



Developing Indigenous Knowledge in Francophone Africa

A Four-Nation Overview

How well is indigenous knowledge (IK) taking hold and being integrated into the development policy and practice in the Francophone countries of West and Central Africa? Results of a World Bank mission in early summer 2001 to four of these nations—Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and Cameroon—offer a brief panorama of the current situation. This note is based on contacts with public and private sector counterparts involved in different facets of indigenous knowledge promotion and interviews that grew, in many instances, from these initial contacts. The situation in each country was different—a function of its own history and the challenges and opportunities it faces; yet there were important commonalities as well. Both are briefly explored below.

An abundance of initiatives

Much is going on in relation to indigenous knowledge in all four countries, both in the public sector and among non-governmental and community-based organizations. Activities are cropping up across multiple domains of development: health, agriculture, education, natural resource management, cultural affairs. A few examples:

- An NGO in Mali devoted to “adding muscle to local knowledge” (*muscler le savoir local*) recruits students from across West Africa to attend seminars on the dynamics of indig-

enous knowledge and to carry out first hand research—particularly in the agricultural zone of the Office du Niger—on how local farmers have adapted traditional understandings of crop fertility and production to the exigencies of commercial operations.

- A center in rural Senegal gathers together over 400 traditional healers to exchange methods and test the efficacy of their ministrations with modern medical diagnosis.
- The Ministry of Culture and Art in Burkina Faso sponsors, through its “Direction of Cultural Heritage,” a series of local museums devoted to preserving indigenous crafts and a program of fora on local know-how.
- A researcher at the Natural Products Research Foundation in Cameroon has carried out, under OAU sponsorship, an ethno-botanic survey of traditional uses of the vast store of plants in that country.

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Indigenous knowledge now appears to be a hot topic. There are sources of funding, both private and foreign aid-based, for studies and initiatives in this area, and it is increasingly politically correct to endorse related efforts. Cross-country undertakings are not uncommon. The Ministry of Culture in Mali recently held an international colloquium of traditional hunters and “bush chieftains” (*chefs de la brousse*) from several West African countries to discuss indigenous methods of natural resource preservation; and the NGO PROMETRA (*Promotion des médecines traditionnelles* or “Promotion of traditional medicine”) in Senegal has joined forces with similar organizations or created branches of its own structure in twelve other African countries. It is evident that any further effort now envisaged in these countries must take careful account of what has already been initiated and of the lessons learned from practice to date.

Uneven development

The very popularity of indigenous knowledge as a banner for action, and funding, attracts such a variety of aspirants and

contributors that testing claims against field-level results is a critical means for identifying best practice and separating the wheat from the chaff. Yet such assessment is far from the rule.

There is nonetheless an increasing amount of substance in the domain of indigenous knowledge throughout the four countries visited, but it remains unevenly developed in a number of respects.

- Despite the creation of Ministries of Culture (as in Mali and Burkina Faso), the preponderance of activities remains in the NGO and voluntary sector. Cultivation of indigenous knowledge is seldom part of the policy or practices of public agencies. In Senegal, for example, almost all of the experiments with traditional medicine have been carried out under private auspices, and their proponents have had little success in interesting the mainline medical system in such initiatives.
- There is also a marked divergence between what might be called the “hard” and “soft” sectors of development. Most IK initiatives have been undertaken in social service domains like health, culture and education. There are some, though fewer, in agriculture. The further one moves from the realm of social development toward engineering, finance and the more technical sectors of development, the fewer people one finds who understand the role of IK or are ready to take it into account. Natural resource management constitutes perhaps the most notable exception.
- Use of African languages is in many cases closely related to efforts to record, develop, and incorporate local knowledge; but practices in this regard are conditioned by a host of other policy concerns. It is typically more difficult to adopt coherent policies promoting them in coastal countries with hundreds of African languages than in interior or Sahelian countries with a more limited number of tongues and a few predominant *lingua franca*. Cameroon, for example, must deal both with official (French-English) bilingualism and a number of different African languages and is therefore still struggling with its policy regarding use of the latter in the educational system.

Why this record of uneven progress? Dominant models of development are difficult to change, it is true, and the more technical the domain the more it is tied into international norms of procedure and performance. Indigenous knowledge is therefore naturally a phenomenon where rhetoric and practice tend to diverge a bit: there is often a political payoff to endorsing it but a real political cost to doing something concrete about it.

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But there are other valid reasons for uneven development. The NGO sector provides a good laboratory for experimenting with innovative approaches before trying to incorporate the most successful or appropriate of them into public policy; it is scarcely surprising therefore that new initiatives crop up there. In a multicultural context, *whose* indigenous knowledge will be given prominence is a thorny question, just like the issue of *which* African language or languages will achieve official status. There are good reasons for advancing slowly with such decisions.

One result of this uneven development is of course a lack of coherence and coordination in the “indigenous knowledge sector.” Actors in one arena do not know what those in another are doing, there are few commonly accepted standards for work, and there is a good deal of competition. This is not all bad, however. The multiplicity of efforts at least favors the emergence of new ideas and creates a variety of approaches that experience may help to winnow out.

Recognizing different varieties of IK

One result of the increasing experience with the development of indigenous knowledge in the four countries visited is increasing sophistication in understanding the various meanings and applications of IK. A group interviewed in Senegal presented perhaps the clearest analysis of the different and potentially complementary interpretations of local knowledge now embodied in the field. They distinguished three variant approaches:

- *Indigenous knowledge as a heritage from the past* to be carefully conserved and respected—an approach displaying the kind of reverence for the accumulated wisdom of previous generations so poignantly expressed in the famous phrase from Amadou Hampate Bâ, “each time an elder dies it is as if a library had burned down.”
- *Indigenous knowledge as an embodiment of a different and specifically African mode of thought*—an African “epistemology” and therefore a means for rethinking development methods in areas like health, agriculture, and natural resource management. Proponents of this approach point to the failure of current methodologies of development as evidence of the need for new concepts rooted in people’s cultural heritage.
- *Indigenous knowledge as a means and process for articulating what local people know, and involving them in the creation of the knowledge required for development*, and so

transmitting to future generations the best that the present has to offer. Proponents of this approach insist that IK is as much a question of enabling local actors to produce *new* knowledge—based both on inheritance from the past and a clear-eyed assessment of current challenges—as it is one of simply inventorying and storing up the traditions inherited from the past.

The *synthesis* of these three perspectives seems to have the greatest potential for stimulating widespread respect of indigenous knowledge. But examples are rare, though the language people use increasingly reflects a compound perspective. Our interlocutors talked of “referring” or having regular “recourse” to indigenous knowledge in building new models for development, rather than simply enshrining it. Many were sensitive, moreover, to the virtues of the third approach, which makes indigenous knowledge an active process, rather than purely a question of anthologies and museums, and ties it to an agenda of popular participation and decentralization.

Building the missing links

Where is the movement headed in these four countries? What are the principal challenges facing its proponents? The biggest “missing link” in all sites visited lies in the inability or insufficient opportunity to “inject” the results of IK initiatives into the policies and procedures that govern local development, to move from gratifying forums and towards encouraging experiments to actual changes in policy and standard practice.

The situation is reflected both in the countries visited and in donor organizations such as the World Bank. Indigenous knowledge concerns, if more frequently recognized now than in the past, tend to be compartmentalized in specialized services or agencies that have this mission but have little effect on policy in the “working” sectors of development. At the national level, there may be a ministry or agency devoted to culture, yet operating largely in a vacuum without influence on practical issues of economic and social development. In donor organizations, programs for the promotion of IK may flourish but intersect little if at all with those mainstream offices that determine aid policy and practice. Crossing this divide remains a major challenge. Four dimensions of activity seem particularly important:

- Promoting the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into development projects through *more explicit procedures for involving local actors in the design of intervention methods* and in tactical decision-making. In many cases, this means making participatory management and action research standard operating procedure in development enterprises.
- Systematically developing, preparing and disseminating *tools and methods* for this kind of participatory approach to local development.
- Making *local schools a hub for the collection of indigenous knowledge* and a place of encounter between development agents and local actors in negotiating investments and initiatives that include it.
- Designing, testing and implementing *materials and methods for the pre-service and in-service professional training of development workers* that initiate them to fuller usage of local knowledge and assist them in discovering ways to synthesize the new and the old.

Strategies must evidently be developed country by country, although accompanied by ample means for cross-national exchange. The first step forward might best be a sort of “sector assessment” or *état des lieux* carried out by national researchers in order to inventory and compare the varied initiatives under way in a given country and what is known of their results. This would serve as a prelude and criteria for prioritizing future efforts. Government ministries and donor organizations should be a part of this scrutiny, which would entail as well an “audit” of their own policies with respect to local participation in development planning and utilization of indigenous knowledge.

In all four countries, IK is manifestly a domain of increasing activity and immense potential. It is at the same time a realm where support from donor communities can help greatly to strengthen existing efforts and “winnow” the most promising initiatives from the many now under way, but where host country policy decisions must finally govern norms.

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