

Annex 4

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

LOCAL AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN AFRICA A Regional Experts Workshop, Nairobi – Kenya

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) is considered as the systematic body of knowledge acquired by local people through accumulation of experiences, informal experimentation, and intimate understanding of their environment. It is local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. Indigenous Knowledge is thus time-tested and adaptive. It is dynamic, and changes through indigenous mechanisms of creativity and innovativeness as well as through contact with other local and external knowledge systems.

Until only about fifteen or so years ago, Indigenous Knowledge in the African context was ignored and maligned by science, researchers, development workers, and policy makers. It was generally viewed as part of a romantic past and an obstacle to development. Only very rarely was Indigenous Knowledge treated as knowledge *per se* in the mainstream development circles. This undermining of Indigenous Knowledge led to people becoming more dependent on outside expertise, inefficient allocation of resources and manpower, and inappropriate planning strategies.

However, such negative views and beliefs about Indigenous Knowledge have been countered by a rapidly expanding database generated by biological and social scientists. A number of recent publications on Indigenous Knowledge indicate that Indigenous Knowledge systems form one of the most viable basis for sustainable approaches to workable development strategies for the future. These studies, combined with the increasing recognition by many sectors of the potential role of Indigenous Knowledge in human development have in the last twenty or so years begun to influence the attitudes of policy makers and development planners to consider the role of Indigenous Knowledge in sustainable development.

Furthermore, regional and national Indigenous Knowledge resource centers have embarked on systematic recording of Indigenous Knowledge systems for use in development. CIKARD in the United States of America, LEAD and CIRAN in the Netherlands are three global centres. In Africa, national Indigenous Knowledge centres are located in Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa.

In Africa in general, there exists a wealth of Indigenous Knowledge among the various indigenous communities. Further, in the last ten or so years, there has been some considerable effort towards research on Indigenous Knowledge. Unfortunately, most of this valuable information and findings either remains fragmentary and/or unpublished. Furthermore, the need to integrate Indigenous Knowledge into formal knowledge systems cannot be over-emphasized.

Currently, Africa remains in dire need of workable development strategies. It is becoming increasingly evident that western approaches towards development in Africa cannot fully solve the current pressing problems. Time is due for African scholars in Indigenous Knowledge to come together and take stock of the available wealth of Indigenous Knowledge, with a view of integrating it into the development process, as well as bringing into sharp focus the existing gaps in Indigenous Knowledge.

In African countries, we have some studies in traditional resource management. These studies need to be shared and replicated in different localities. An example is research on traditional water systems management techniques among the pastoral groups. Although this may rightly be seen as part of the communities' adaptation to the environment, it is a form of Indigenous Knowledge, which can be studied and integrated with other initiatives as a way of responding to the harsh environment. A regional workshop as this one becomes an important forum for exploring how such an interface can be worked out and implemented with the participation of all key stakeholders.

African women have also been at the forefront in taking care of their animals through what in modern science would be called veterinary science but which among the indigenous African community is refined and given local specific rationale. Experiences from Kenya indicate that scientists are now turning to one of the indigenous communities (the Maasai) to learn how they control the foot and mouth disease. There is need for a more systematic understanding and sharing of this knowledge and other relevant ones from the African region.

A third area in which there can be sharing at the regional level is the Indigenous Knowledge regarding sacred forests as part of the bio-diversity resource. It is necessary to scientifically examine the notion of sacred from the community perspective. The emerging ethno-scientific views can then be compared with modern scientific knowledge on fauna and flora to explore how sacred forests can best be integrated within the sustainable development agenda.

Based on the foregoing, the UNESCO/UNITWIN Chair at the University of Nairobi proposes to bring together key stakeholders from selected African countries to brainstorm on what indigenous communities in the respective countries have been doing to safeguard their resources.

Indigenous Knowledge is a valuable resource, not least in the fields of bio-diversity. The concept of Indigenous Knowledge is based on the acknowledgement that in any setting, local cognitive understandings of the environment are intertwined with broader social, economic and political contexts. The combination of these threads influences local interactions between human beings and their environment.

The problem therefore partly lies in the assumption by researchers, conservationists and development practitioners that questions of bio-diversity loss or environmental decay call for international institutional interventions. Western science tends to address the problems it reveals (such as climate change, decline in bio-diversity) within the cultural

and social parameters that the scientists operate in: hence the tendency to look to legal and institutional solutions based on the actions of “Nation States” and other culturally constructed social entities. Without wanting to dismiss the importance of international agreements, there are, however, dissenting voices, which challenge the dominant discourse on bio-diversity conversation. One of the most vociferous of these is the ‘indigenous ecology movement’.

The concept of the indigenous ecology movement emphasizes the need for a localized and sounder notion of bio-diversity resource, which recognizes the importance of a healthy relationship between human beings and their local ecology. Indigenous Knowledge, which has been developed over a long time and is, unfortunately, often taken for granted, is the core of this relationship.

In Africa, a lot of Indigenous Knowledge in relation to the environment is yet to be understood and documented. This underscores the need for Indigenous Knowledge research and a forum to facilitate the meeting of professionals, practitioners and other stakeholders in the area of environment and Indigenous Knowledge to share the state of the art in this field of ethno-science in relation to the bio-diversity resource.