

The Role of University in Promoting Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Zimbabwe with Reference to Traditional Practices in Rural Areas

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ABSTRACT

University Outreach: Promoting Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Zimbabwe

This paper looks at the importance of Indigenous Knowledge Development (IKD) and the function of Universities, through relevant government ministries and other institutions of higher learning in promoting the role of culture, indigenous knowledge and cosmo-vision in agriculture and rural development. Traditional practices have not always been very effective to prevent over-exploitation of resources and environmental disaster. But it is within the framework of their own knowledge and experiences, that farmers take decisions and define their relationship with outside knowledge and agencies. Indigenous Knowledge Systems have been found to be dynamic, incorporating new elements and concepts as contacts with other people and new phenomena are established.

The paper analyses what is involved in Indigenous Knowledge Development and why it is important to look at indigenous methods of imparting knowledge, indigenous approaches to innovation and experimentation, indigenous games and indigenous specialists. Indigenous development is based mainly on locally available resources such as land, water, local knowledge; culture and the way people organize themselves. Indigenous development strives to optimize the dynamics of these resources, thus enhancing cultural diversity, human welfare and ecological stability.

Universities have a role to play in creating sustainable livelihood systems through Indigenous Knowledge Development. This can be done basing on social spiritual and natural realities as expressed in the cosmologies or worldviews of the communities in Zimbabwe.

By virtue of their position in academia and society, the universities can create an enabling environment for Indigenous Knowledge Systems with sustainable livelihood systems. The paper looks at the need for supportive research policy, inter-scientific dialogue enhancement, joint learning and capacity building, deliberate stimulation of local and country wide regional economies, dealing with controversies and the traditional resources rights.

In conclusion, possible challenges and fundamental issues on approaches are highlighted coming up with activities to be utilised.

INTRODUCTION

The current wave of globalisation has contributed significantly to the economic growth, but this growth is not proportionally distributed throughout the nations. A lot of people still cannot afford the mere basics for sustenance. Poverty is reflected in various ways ranging from lack of purchasing power, ill health, political influence, economic dislocation and resort to violence.

The quest for better resource benefit has, in some instances, caused traditional human societies to break-up. Numerous customs expressions and languages are vanishing. Global awareness of these problems and their recognition by government is increasing. This has resulted in a number of international conventions and initiatives on biodiversity, desertification, and water and climate changes. Universities are appropriately placed to bring about awareness on the value of the earth's ecosystem and the recognition that indigenous knowledge and traditional cultures may contain key characteristics to meet the local and global challenge of bio-cultural sustainability.

This paper is meant to give additional tools for involvement and uplifting of the knowledge understanding and participation in indigenous knowledge development.

BACKGROUND ON INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

Indigenous knowledge is knowledge generated, developed and used by people in a certain area. It is not limited to indigenous peoples and can include knowledge originating from elsewhere but has been internalized by local people through local processes of learning, testing and adaptation. It forms the basis for the art of identifying, combining, unfolding and protecting local resources. It is rooted in and stems from the local practices hence it is specific to local context. We also talk of Endogenous Development, which refers to development based mainly, on locally available resources such as land water vegetation local knowledge, culture and the way people have organized themselves. External knowledge and resources are considered important to complement the local resources. Endogenous development strives to enhance cultural diversity, human welfare and ecological stability. It is the reason to the current process of modernization, which, in many respects, is having the opposite effects.

It should be realized that for a developing country to depend on foreign expertise and experiences alone for transformation, it will not and cannot be the sole remedy for the problems encountered. All possible avenues of democracy, peace and development initiatives from within must always be explored. This highlights the need for domestic capacities and/or potentials to take precedence to the external ones.

The success of Universities' development initiatives in integrating indigenous knowledge capacities and potentials in the curriculum can be a drastic milestone in educational development.

In developing countries it is noted that there are three stocks of knowledge; namely modern and scientific knowledge (expert) knowledge; traditional or people's knowledge, and the new knowledge which is a blend of expert and people's knowledge. In a number of cases the tendency has been for the expert Western systems to dominate or subdue the indigenous systems. The debates on these issues impinge greatly on the local people's capacity and capability to maintain and effectively utilize natural resources sustainably and beneficially. This has to be done in close liaison with other facilitating relevant institutions for the purposes of developing appropriate skills. Of late there has been a growing tendency in the Sub-Saharan Africa Region to pay close attention at how traditional systems of governance, local institutions and indigenous knowledge systems may be fruitfully incorporated into sustainable development initiatives. Therefore, Zimbabwe is by no means an exception to this progressive challenge.

IMPORTANCE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT

Studying and **conserving indigenous knowledge is important** for several reasons:

- Indigenous knowledge is generally an under-utilised resource.
- It is important and relevant for the development process.
- It provides a basis for problem solving strategies for local communities particularly the poor.

- It is a fundamental representative of an important contribution to global development knowledge.
- Investigating first what local communities know about indigenous knowledge helps improve understanding of local conditions and provide productive context for activities designed to help the communities.
- Indigenous development strives to optimize the dynamics of locally available natural resources. [1]
- A lot of indigenous knowledge systems are at risk of getting extinct; e.g. (the system of passing on knowledge to young generation by grandparents at an informal gathering).
- It is possible to create sustainable livelihood systems through Indigenous Knowledge Development.

In their operations and at policy level, the universities or institutions of higher learning should involve all sectors of society, government officials, and district councils, community members and leaders. The process should involve strategic decision-making in which institutions of higher learning, local communities, traditional leaders and government authorities identify solutions and priorities. The general realisation is that the success of promoting Indigenous Knowledge Systems relies mainly on motivation, interest and commitment of local people and the non-governmental organizations involved. There should be an implementation framework and action plans detailing responsibilities and specific budgets. Grassroots participation has to be encouraged and sanctioned starting from the strategy document preparation. The universities should come up with feasibility studies for action research. The process should achieve the following:

- Identification of local talent, and empowerment of the local people to conserve and utilize natural resources through the sustainable use approach.
- Reduction of environmental degradation through participatory approach, particularly in the rural areas.
- Provision of linkages between social and natural resources activities at district level.
- Supporting and enhancing local demonstrations of sustainable development initiatives and common practices.

GROUNDWORK FOR THE UNIVERSITIES.

Creation of an Enabling Environment.

For Indigenous Knowledge Development programmes to be more meaningful and effective, there is need for supportive legal framework and a close liaison with the environmental conservation authority. The intervention and analysis by relevant policy makers is paramount to avoid possible conflicts and resistance to the new initiatives at various levels.

The universities can institute intercultural dialogues by initiating open partnerships with other countries regionally and /or internationally. This creates a platform for exchanging ideas with a deliberate intention to learn and understand the co-evolution of diversity of cultures. Workshops and scientific conferences can be organized centered on specific themes. Undertaking joint research and discussing the outcomes is crucial and critical because general perspectives on solutions are shared and disseminated to various users.

ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES.

To identify and establish the scientific paradigm of particular knowledge systems is quite challenging because it implies making indigenous theories, concepts and research methodologies explicit for development and transfer into university conventional curriculum.

We are looking at the new scientific paradigms such as the sciences of complexity, and the chaos theory. They are governed by principles in which causality is cyclic; and cause and effect are not separable. Quite a number of indigenous knowledge systems have subtle engagement with the natural processes and intuition as a vehicle of understanding. There is need to understand from traditional leaders the role and techniques of meditation, the role of ceremonial music and rituals, just to mention a few. However tradition sometimes has fundamental challenges; like where the children are not supposed to ask questions or are told to ask later but the opportunity never comes. The modern feeling maybe that such culture can be a culprit that keeps creative energies trapped by conformity and compliance. Some controversies relate to spiritual traditional leaders who may come up with beliefs contrary to representatives of formal religion.

Such issues pose an ongoing challenge in dealing with issues of indigenous knowledge systems.

It is gratifying to note that some structures were formed to resuscitate and promote traditional knowledge systems. The Association of Zimbabwe Traditional Environmental Conservationists (AZTREC) was formed in 1985 to focus on environmental conservation and cultural survival. The association is comprised of war veterans, groups of chiefs, traditional leaders, spirit mediums, traditional medical practitioners and natural spirit driven experts. Activities of this association are centered on eco-cultural villages where many income-generating activities are taking place. Such structures invite the participation from institutions of higher learning to facilitate with the validation, documentation and publication of indigenous knowledge. This scenario poses a number of challenges to the academia in terms of the precedence set by such organizations.

THERMATIC AREAS OF ENDOGENOUS DEVELOPMENT AS FOCUS FOR RESEARCH.

The universities may focus their research mainly on the five thematic areas of Endogenous Development. These are supposed to cover the following,

- Nature and conservation knowledge systems,
- Health delivery knowledge systems,

- Agriculture knowledge systems,
- Technology knowledge systems,
- Culture and cosmovision knowledge systems.

Experience has revealed that within the communities there are natural experts in all facets that constitute endogenous development. Generally in African perspective, these natural experts are the custodians of specific indigenous knowledge systems because they take the lead in the new initiatives. However there is need for in-depth research and validation of these initiatives and this can be authenticated through action research, experimentation and testing by universities and other institutions of higher learning.

Details on Thematic Areas.

- (a) Nature and conservation knowledge systems refer to knowledge on the characteristics of woodlands, wetlands and sacred groves. The experts jealously guard against any random destruction of the environment. Through leadership and guidance of the chiefs and spirit mediums, rehabilitation of woodlands, wetlands and mountain eco-systems has been successfully undertaken in improving the state of bio-cultural diversity.
- (b) Health delivery knowledge systems refer to natural health delivery experts or health spirit mediums who care for mortal human being's health requirements. These experts never attended any formal medical school. They may be spirited medical practitioners or herbalists.
- (c) Agricultural knowledge systems refer to farming being done according to the dictates of nature resulting in well above average yields. Experiments can be done on water conservation, natural pest and disease management, seed selection, organic crop production, storage of traditional crop varieties and performance of agricultural rituals and ceremonies.
- (d) Technological knowledge systems: Some individuals are specialists in traditional trades like blacksmith. Sculpture, pottery, carpentry basket making and building. The communities used to depend mainly on these experts for their technological requirements.
- (e) Cultural knowledge systems; Culture refers to an integrated pattern of human knowledge, language customs, ideas, beliefs, taboos, techniques, tools artifacts, ceremonies, ritual, folklores and gender. Some cultural villages have been established. These are regarded as centers of excellence in disseminating culture, religion and teachings such as rituals, ceremonies, spirited world worshipping and traditional assemblies. [2]
Cosmo-vision or worldview refers to the premise on which people organise themselves and determines the moral and scientific bases for intervention in nature. It describes the relationship between human beings and nature, the perceived role of supernatural powers and the way natural processes take place.

FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT TO BE OBSERVED.

In serving the needs of the rural communities a wide range of activities can be addressed centered on **supporting local initiatives.**

In-situ development of local knowledge; this involves a combination of local and external resources in experimentation and adaptation to the changing circumstances and opportunities. It has to be based on the local people's own way of explaining reality, sharing and transforming information and learning from former experiences.

Maximizing on local control; There are many ways that communities use to take decision in the local context. It is useful to enhance this process of local control. However there are subcultures abound and differences in gender, class ethnic group, religious affiliation, education, language and power that lead to different needs and objectives. Addressing these subcultures is a delicate process and there is a lot to learn on the issue from the locals.

Retention of benefits; The action research outcomes should be such that they benefit all the participating stakeholders. The locals should benefit from the utilization of the new innovations and gaining the new knowledge, and publications of the results should reward researchers.

Utilisation of identified niches; Production and marketing of region specific food products and craftwork is part of the indigenous development activities, which can attract trade with interested groups. Currently the roadside sell of craftwork is without any form of pricing system. Negotiation or consensus is the prevailing method of setting price for the individual customer. Formalisation of the situation will result in benefits to both parties involved with some revenue going to the state.

The issue of intellectual property rights has to be viewed seriously to ensure patenting of inventions or other discoveries. The locals should benefit from their intellectual property rights.

Therefore universities have the task to ensure that all the participants in the research initiatives are aware and conform to all these far-reaching logistics.

UNIVERSITY ACTIVITIES:

For the university to fulfill its mandate in contributing to the **resuscitation and preservation of indigenous knowledge systems**, there is need to embark on the following activities.

- (i) Development of strategic plans, which will, incorporates community service and outreach programmes as one of the objectives. Representatives from all stakeholders, traditional leaders and local authority should be involved.

- (ii) Initiating and conducting needs assessment workshops and come up with relevant training programmes and subsequently compile information for writing training modules to serve as guidelines.
- (iii) Carrying out training programmes for university staff, students and other participants to address attitudinal aspects as well as participatory development of indigenous knowledge in a cultural context. The training would be done by academics, traditional leaders and traditional experts. Accountability should be towards community development, the rural people and the scientific community.
- (iv) Initiating and coordinating research programmes by sharing areas and topics for research, methodologies, assessment of findings and publications. [3]
- (v) Creating information-sharing platform for the participating universities to exchange ideas on progress and findings from the research programmes.
- (vi) Establishing exchange programmes for staff, students and traditional leaders between the different partners for intercultural dialogues on methods, concepts and theories.
- (vii) Instituting systems of presenting findings to the government to influence the future investment in science, research technology and development.
- (viii) Putting in place periodical and systematic evaluation of training and research programmes to make appropriate adjustments and rectifications. [4]
- (ix) Assessment of the impact of the entire initiative with regards to the overall goal of the Indigenous Knowledge Development Programme.
- (x) Identification of additional training needs to ensure capacity building and establish mechanisms for conflict resolution and management.

These activities create the fabric of the entire outreach initiative as a result all the stakeholders have to be groomed to fit easily into the system. A systematic schedule of forward planning will enhance a practical approach to the initiative. The above activities call for a lot of funds therefore sourcing and lobbying for funds should be on the agenda to ensure success of the programmes.

CONCLUSION

We are all reminded of an old adage that a hundred mile journey begins with the first step. Some universities in the country may have already started working on **indigenous knowledge development initiatives** at a very small scale; however, there is need for enhanced complementary support to ensure more coverage countrywide. A lot of brilliant practical ideas have been generated with no immediate practical implementation. This reflects a clear vacuum in our curriculum with regards to Indigenous Knowledge Development. Our current programmes cater for the formal micro-needs of our society. There is need to analyse our curriculum structure and systems closely to incorporate Indigenous Knowledge Development and cater for the macro-needs of our nation.

Universities and other institutions of higher learning should raise awareness of the value and importance of community based practices in enriching the indigenous knowledge development process. To ensure effective and deliberate contribution to local community development, it is essential that all participating members of the community share a common vision for development. The vision must be well articulated for members to understand and own it. The universities can also facilitate the mainstreaming of indigenous knowledge application

into the national development programmes and internationally supported projects. This necessitates proactive lobbying through the community-based organizations, relevant government authority and other stakeholders.

The general outcry of local indigenous knowledge and natural resources being tapped modified and utilised elsewhere should gradually be an issue of the past.

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