

Indigenous Traditional Knowledge: An overview

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Abstract: Traditional knowledge is the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities around the world. It is an integral part of the culture and history of a local community. It is developed from experience gained over centuries and adapted to the local culture and environment; it is transmitted orally from generation to generation. It tends to be collectively owned and takes the form of stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language, and agricultural practices, including the development of plant species and animal breeds. Sometimes it is referred to as an oral tradition for it is practiced, sung, danced, painted, carved, chanted and performed down through millennia. The paper is a theoretical overview of the concept and development of indigenous traditional knowledge.

Keywords: *Indigenous Knowledge, Traditional Knowledge, Theoretical Overview.*

Traditional Knowledge:

Traditional Knowledge (TK) is an integral part of the culture and history of a local community. It is evolved through many years of regular experimentation on the day to day life and available resources surrounded by the community. It is the unique, traditional, local knowledge existing within and developed around specific condition of men and women indigenous to a particular geographical area.

Traditional knowledge is the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities around the world. Developed from experience gained over centuries and adapted to the local culture and environment, it is transmitted orally from generation to generation. It tends to be collectively owned and takes the form of stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language, and agricultural practices, including the development

of plant species and animal breeds. Sometimes it is referred to as an oral tradition for it is practiced, sung, danced, painted, carved, chanted and performed down through millennia. Traditional knowledge is mainly of a practical nature, particularly in such fields as agriculture, fisheries, health, horticulture, forestry and environmental management in general.

According to Mugabe (1998), indigenous knowledge (IK) 'is that knowledge that is held and used by a people who identify themselves as indigenous of a place based on a combination of cultural distinctiveness and prior territorial occupancy relative to a more recently-arrived population with its own distinct and subsequently dominant culture'. Traditional knowledge (TK) is 'the totality of all knowledge and practices, whether explicit or implicit. This knowledge is established on past experiences and observation' (Mugabe 1998). Following the definitions of indigenous knowledge and traditional knowledge, one can state that indigenous traditional knowledge is the totality of all knowledge and practices established on past experiences and observation that is held and used by a people.

Types of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge:

Traditional knowledge is 'a broad term referring to knowledge systems, encompassing a wide variety of areas, held by traditional groups or communities or to knowledge acquired in a

non-systemic way'. This knowledge 'is drawn from global experience and combines western scientific discoveries, economic preferences and philosophies with those of other widespread cultures' (Mugabe Kameri-Mbote & Mutta 2001-5). Following Mugabe (1998), 'examples of traditional knowledge include knowledge about the use of specific plants and/or parts thereof, identification of medicinal properties in plants, and harvesting practices'. For example, 'the weeping wattle tree used for cleansing bad spells in a village or yard; Aloe which can be used for blood cleansing and for the treatment of burns; and the use of Buffalo-thorn tree – *Ziziphus mucronata* – to heal abscesses having mixed the leaves in hot water'.

According to Fien (2006), indigenous knowledge (IK) is the local knowledge that is unique to a culture or society. Other names for it include: local knowledge, folk knowledge, people's knowledge, traditional wisdom or traditional science. This knowledge is passed from generation to generation, usually by word of mouth and cultural rituals, and has been the basis for agriculture, food preparation, health care, education, conservation and the wide range of other activities that sustain societies in many parts of the world.

Different Aspects of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge:

Indigenous Traditional Knowledge system consists of an integrated body of knowledge system which tends to focus on different aspects like:

- **Classification:** Local classification and quantification system of materials, soil, water, air and weather.
- **Agriculture :** Agricultural farming and crop system, land preparation, crop selection, propagation of plant, sowing, seedling preparation, plant protection method, harvesting, seed storage and processing.
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- **Animal Care:** Animal breeding and production, traditional fodder and forage species and their specific use, animal disease classification and ethno-veterinary medicines.
- **Soil Conservation :** Soil conservation practices, use of species for soil conservation and soil fertility, enhancement of practices
- **Water:** Traditional water management and water conservation system,

traditional techniques for irrigation, use of specific species for water conservation, aquatic resource management.

- **Agro-forestry:** Management of forest lands and trees, the knowledge and use of forest plants and animals and the inter relationship between trees, crops and soil.
- **Plants:** As a source of wild food, building material, household tools, minor forest products, fuel wood and medicinal folklore system.
- **Social networks:** Kinship ties and their effect on power relations, economic strategies and allocation of resources.
- **World science:** Views of the universe and humanity's place with it, relationship between human and nature, myths, beliefs and customs.

Special Features of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge:

Some of the features relevant to Indigenous Traditional Knowledge are:

- Locally appropriate and specifically adapted as per the requirement of local conditions.
- Restraint in resources exploitation needed for immediate survival.
- Having diversified production system without over exploitation of a single resource.

- Symbolizes the respect towards nature.
- Flexible for new interventions and integration of green technological advances.
- Inspires the social responsibilities.

Sources of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge:

There is Indigenous Traditional Knowledge hidden in our villages, community and countryside. Some of the possible sources of collecting Indigenous Traditional Knowledge are –

- Farmers
- Elderly persons
- Community leaders
- Folk literature, song and poetry
- Folktales
- Ancient Records
- Published materials of different languages

Rational behind Protection of Indigenous Knowledge:

One of the possible reasons for the protection of indigenous traditional knowledge is to prevent the knowledge from being exploited by appropriation for financial gains ‘by third parties’ (World Intellectual Property Organization). Supporting this view, Hountondji (2002: 35) is of the opinion that ‘Western society ... accumulates data about non-Western societies and appropriates their knowledge

systems’. According to IFLANET (2004), indigenous traditional knowledge is ‘vulnerable both because it is exploitable and has been exploited’ financially by global drug industries. The drug industries, for example, derive prescription drugs from indigenous traditional knowledge plant species by appropriation. This is supported by Mugabe (1998), who says that ‘plant-derived prescription drugs in the U.S. originate from 40 species of which 50% are from the tropics ... The search for these plants has been accompanied by appropriation of traditional knowledge’.

Another reason for the protection of indigenous traditional knowledge is that drug industries financially benefit and exploit the medicinal properties in plants used by indigenous traditional people to treat certain illness such as cancer without the recognition of the indigenous traditional peoples’ knowledge of the plant and its medicinal properties. It can be argued that the drug industries are exploiting the collective knowledge of indigenous traditional people ‘for the profit of a few’

Another possible reason why indigenous traditional knowledge needs to be protected is because Western science makes a lot of money from medicinal plants ‘without the consent of the possessors of the resources and knowledge’ (Sahai 2002).

Conclusion:

Appreciation of the value of traditional knowledge is growing. This knowledge is valuable not only to those who depend on it in their daily lives, but to modern industry and agriculture as well. Many widely used products, such as plant-based medicines, health products and cosmetics, are derived from traditional knowledge. Other such valuable products include agricultural and non-wood forest products as well as handicraft. Traditional

knowledge can make a significant contribution to sustainable development.

The knowledge related to indigenous tradition is depleting day by day because of lack of awareness about its value and impact, as well as proper documentation. There is an urgent need of effort to document such valuable information for the welfare and betterment of society.

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