**Indigenous Knowledge**

**What is Indigenous Knowledge?**

The increasing attention indigenous knowledge is receiving by academia and the development institutions has not yet led to a unanimous perception of the concept of indigenous knowledge. None of the definitions is essentially contradictory; they overlap in many aspects. Warren (1991) and Flavier (1995) present typical definitions by suggesting:

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is the local knowledge – knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. IK contrasts with the international knowledge system generated by universities, research institutions and private firms. It is the basis for local-level decision making in agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, natural-resource management, and a host of other activities in rural communities. (Warren 1991)

Indigenous Knowledge is (…) the information base for a society, which facilitates communication and decision-making. Indigenous information systems are dynamic, and are continually influenced by internal creativity and experimentation as well as by contact with external systems. (Flavier et al. 1995: 479)

While using similar definitions, the conclusions drawn by the various authors are, controversial in a number of aspects. The implications of this will be discussed in the section "Public debate on indigenous knowledge". Most authors explain their perception of indigenous knowledge, covering only some aspects of it. In contrast, [Ellen and Harris (1996)](http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/Rainforest/SML_files/Occpap/indigknow.occpap_TOC.html) provide ten characteristics of indigenous knowledge that are comprehensive and conclusive.

**Why is Indigenous Knowledge Important?**

In the emerging global knowledge economy a country’s ability to build and mobilize knowledge capital, is equally essential for sustainable development as the availability of physical and financial capital. (World Bank, 1997) The basic component of any country’s knowledge system is its indigenous knowledge. It encompasses the skills, experiences and insights of people, applied to maintain or improve their livelihood.

**Significant contributions to global knowledge have originated from indigenous people**, for instance in medicine and veterinary medicine with their intimate understanding of their environments. Indigenous knowledge is developed and adapted continuously to gradually changing environments and passed down from generation to generation and closely interwoven with people’s cultural values. Indigenous knowledge is also the social capital of the poor, their main asset to invest in the struggle for survival, to produce food, to provide for shelter or to achieve control of their own lives.

To name but a few:

· Medicinal properties of the neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*), which, among others, [IDRC](http://www.idrc.ca/)is researching

· Traditional pastoralists as guardians of [biological diversity.](http://www4.worldbank.org/afr/ikdb/endetail.cfm?P_Id=49&Technology_Id=45&Ctry_ISO=TZ&Domain_ID=6)

· Egyptian [architecture](http://www4.worldbank.org/afr/ikdb/endetail.cfm?P_Id=3&Technology_Id=3&Ctry_ISO=EG&Domain_ID=2)for urban areas.

For more examples see our [database](http://www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/datab.htm) of indigenous knowledge practices.

Today, many **indigenous knowledge systems are at risk of becoming extinct** because of rapidly changing natural environments and fast pacing economic, political, and cultural changes on a global scale. Practices vanish, as they become inappropriate for new challenges or because they adapt too slowly. However, many practices disappear only because of the intrusion of foreign technologies or development concepts that promise short-term gains or solutions to problems without being capable of sustaining them. The tragedy of the impending disappearance of indigenous knowledge is most obvious to those who have developed it and make a living through it. But the implication for others can be detrimental as well, when skills, technologies, artifacts, problem solving strategies and expertise are lost.

**Indigenous knowledge is part of the lives of the rural poor;** their livelihood depends almost entirely on specific skills and knowledge essential for their survival. Accordingly, for the **development process**, indigenous knowledge is of particular relevance for the following **sectors** **and strategies**:

· Agriculture

· Animal husbandry and ethnic veterinary medicine

· Use and management of natural resources

· Primary health care (PHC), preventive medicine and psychosocial care

· Saving and lending

· Community development

· Poverty alleviation

Indigenous knowledge is **not yet fully utilized in the development process**. Conventional approaches imply that development processes always require technology transfers from locations that are perceived as more advanced. This has led often to overlooking the potential in local experiences and practices. The following experience from Ethiopia food security program may illustrate the consequences if local knowledge is not considered adequately.

Higher yielding sorghum varieties were introduced in Ethiopia to increase food security and income for farmers and rural communities. When weather and other conditions were favorable, the modern varieties proved a success. However, in some areas complete crop failures were observed, whereas local varieties, with a higher variance of traits, were less susceptible to the frequent droughts. The loss of an entire crop was considered by the farming community as more than offset by the lower, average yields of the local variety that performed also under more extreme conditions. (Oduol, W. 1992) An approach, that had included the local experience of farmers, might have resulted in a balanced mix of local and introduced varieties, to reduce the risk for the producers.

Introduced varieties and commercially marketed seeds are replacing local varieties – along with them, the concomitant local knowledge disappears. For many years, the international community is establishing - with considerable effort - gene banks to preserve the genetic information of local varieties or indigenous species. However, the seeds and clones do not carry the instructions how to grow them. This knowledge needs to be captured, preserved and transferred as well.

Indigenous knowledge is **relevant** on **three levels for the development process**.

· It is, obviously, most important for the **local community** in which the bearers of such knowledge live and produce.

· Development agents (CBOs, NGOs, governments, donors, local leaders, and private sector initiatives) need to **recognize**it, **value** it and **appreciate** it in their interaction with the local communities. Before incorporating it in their approaches, they need to understand it – and critically validate it against the usefulness for their intended objectives.

· Lastly, indigenous knowledge forms part of the **global knowledge**. In this context, it has a value and relevance in itself. **Indigenous knowledge can be preserved, transferred, or adopted and adapted elsewhere**.

The **development process** **interacts with indigenous knowledge.**When designing or implementing development programs or projects, three scenarios can be observed:

The development strategy either

· relies entirely or substantially on indigenous knowledge,

· overrides indigenous knowledge or,

· incorporates indigenous knowledge.

Planners and implementers need to decide which path to follow. Rational conclusions are based on determining whether indigenous knowledge would contribute to solve existing problems and achieving the intended objectives. In most cases, a careful amalgamation of indigenous and foreign knowledge would be most promising, leaving the choice, the rate and the degree of adoption and adaptation to the clients. Foreign knowledge does not necessarily mean modern technology, it includes also indigenous practices developed and applied under similar conditions elsewhere. These techniques are then likely to be adopted faster and applied more successfully. To foster such a transfer a **sound understanding of indigenous knowledge**is needed. This requires means for the **capture and validation,**as well as for the eventual[exchange](http://www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/ik-web2.htm), transfer and dissemination ofindigenous knowledge.