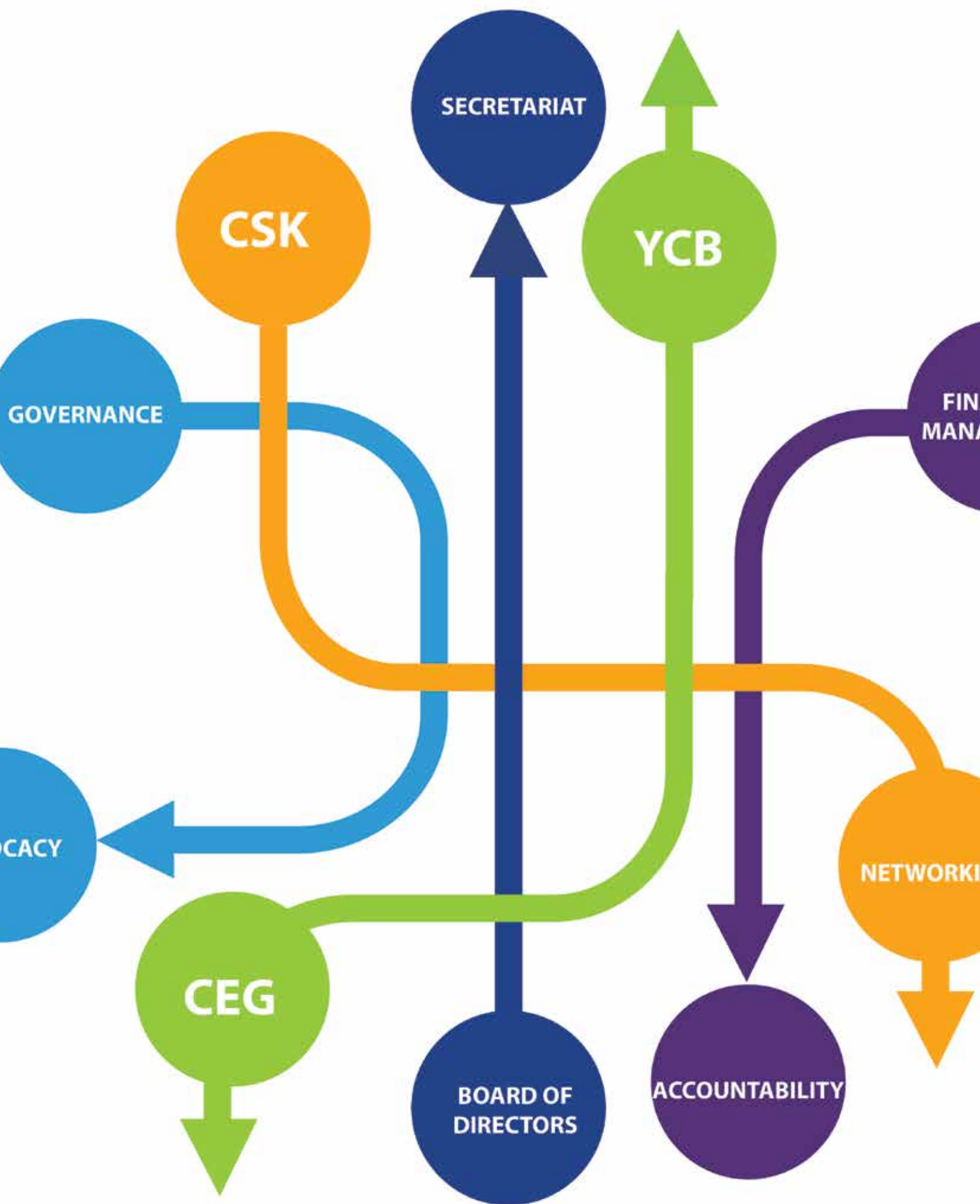
In order to continue with the spirit behind establishing ABN that is anchored on collective participation and decision making, the Board of Trustees engaged ABN Partners in dialogue on modalities of ensuring their participation in decision making and directing ABN. The Trustees also sought legal advice on the same and later, resolved to create space for Partners to participate in directing and making decisions regarding the growth of ABN. During the

Partners' Biennial Meeting of 2013, Partners nominated four representatives to the Board and who were formally invited to the ABN Board by the Trustees. The Partners' representation considers geographical and gender dimensions.

The Board, now comprising the Trustees and Partners' representatives, has an Executive Committee that supports the Secretariat through innovative approaches that include Skype, teleconferencing and face to face meetings. Full Board meetings are done on a quarterly basis. Also, in order to enhance the Board support to the Secretariat and facilitate smooth operations, a Core Group was formed consisting of the Board representatives and senior ABN staff. The Core Group meets on a quarterly basis and is mandated to develop and review work plans as well as distil lessons.

ABN governance has improved in the last two years since the Board is available and works closely with the Secretariat. The Board has created the necessary policies and instruments that strengthens financial controls, ensure results, timely reporting and feedback between and among Partners and donors. The Board works closely with like-minded networks like AFSA to ensure the ABN agenda is realised through tapping relevant synergies.

Joseph Karangathi Njoroge is the Executive Director, Maendeleo Endelevu Action Programme (MEAP)



Becoming a Network

In 'Becoming a Network', John Wilson gives an account of the ABN's 2015 Biennial Partners' Meeting. He notes that, aside from getting reports by the various organs that make the whole of ABN, the meeting was an opportune moment for laying the framework with which to develop a comprehensive M&E policy manual to effectively monitor ABN's role as an advocacy network championing the cause of biodiversity and culture. The role of youth in the network also featured prominently in the discussions.

FINANCIAL
MANAGEMENT

The group sat in a big circle in the full sun but with jerseys on. At this altitude the sun was weak. Looming in the background was the peak of Mt. Kenya, a sacred mountain for all who live in its shadow and who still practise their traditional heritage and values.

The members of this group were all representatives of the 19 partners who belong to the African Biodiversity Network (ABN). It was a Wednesday and they were in the middle of reviewing ABN's work and planning ahead. The sitting arrangement was quite unconventional as ABN's meetings are never set in a rectangular manner as is the norm with most conferences.

This is because at the heart of ABN's work is the belief that we will only care for our environment if we re-establish our deep connection to Nature. And we can only do that by living the experience, hence our meeting close to Mt. Kenya's peak. Also at the heart of ABN's work is a recognition that cultures throughout Africa have always revered and respected Nature as the basis of life; and that this has been largely lost throughout the continent through, first, colonisation and, then, globalisation.

During that Wednesday spent high up on Mt. Kenya, participants held crucial discussions around the roles of the different organs of the African Biodiversity Network: Partners, Board, Secretariat and the Biennial Partners' Meeting. After an energetic and dynamic first 7 to 8 years, in which it gained a reputation as an advocacy voice and during which time Partners developed ways of working with communities that tied closely into its philosophy, ABN lost its way to some extent, especially around the issue of being a Network. Much reflection, which is well documented elsewhere, led to the decision to become truly a Network – not a far-reaching Network with wide membership, but nevertheless a Network in which all partners feel a full sense of ownership for their Network.

This is very much an ongoing process and at the opening day of this meeting, a number of the participants, as well as the Chair of the Board, expressed their hope that participants would leave the meeting with a much stronger feeling of ownership of the Network. It soon became clear that being clear on the roles of different parts of the Network was a critical task for the meeting.

The meeting received reports from the Secretariat and Partner representatives and which drew lessons and questions on the work they have been doing in relation to ABN. The group also looked at key trends in our context and what these mean for ABN. They developed a set of principles, with the plan that these can become part of ABN's Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) process. They drew up five strategic objectives and the broad thrusts towards achieving these, as well as laying the groundwork for an M&E manual.

The following are the five themes that emerged strongly throughout the meeting:

Information flow

Information sharing is a key ingredient in any effective Network. The 2012 evaluation of ABN had stressed this point and highlighted that this was not happening enough. It had urged ABNers to develop a culture of story-telling. It was noted that this remains a weakness in ABN. Though happening at the micro-level, during exchange visits for example, or eco-mapping trainings, with the Communities of Practice distilling learning towards publications, the constant flow of information that a Network thrives on was yet to be achieved.

NG





The strategic area of work previously entitled 'Network Development' was modified to read 'Networking and Network Development' to stress on this point. Participants, led by the Chair, urged members of the Secretariat to share stories of what they saw every time they visited a Partner or attended an event. Sharing is also to be done on the development of the methodologies going on and lessons learnt.

At the same time, it was agreed that if ABN is going to function as a Network, Partners must share their stories much more often. The ABN email list should be humming with stories flowing in. The ABN social media abuzz with updates.

Depth versus spread, or depth and spread

"Really grasping the ABN philosophy takes time, commitment, practice and transformation" was a key learning point that came out of Partners sharing their recent experiences. "How do we harmonise the longer term, slower processes of ABN with the need to show impact to donors in the relatively short term?" was a question that arose in the same vein.

ABN partners have long debated the tension of needing to 'go deep' by developing well thought out methodologies and community 'learning centres' that have fully grasped the approach ABN is promoting before 'going wide' and spreading the practices. The fear is of becoming superficial. Coming out of the meeting was a sense that ABN is now ready to reach out and spread its work more consciously. Further, although the development of the community learning centres is coming along well, the Communities of Practice need to be more active.

It was agreed that the main strategy of spreading ABN's philosophy and practice more widely in the next phase will be through strategic partnerships with others; reaching out to those who empathise strongly with ABN and what it stands for.

ABN 'deep inside' partners

"ABN needs to become part of the face of Partners." A participant from West Africa stated. Partners have a responsibility to embody ABN at the same time as they are distinct organisations in their own right. Their work is also ABN's work and should be reflected as such. As well as strengthening ABN, this gives the Partners a wider reach across the continent. This will see to it that not only are they doing their work but they are also contributing to much bigger actions/

developments via ABN. For this to happen, full understanding and ownership of ABN by everyone throughout each Partner organisation, including the Board, is needed.

Youth

As the meeting progressed, the issue of working with the youth kept coming up as critical. It was felt that many young people in Africa are lost and are without a sense of identity. They are disconnected from their past and are heading towards adopting a Western mind-set. Participants agreed that the aspect of youth inclusivity should cut across all thematic areas of ABN and that Partners should adopt the Youth, Culture and Biodiversity theme in their work by 2018. At the same time, there should be more focus on bringing elders into the work of ABN thus strengthening intergenerational learning.

Documentation

The meeting stressed on the need for the Network to give more attention to documentation. It was noted that there are 'learning books' (elementary guides) in the pipeline for each thematic area and whose publication needed to be speeded up as it was not a prerequisite that they be perfect as they were in constant evolution.

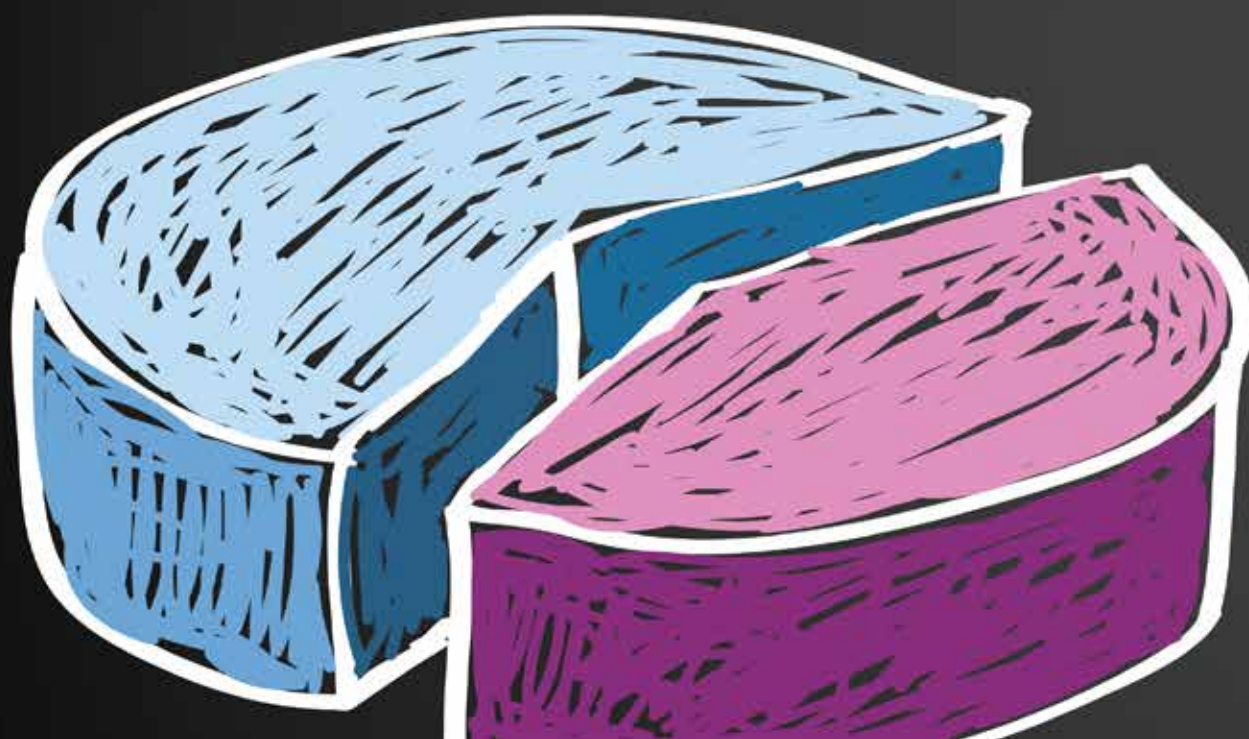
It was agreed that ABN will also produce clear and concise documents that explain its position and approach as far as gender goes, its perspective on livelihoods, and its overall philosophy, to mention just three areas where such documentation is long overdue.

Conclusion

ABN is two years into its second decade. It remains a pioneering Network with a clear message and approach around African people's relationship with their land and the ecosystems that can keep that land vibrant, productive and healthy. At the same time it is galvanising itself to start reaching out more in the coming years towards this goal as developed at the meeting.

The African Biodiversity Network is to be increasingly recognised as a pioneering authority in ecological governance and bio-cultural diversity in Africa by the end of 2018.

This will not be recognition for its own sake but rather hard-earned recognition gained by sharing ABN's experiences, practices and learning more widely and in various ways. The meeting recognised that this will only happen if Partners and the Secretariat forge a close working relationship based on constant information sharing.



ABN's Management Trends and Achievements

Management is a core component of any network. NJOROGE KARANGATHI expounds on the need for a Secretariat to properly manage and coordinate the various activities run by the African Biodiversity Network.

Why a Secretariat?

ABN has been evolving prior, during 2002 and up to date. In the process, the functions of the Network have been taking different dimensions due to context and priorities. Seed work, bio-safety, intellectual property and community rights formed the initial focus areas. All along the ABN pioneers have been fine-tuning ideas to respond to threats to biodiversity conservation in Africa. In the process thematic focuses have been developed including Cultural Biodiversity, Advocacy and Communication, and Community Ecological Governance. The thematic areas were initially coordinated from different countries; for example, Cultural Biodiversity was coordinated in Ethiopia and Advocacy and Communication was coordinated from South Africa.

As the thematic focuses became clear and concretised, the need to have a coordination hub was realised in order to sustain the Network and enhance coordination. After consensus on registering the ABN Network was reached to formally register it as a trust, the need to set up a Secretariat was realised around 2007. A working or operational structure, likewise, emerged where the Board of Trustees was legally mandated to make final decisions regarding the growth of ABN. The Secretariat was supposed to serve as the implementation arm of the decisions made by the Board of Trustees. Despite the Board of Trustees having the legal mandate to make critical decisions

regarding the growth of ABN, they resolved to create space for Partners to participate in decision making through seconding representative to the Board and through participation in the Biennial Meeting where partners contribute to the strategic direction of ABN.

For smooth operations, the Board has link persons for each thematic focus identified along their experience and expertise. This arrangement facilitates informed decision making at the Board level due to updates from link persons. Over the years, some Thematic Coordinators have relinquished their responsibility due to other commitments and got replaced as appropriate.

The ABN Management currently comprises the General Coordinator (GC), and five Thematic Coordinators for Community Ecological Governance (CEG); Youth, Culture and Biodiversity (YCB); Community Seed and Knowledge (CSK); Network Development Practice (NDP); and Advocacy and Communication. Ideally, each thematic focus requires one Thematic Coordinator; however, due to financial constraints some Thematic Coordinators assume responsibility for coordinating more than one thematic focus. Recently the need to hire a Resource Mobilisation and Monitoring and Evaluation Officer was realised and the officer recruited. Also, since the Financial Manager is involved in administration

work, an assistant accountant was hired to assist in both financial and administrative matters.

New arrangements for enhancing management at the Secretariat has been developed where the General Coordinator will double as the CEG Coordinator, the Finance Manager will deputise the General Coordinator, and the Advocacy and Communication Coordinator will also coordinate Network Development Practice. A Management Committee of five people has been constituted comprising the General Coordinator, Financial Manager, CSK and YCB Coordinator, Advocacy and Communication Coordinator, and the Resource Mobilisation Officer.

The Management Committee is mandated to oversee the daily operations of the Secretariat and guide the implementation of the ABN Strategic Plan with support from the Board. The idea to establish the Management Committee was informed by past experience and the need to ensure collective decision making and regular review of progress and feedback to and from the ABN constituency. The Management Committee will, therefore, propel the ABN Secretariat to realise its mandate.

Joseph Karangathi Njoroge is the Executive Director, Maendeleo Endelevu Action Programme (MEAP)

The Martyrs of Community Seed and Knowledge

Who is a Martyr of Community Seed and Knowledge? Simon Mitambo weaves a rich tapestry, drawn from his Tharaka culture, to explain this phenomenon. Indeed, his is a tale with great lessons for those ready to sacrifice their all and be modern day Martyrs of Seed and Community Knowledge for the sake of posterity.





The African Biodiversity Network (ABN) works with indigenous and local communities across Africa to enhance their ecosystems and community resilience. To enhance their seed and bio-cultural diversity and to diversify their livelihood options, ABN's work with partners on seed helps to connect deep, diverse and holistic community perspectives on food sovereignty. This includes people's spirituality, governance, relationships, cultural identity and heritage. It is about the different values that communities attach to their seed. As much as seed provides for their livelihoods options, it also transcends the physical boundaries of being a commodity for sale to earn an income or food to nourish their nutritional requirements. It is a great symbol of life on one hand, and death on the other.

Seed is at the heart of every community and permeates all aspects of their lives and livelihoods. For instance, certain rituals cannot be done without a particular community seed as certain seeds are very important in conducting rituals to celebrate good harvests, healing, peace and community cohesion. For such communities, their seed cannot be replaced with any type of seed including genetically modified ones as the ancestors will not understand such seeds and this will distort their ritual and ceremony.

Seed is also a symbol of sharing (a virtue that is dying in modern society), building community cohesion and maintaining law and order. Seed defines people's relationship with themselves, their land and territory including the sacred natural sites. For instance, my Gankuyu ya Bwairi clan in

Tharaka cannot share any form of seed (plant or animal) with someone from Kagunda and Kanyaki clans. This is because of the very strong ancestral blood brotherhood that we have. This further illustrates how seed defines a people's story of origin and the customary laws that underpin the community seed governance system.

Seed carries deep knowledge and traditional practices of a community. It enriches people's language, songs and other cultural traits of a given community. Loss of a single seed can lead to immense loss of very rich knowledge and traditional practices associated with that seed. It is thus very important for every community to keep their seeds protected at all costs. An understanding of this complex community seed system and network is very critical in enhancing bio-cultural diversity, quality and vitality of the community ecological governance.

The custodians of traditional seeds are the men and women who have gone to the extent of offering their lives for the seed continuity. They are the ones I call 'the martyrs of community seed, knowledge and traditional practices'. Thinking of these 'martyrs' leads me to recall a story I was told by a colleague from the Ethiopian Masha community of the North; Fassil Gebeyehu Yelemtu. Since then, I have loved recounting the story in my own context of the Great Famine of Kothithi that ravaged Tharaka in the 1890s. This was long before the 'foetus' or the 'un-cooked man' came to Tharaka. The community in Tharaka referred to the White man as the 'foetus' while the Amazonians from Latin America referred to him as the 'un-cooked man' – this because of his colour and character.

The Great Famine of Kothithi

The Great Famine of Kothithi is well known to the old and the young alike in Tharaka. It marks an historic moment of a community that is agro-pastoralist; a community where hunger is a common phenomenon because of low and erratic rainfall. The famine was so called because people fed on tamarind leaves, once the tamarind fruits were depleted, and seedlings. People would grind these leaves and seedlings and mix them with ingredients from other non-edible plants to give them a taste of food in order to survive as the days went by.

The story goes that during this famine, people boiled soft stones to produce soup which they mixed with the tamarind leaves and seedlings to drink. During that time, people, animals, plants and everything survived at the mercy of force majeure.

The famine hit Tharaka and spread like bush fire as the rains had failed for two consecutive seasons. This left people, animals and plants all ravaged and lifeless. For instance, one of my great maternal ancestors called Caguambi from Kanjogu clan had all his children perish. It is alleged that he ate the children who died to survive the famine. He was married to a lady called Ntugu; whom my mother is named after. Ntugu was the daughter of Cangene from Kithuri clan, a clan that is the custodian of spiritual leadership of the Tharaka community.

The only way for Cangene and his family to survive was by being ingenious. Cangene was left with one bull after all his other livestock died. He slaughtered it and hid the meat and which he ate bit by bit until the next rainy season. As he did not want people to know that he had killed the bull, he kept the hooves and used them to fool people.

Cangene would wake up very early in the morning before everyone else had woken up in the village. He would then walk to the river with the hooves of the bull and pretend that he was taking the bull to the river to drink- using the hooves to put marks on the ground along the path. When people saw the hoof prints on the ground they thought the bull was still alive. Although the villagers could not see the bull, they thought it was tethered somewhere where they could not see it. Cangene continued to do this for some time as he went on eating the meat. When he was through with the meat, he began to eat the hooves. When the people could no longer see the hoof prints on the path to the river, they sensed that Cangene had killed the bull. They rushed to his homestead for a share of the meat but to their surprise, they found Cangene eating the last hoof of the bull!

The Martyr of Seed

Amidst the severe famine that swept the whole village, lived an old woman in a small hut. She was so old that her skin had changed its colour. She loved to sit next to the fire place and the ashes from the fire turned her body whitish. Those who struck a friendship with her carried firewood to her house. She rarely walked around the village because of her advanced age and so not very many people noticed her.

As is the case with women custodians across Africa, the old woman had one outstanding character- she religiously kept her traditional seeds. She planted these seeds around her compound and anywhere else where she felt appropriate. She gave stories of how some of the seeds were given to her by her late mother when she got married. She told stories of how she carefully selected seeds from her farm and how she kept them in special gourds; sometimes smoking some of the seeds to preserve them. The old woman loved her seeds because of their great taste. She said that her seeds could survive adverse weather conditions because they were more adapted to the environment. As such, she had a diversity of seeds which she was greatly knowledgeable about. She told stories of how different seeds were used for rituals and ceremonies; of how such rituals and ceremonies could not happen without the right seeds. She was attached and connected to the seeds as she grew them for a long time.

The old woman's life culminated as a 'martyr of seed'. This was due to the kind of 'will' that she left behind when she was about to die of the famine that was killing everyone in the village. In a slow and low tone, she told her heir that she was feeling weak. She had not eaten anything for many days. She said that she was sure that she was going to die of hunger. However, she left a handful of indigenous seeds in a pot under her bed. She requested her heir to keep these seeds safe. She told her heir that the seeds must not be eaten but should be kept for planting when the next rains would come, at which point the old woman passed on.

For those who cherish the value of indigenous seeds, they will agree with me that this woman remains a true 'martyr' of community seeds. She died for the community seeds and will rise for the seeds. You will also agree with me that however little this woman was known in her own village, she will live in our hearts as an iconic figure for the great legacy she left behind: the legacy of connection with our community seeds and all that goes with it. Today, there are very few people in Africa and in the world who can unravel this mystery. The mystery of the old woman who chose to die of famine and yet she had a handful of seeds in her pot that she could eat and save her life even if for a day. Instead she chose death so as to leave behind the seeds for future generation.

Aren't seeds more than just food and a commodity for sale?

Simon Mitambo is the Acting General Coordinator, ABN

THE JOURNEY SO FAR

ABN through the years

2012

Release of the film
'Seeds of Freedom'

2002

The African Biodiversity
Network is born.

2004

ABN supports partners to
initiate national campaigns
against GMO's.



2014

Release of the film,
'The Mining Curse'.

2015

ABN's Partners
Biennial
Meeting

2009

AFSA is launched.

2007

ABN Secretariat
opens in Kenya.

The African Biodiversity Network (ABN) is a regional network of individuals and organisations seeking African solutions to the ecological and socio-economic challenges that face the continent.

The ABN was first conceived in 1996 in response to growing concern in the region over threats to biodiversity in Africa and the need to develop strong African positions and legal instruments at the national, regional and international level.

ABN strives to ignite and nurture a growing network of change agents working passionately at all levels, in the face of injustices and destruction arising from the current industrial development model, to enable resilient local communities to govern their lives and livelihoods rooted in their own social, cultural and ecological diversity.

The Journey so far Reflections of ABN Partners

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. This has been ABN's story thus far; from its nascent birth, teething problems, the first baby steps... onwards into a network that has brought like-minded partners onboard to offering African solutions to African challenges. And the journey has just begun, as Hardi Tijani expounds.



Once every two years the African Biodiversity Network (ABN) holds its Partners' meeting. The latest biennial meeting was organised by the ABN Secretariat, which is based in Kenya, at the Bantu Lodge, a 2 hour drive from Nairobi. Throughout the week, 19 representatives of the Partners, as 'custodians' of the Network, and drawn from different countries in West, East and Southern Africa, met to take stock of progress and challenges around the work they are involved in at the community, national and international levels.

Indeed, participants agreed on the persisting nature of the challenges for which the ABN, through member organisations, has been struggling to address, first in their respective countries, and through their collective struggle, at the continental and global levels. The dynamics of the context and trends around these challenges have continued to change throughout Africa, making it necessary for vigilance to maintain the momentum of ABN in the face of increasing obstacles. A fact which all members of the Network are only too aware of!

Despite the fast changing context, the 'custodians' of the philosophies and methodologies have been resilient in their efforts to advance the course of the Network; working

towards achieving an Africa in which solutions to ecological and socio-economic challenges are sought for 'locally' and implemented. From the second half of the second day, and the first half of day three, member participants undertook to reflect on the journey of the ABN over the previous two years. Throughout Africa and especially in the countries and sub-regions where ABN's Partners operate, there is increasing awareness on the need to protect locally adapted seeds, agro-ecological practices, ecological governance, culture and

biodiversity, protection of sacred natural sites, and other issues. This as a means to building resilience to climate change, urbanisation, population increase and other trends, and for an informed citizenry on the unprecedented diversity and level of threats to biodiversity, especially through the action of powerful players in the global

economy supported by local players. As one participant noted, the "...awareness level has yet to translate into coordinated people's resistance and action to the destruction of biodiversity around them as we have seen in South America." Members, however, recognise that increasing awareness is a major milestone achieved.

Partners have been successful in implementing the methodologies of the ABN in their localities, and expressed



the view that it is critical to build the necessary evidence from the changes in the lives of communities in Africa involved to support wider action and advocacy. Specifically, ABN Partners have utilised results from the implementation of the methodologies in local level advocacy efforts. They are also deepening their works towards restoration of sacred natural sites in many communities, the promotion of sustainable agriculture, the revival of indigenous knowledge, the

The commitment of Partners and Partners' communities and the use of endogenous development processes in engaging communities have been key in supporting the work of Partners in their respective communities.

protection of biodiversity, and 'closing' of the gap between elders and the youth for the purposes of inter-generational learning.

Through sharing of stories and experiences driving these processes, there was general agreement on the need to continue to deepen the understanding of the methodologies of the ABN. Participants continued to reflect on their work for the past two years in a situation of having to manage two contrasting weather situations: too cold (if you choose to sit in

the shade provided by the fig tree) and too hot (if you chose to sunbathe).

The commitment of Partners and Partners' communities and the use of endogenous development processes in engaging communities have been key in supporting the work of Partners in their respective communities. According to a participant, "...this has been instrumental in building on the knowledge systems of communities; a key ABN way of working at the community level." The involvement of 'elders' has supported the work processes as far as the revival of indigenous knowledge and inter-generational learning is concerned. Also noted at the plenary discussions was the support Partners have received from the ABN Secretariat. This support has been in the form of capacity building - from training initiatives organised and from seed grants provided. A participant was of the view that the Secretariat's resources provided the lifeline and energy needed to support some Partners engage with communities on the ABN methodologies.

Have there been factors holding back our work within the period? Indeed, it came out from the sharing sessions throughout the discussions that some factors have limited the ability of Partners to have achieved more. One such factor identified was ongoing 'resistance' to the facilitation and application of the ABN methodologies by government agencies and even within organisations. Two participants



observed: "Within my organisation some members saw the involvement of elders in our work as backward, a step back, initially..." and, "School authorities do not see why learning hours should be committed to cultural activities." Resistance as a limiting factor generated some interesting discussions. "Could it be as a result of some Partners' limited knowledge of facilitating dialogues as part of their engagements?" A participant asked, emphasising the fact that proper application of the methods should be done without resistance from any quarters.

As the discussions progressed, it was observed that member organisations have not been able to fully provide 'moral support' to each other within the period as they led specific struggles with communities in their homelands. A member organisation that led many struggles within the period in restoring SNS observed that, at times, they felt lonely in these struggles. They called for an increase in the level of solidarity among members beyond the opportunity to meet. Another participant mused "Are we able to fully demonstrate the results from our practices as the way to go given the fact that our practices are found in few communities?" This statement elicited intermittent debate/discussions around achieving 'depth' versus 'spread' in the work. A key question one would ask is the extent to which 'ABNers' have learnt from their work in facilitating the processes and practices of the methodologies.

Participants spent time to reflect in groups and share, during the plenary sessions, critical learning generated over the last two years. Interestingly, documentation and knowledge

sharing was up for discussion again, having surfaced in many other Partners' meetings. The lesson, as captured by a number of participants, is that the advocacy work of Partners can be enhanced if supported by the proper and systematic documentation of knowledge generated. "We have not been able to document lessons learnt in a way to support knowledge sharing and our advocacy efforts" – A participant from East Africa suggested. Perhaps, Partners should be supported to improve skills on documentation and knowledge sharing.

Another key lesson highlighted was the opportunity to build a strong local support for our actions. Some participants felt that the achievements of Partners could have been more if efforts had been made to build strategic country specific alliances. It was not surprising, therefore, to discuss on the need to identify and build 'friendship' with others in our home countries, as well as at the continental and global levels if that would promote the ABN methodologies within the next phase of our work. Members discussed and gave credence to what has worked and has to be deepened as part of our work to achieve more. "We need to emphasis on accompanying communities rather than leading them. This approach is at the heart of the ABN principles". A participant stressed. Lastly, there were suggestions on the need to strengthen the capacity of Partners on the concept of 'community dialogues'.

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October 16th World Food Day



Biodiversity is essential for food security and nutrition. Thousands of interconnected species make up a vital web of biodiversity within the ecosystems upon which global food production depends.

A close-up, vertical shot of a waterfall. Water is seen cascading over dark, jagged rocks that are heavily covered in bright green moss. The water is white and frothy as it falls, creating a strong contrast with the dark rocks and green moss. The overall scene is lush and natural.

COMING SOON

THE VOICE OF RIVER KATHITA

A captivating race-against-time documentary on how a group of custodians from a local community in Kenya is fighting to conserve a drying river which forms the bed-rock of their very lives, livelihoods and culture.