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Indigenous Knowledge for Development



A Framework for Action

Knowledge and Learning Center
Africa Region
The World Bank

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A framework for action

KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING CENTER
AFRICA REGION
THE WORLD BANK

This paper has been prepared by Reinhard Woytek (Consultant, Practice Manager, IK Initiative) under the overall guidance of Nicolas Gorjestani (Program Manager, IK Initiative). The paper has benefited from the suggestions of the IK Initiative Team in the World Bank (Africa Region and Information Solutions Group) as well as from the views of the external advisory panel of the IK Initiative composed of representatives of partner institutions. An earlier draft of the paper (dated October 15, 1998) was disseminated to the partners during the meeting of PICTA in Tunis on October 21-23, 1998. The present draft reflects the suggestions made and agreements reached by the partners at that meeting. Funding for the IK Initiative has been provided by a grant from the Innovation Marketplace of the World Bank. The views and conclusions within are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the World Bank or any of its affiliated organizations.

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Cover photo courtesy of R. Kiessling, GTZ, Eschborn:
Women in Mali painting fabric using traditional Bogolan motifs and techniques.

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Overview

This paper has been prepared within the context of the Indigenous Knowledge for Development Initiative. The initiative is led by the World Bank in partnership with several organizations which are collaborating under the Partnership for Information and Communication Technology for Africa (PICTA). The main premise of the paper is that the vision of a truly global knowledge partnership will be realized only when the people of the developing countries participate as both contributors and users of knowledge. There is, therefore, a need not only to help bring global knowledge to the developing countries, but also to learn about indigenous knowledge (IK) from these countries, paying particular attention to the knowledge base of the poor. To this end, the paper explains why indigenous knowledge should play a greater role in the development activities of the World Bank and its development partners. It then proposes a framework for action for the development partners to help raise awareness of the importance of IK and to better integrate IK in their development activities in order to improve the benefits of development assistance.

What is indigenous knowledge?

Herbal medicine is a good example of IK, which has affected the lives of people around the globe. The literature on IK does not provide a single definition of the concept. Nevertheless, several traits distinguish IK broadly from other knowledge. IK is unique to a particular culture and society. It is the basis for local decision-making in agriculture, health, natural resource management and other activities. IK is embedded in community practices, institutions, relationships and rituals. It is essentially tacit knowledge that is not easily codifiable. The paper illustrates the concept with boxes that describe several examples of IK practices and the key lessons for development: adoption of modern bean varieties in Columbia and Rwanda; distribution of food aid in Nepal; abolition of female circumcision/mutilation by women of Malicounda in Senegal; and postpartum maternal and child health care rites among the Ibo in Nigeria.

Why is indigenous knowledge important?

Indigenous knowledge provides the basis for problem-solving strategies for local communities, especially the poor. It represents an important component of global knowledge on development issues. IK is an underutilized resource in the development process. Learning from IK, by investigating first what local communities know and have, can improve understanding of local conditions and provide a productive context for activities designed to help the communities. Understanding IK can increase responsiveness to clients. Adapting international practices to the local setting can help improve the impact and sustainability of development assistance. Sharing IK within and across communities can help enhance cross-cultural understanding and promote the cultural dimension of development. Most importantly, investing in the exchange of IK and its integration into the assistance programs of the World Bank and its development partners can help to reduce poverty.

How is indigenous knowledge exchanged?

The integration of IK into the development process is essentially a process of exchange of information from one community to another. The process of exchange of IK within and between developing countries and between developing and industrial countries involves six steps:

