

# INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

## THE WAY FORWARD

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**I**N 1998, THE WORLD BANK LAUNCHED THE INDIGENOUS Knowledge for Development Program in response to the challenge articulated by governments' and civil society leaders at the Global Knowledge Conference in Toronto, Canada in 1997. At the same time, a new vision of a Knowledge Bank was formulated, recognizing that beside the role of storehouse of universally applicable and transferable knowledge, the Bank would seek to:

- ✓ Empower its clients to tap a variety of knowledge sources, including indigenous knowledge systems embedded in local communities;
- ✓ Help connect clients to each other and to other sources of experience;
- ✓ Learn from and with clients about what may works in a given setting and why.

The 'business case' for using Indigenous Knowledge (IK) is based on the following assumption: that understanding the local context allows for a better adaptation of the global knowledge; that using local knowledge sources increases ownership and eventually produces better results on the ground with higher sustainability; that learning from and building on the knowledge systems embedded in local communities helps to empower these communities and fosters a sense of equity in their interactions with governments and external development partners<sup>1</sup>; that building on IK could only be achieved in partnership with the communities themselves, with governments and civil society, and with development partners and academia, in order to leverage scarce resources and maximize the comparative advantage of the respective partners<sup>2</sup>; and, most importantly, that investing in the exchange of IK and its integration into development programs supported by the Bank and its development partners would help achieve the main development objective, the reduction of poverty.

A decade of experience in that sector has led us to the following observations: the successful indigenous practices have a huge potential to enhance the impact and the sustainability of development efforts, and the development community should therefore increase its support to programs that reinforce

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*“ Men are not to be judged by what they do not know, but by what they know, and the manner in which they know it. ”*

VAUVENARGUES

the ability of local communities to share and apply IK. In the following, a six-point agenda for enriching the development programs with the integration of effective IK practices is outlined.

#### THE WAY FORWARD

Over the past few years IK has been progressively put on the agenda of development, as people are more aware of the value of IK for the development process. Although sharing IK across borders and communities is still dominated by academic circles rather than by practitioners, the integration of IK into development projects is gradually beginning to take place.

Nevertheless, to build on and to widely extend the progress to date, much more efforts are required.

The main actors are clearly the communities and the practitioners, even if governments and their development partners can play an important role by supporting appropriate policies, programs, researches, and targeted interventions.

Would it be realistic to envision that, within the next five to ten years, learning from IK and incorporating successful practices into development programs may become the standard rather than the exception? The following six-point agenda suggests both governments' and partners' actions which contribute to realize this vision.

#### SCALE UP SUCCESSFUL IK PRACTICES TO HELP ACHIEVE THE MDGS

According to an ample evidence, one of the best ways to empower the local communities is to let them apply their indigenous practices in development activities that affect them directly. While local institutions and governments are increasingly interested in incorporating IK into programs and projects, the degree of such interest varies from case to case. Some governments, for example, are uncertain about the commitment of external partners in supporting the activities, and raise doubts about the effectiveness of such an approach.

Table 1 highlights the potential contribution of IK to the achievement of the MDGs. These cases demonstrate that, with an appropriate adaptation and leveraging with other knowledge resources, IK can make a significant contribution in saving lives, educating children, increasing agricultural production, enhancing governance, etc. It would be therefore recommended that partners increase their support to community-driven activities that rely on IK.

#### ENHANCE THE ABILITY OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES TO DEVELOP, SHARE AND APPLY THEIR IK

One of the most effective ways to empower local communities is to help enhance their ability to exchange and apply indigenous practices (either directly or in combination with other practices). In particular, brokering knowledge and bringing together knowledge seekers and providers can increase the participative problem-solving capacity within local communities. Specific actions in this area may include:

- ✓ Development of national IK strategies and their incorporation into poverty reduction programs;

MDG	IK EXAMPLE	SOURCE
ERADICATE POVERTY AND HUNGER	In the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, farmers used their local knowledge and expertise to increase agricultural productivity and incomes by 60 per cent in about five years.	<i>IK Notes 45</i>
ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION	In West Africa, the use of local language as a medium of instruction has helped increase literacy rates among rural populations and provided gainful employment for teachers and young girls.	<i>IK Notes 5</i>
PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN	Women are playing an active role as agents of social change throughout Africa. In Senegal, the women of Malicounda empowered themselves to put an end to the local practice of female genital mutilation.	<i>IK Notes 3</i>
REDUCE CHILD MORTALITY	Throughout Africa, local communities use traditional child rearing practices to supplement the diet of infants. In Ethiopia, traditional medicine is used to treat common infant diseases.	<i>IK Notes 35</i>
IMPROVE MATERNAL HEALTH	In Uganda, traditional birth attendants have collaborated with district health centers, using modern ICTs, to help reduce maternal mortality reportedly by over 50 per cent in three years.	<i>IK Notes 40</i>
COMBAT HIV/AIDS, MALARIA AND OTHER DISEASES	In Tanzania, traditional healers have successfully treated opportunistic infections of over 4000 AIDS patients, prolonging their lives.	<i>IK Notes 51</i>
ENSURE ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY	Rural Communities in Mozambique manage control of forest exploitation along the country's shoreline through myths and traditional rites, maintaining these resources for the next generations.	<i>IK Notes 46</i>
BUILD A GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT	A team of IK experts from East Africa visits counterparts in South Asia to develop a partnership for South-South cooperation on IK-related activities.	<i>IK Notes 55</i>

TABLE 1. POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION OF IK TOWARDS ACHIEVING THE MDGS

SOURCE: *Indigenous Knowledge: Local Pathways to Global Development*, World Bank, 2004. *IK Notes* is a monthly publication reporting on IK-based practices. See <http://www.worldbank.org/afr/ik>.

- ✓ Brokering South-South cross-regional IK learning exchanges;
- ✓ Facilitation of intra-regional community-to-community learning exchanges;
- ✓ Building of IK professional associations, standards and ethics; and
- ✓ Supporting communities to develop businesses related to IK.

The governments should take the lead in creating the appropriate policy environment for the evolution of these activities. On the other side partners could provide the resources required for brokering, for the facilitating functions and for the dissemination of lessons of experience (e.g., in the form of tool kits and guidelines, some prototypes of which have already been developed). Projects, intermediaries and government agencies could be supported in providing opportunities for exposing traditional practitioners to the scientific research community and other professional associations. At the same time, the private sector could be encouraged through appropriate policies to invest in the development of products derived from indigenous practices, or develop appropriate community – private sector partnerships<sup>2</sup>.

DEVELOP INNOVATIVE PROTOCOLS  
FOR THE VALIDATION AND  
PROTECTION OF IK

Existing international protocols governing intellectual property rights (IPR) are essentially based on the concept of patent. Similarly, protocols for validation of traditional medicine are essentially based on discovering the effect of single substances on a specific disease or illness. In the case of traditional medicine, given the multiple ingredients in a herbal treatment, the application of such protocols appears problematic. Accordingly, more appropriate approaches are needed to address the issues of IPR and the scientific validation of IK.

While a start in this direction has been observed, a more concerted action is called for. Governments can help by designing appropriate policies and legal covenants. The partners, led by WIPO in the case of IPR issues and by WHO in the case of traditional medicine, could contribute by promoting the use of appropriate international protocols and disseminating them through an information campaign that reaches the local practitioners and the communities, associations researchers etc.

DEVELOP A RESULTS FRAMEWORK  
FOR MONITORING IK AND MEASURING ITS IMPACT

Thanks to an increasing of number of projects and activities incorporating IK, a considerable body of evidence, useful for expanding IK applications across countries, is being formed. It is therefore important to identify effective approaches to monitoring and evaluation of results in projects that incorporate IK, and to establish a larger database of quantifiable results of IK-driven activities. Sector-specific sets of indicators need to be developed, to demonstrate how the incorporation of useful IK (or addressing harmful practices) in development has made a difference. Such a framework would also help distill successful approaches for replication and scale up. The framework



should be referenced against the MDGs, indicating how IK can contribute to achieve them. Finally, such an approach would help also address the issues related to validation and IPR associated with IK. Governments could ensure that national IK strategies contain appropriate arrangements for measuring the results. The partners could help by developing common methodologies based on successful country practices and disseminating them to the communities of practice.

ESTABLISH AN INNOVATION FUND  
TO PROMOTE SUCCESSFUL IK PRACTICES

Even if IK is typically passed on from generation to generation, such heritage is not rigid, and each generation can adapt and improve the earlier practices. Local communities have the potential for creativity and innovation. It is

evidenced that enabled impoverished communities and traditional practitioners are actually capable of developing new problem solving approaches, building on their intellectual capital (i.e., their IK systems).

Evidences also suggest that an innovation fund supporting such activities can impressively stimulate further creative thinking among the impoverished communities. For example, the GTZ has evaluated a series of small scale innovation projects funded by Germany and found them to be particularly useful in promoting community-based initiatives, micro-enterprise development and local

innovations. Similarly, the World Bank's Development Marketplace has spurred several very creative community-based solutions, some of which have involved IK<sup>3</sup>. An innovation fund dedicated to IK could be modeled on the latter and provide a platform for partners to provide resources as "venture capital" for IK-related innovation<sup>4</sup>.

ORGANIZE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS AND EVENTS  
TO PROMOTE THE ABOVE AGENDA

Despite the recent progress, the awareness of the role played by IK in development is generally limited. Yet, a growing body of evidence suggests that successful indigenous practices can effectively contribute to the development agenda. In this context, it is time to establish a high level advocacy group composed by global leaders and other eminent personalities to help raise said level of awareness.

In addition, it appears appropriate to organize a global conference in order to bring together policy makers, representatives of IK communities of practice and other community-based organizations, the development partners, and other possible actors, to help generate a stronger commitment to implement the above agenda. Year 2010 would be a realistic and ideal target for such a conference, giving still a suitable springboard for the IK's role in the remaining five years before the target date of the MDGs in 2015.



Such a global event would underline the commitment of development partners to promote the use of IK in the development process.

FINAL REMARKS<sup>5</sup>

We have learned that IK is a critical factor for sustainable development and empowerment of local communities. The integration of IK into the development process will help to enrich it and make it more equitable. Like any other knowledge, IK needs to be constantly used, challenged, and further adapted to the evolving contexts.

Supporting local and regional networks of IK practitioners and facilitating community-to-community knowledge and learning exchanges will help to enable the communities to participate more actively in the development process as protagonists of their own development. While innovative mechanisms for the validation and protection of IK need to be developed, many indigenous practices can at the same

<sup>2</sup> There are good examples: in South Africa, tea-growing farmers of Suid Bokkeveld have used indigenous practices (adopted from farmers in Wupperthal in West Cape Province) to improve their post-harvest processing and set up a cooperative which has succeeded in securing export orders to Europe. In Uganda, the authorities are supporting the marketing of toothpaste based on indigenous plants.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the Bank's IK Program was launched with a grant from the Bank's Innovation Marketplace, which preceded the Bank's Development Marketplace concept, then limited to proposals from Bank teams. The Development Marketplace expanded the concept to include proposals from civil society groups in participating countries. At each marketplace, (several such events have been organized to date), the Bank provides innovation grants (about \$100,000 on average) to several innovation projects selected from thousands of proposals. For example, the marketplace held in December 2003, awarded about \$6 million to 47 proposals from 27 countries.

<sup>4</sup> For a review of approaches to supporting grass-roots innovation see *Supporting Local Innovation for Rural Development: Analysis and review of Five Innovation Support Funds*, Danish Institute for International Stud-



time be adapted and scaled up within local, national, and regional development efforts.

To proceed on these fronts, a stronger commitment from governments, partners, community-based organizations, and other interested players to work together is required. Finally, we need to promote a strong partnership to harness IK for development in a process of learning from communities and helping communities to learn.

ies, June, 2006. This study was commissioned by the IK for Development Program and supported by a Danish Trust Fund.

<sup>5</sup> For further information on the IK for Development Program please consult: <http://www.worldbank.org/afri/ik> ■

<sup>1</sup> For example, WIPO would concentrate on IPR issues; IFAD on agricultural topics; NGOs would provide the link to communities, etc. Before the launch of the IK Program, the following initial partners were consulted in the context of PICTA (Partnership for ICT in Africa): ECA, CISDA, IDRC, ITU, UNESCO, UNDP, and WHO. Subsequently, the IK Program collaborated also with others, including CIDA, CIRAN at NUFFIC (Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education), FAO, GM/CCD (Global Mechanism of the Convention to Combat Desertification), GTZ, IFAD, ILO, Netherlands Development Cooperation, NORAD, Swiss Development Cooperation, UNCED, UNCTAD, WIPO, and numerous NGOs, CBOs and centers of excellence, mainly in Africa and South Asia.

