

Keynote Address

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INTRODUCTION

I would first of all like to **welcome you all very warmly** to the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), and particularly to this very important international conference on “*Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in Africa and their Relevance for Sustainable Development*”. Secondly, I am happy to mention that the **conference is a very relevant and timely event** because it lends support to a number of important international fora that focused on this theme in recent times, including:

- The ILO’s 1989 Convention No. 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries.
- Chapter 26 of Agenda 21 stresses the need to recognise and strengthen the role of indigenous people and their communities (UN, 1992).
- The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 50/157 of 21 December 1995 declared the first International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People (1995-2004),
- The final Report of the Millennium Development Project presented to the Secretary-General of the United Nations on 17 January 2005 calls for a special focus on the needs and rights of indigenous and tribal peoples in MDG-based strategies. (<http://www.unmillenniumproject.org>)
- The second International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People (2005 – 2015) was launched on 9 August 2005.
- The adoption of UNESCO’s Convention on Cultural Diversity on 20 October 2005.

This Convention’s overall objective is to take into account cultural diversity when developing other policies, by ensuring that cultural policies support fair access to both local cultures and other world cultures (European Commission, 2005). The Convention is unique in the sense that it fills a vacuum in world governance by establishing a series of rights and obligations, at both national and international level, aimed at protecting and promoting cultural diversity. It is also a platform for debates and exchanges on cultural diversity at the international level.

DEFINITION OF KNOWLEDGE

I believe it is impossible to produce a universally accepted **definition of knowledge**. What constitutes knowledge, certainty and truth are controversial issues in the contemporary world of ours. Although knowledge is complex nature of knowledge, I still like to try to suggest a definition. My first view is that knowledge is a term with many meanings depending on the context, but it is closely related to concepts such as *meaning, information, instruction, communication, representation, learning and mental stimulus*. It consists of justified true beliefs. It can be described as the *awareness and understanding of facts, truths or information gained in the form of experience or learning*.

Knowledge is distinct from simple information. Both knowledge and information consist of true statements. However, knowledge is information that has a purpose or use. Through experience, observation, and inference, individuals and cultures gain knowledge. The spread of this knowledge takes place through diffusion in time and space. My sincere belief is that this conference is an essential vehicle for the diffusion and innovation of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in the world.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Indigenous knowledge (IK) refers to the “knowledge that grows within a social group, incorporating learning from own experience over generations but also knowledge gained from other sources and fully internalised within local ways of thinking and doing.” (World Bank, 2005). IK refers to traditional and local knowledge existing within and developed around specific conditions of women and men indigenous to a particular geographic area in contrast with knowledge generated within the international system of universities, research institutes and private firms (Warren, 1991).

For many countries in Africa and the developing world, the basic component of their knowledge system is indigenous knowledge, which is also often referred to as traditional knowledge (World

Bank, 1997). It includes the skills, experiences and insights people apply to maintain or improve their livelihood. Indigenous knowledge also encompasses local environmental knowledge (i.e.: knowledge of plants, animals, soils and other natural elements) with practical applications but also clearly associated with environmental philosophies and world-views. Many different terms are used to refer to this knowledge, including:

- traditional ecological knowledge (TEK)
- indigenous knowledge (IK)
- local knowledge
- rural peoples' / farmers' knowledge
- ethnobiology / ethnobotany / ethnozoology
- ethnoscience
- folk science
- indigenous science

I would like to ask the conference delegates to inform us whether this type of knowledge concerns universities and other institutions of higher education.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Who are **indigenous peoples or communities**? Indigenous peoples inhabit large areas of the earth's surface. Spread across the world from the Arctic to the South Pacific, they number, at a rough estimate, some 300 million (UN, 21 December 1995). Indigenous people represent about 5 percent of the world's population. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 1989), indigenous communities consist of those people having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories or part of them. At present, they form non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and ethnic identity as the basis of their continued existence as peoples and in accordance with their cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems. Principle 22 of the Rio Declaration (UN, 1992) underlines the role of indigenous people in SD in these words:

“Indigenous people and their communities and other local communities have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. States should recognize and duly support their identity, culture and interests and enable their effective participation in sustainable development.”

Indigenous people and their communities have a historical relationship with their lands and are generally descendants of the original inhabitants of such lands. They have developed over many generations a **holistic traditional scientific knowledge** of their lands, natural resources and environment. Their ability to participate fully in SD practices on their lands has tended to be limited by factors that are economic, social and historical in nature. As Maurice Strong (1990) rightly points out:

“Indigenous peoples have evolved over many centuries a judicious balance between their needs and those of nature. The notion of sustainability, now recognised as the framework for our future development, is an integral part of most indigenous cultures. ...Indigenous peoples are thus indispensable partners as we try to make a successful transition to a more secure and sustainable future on our precious planet.”

The Vienna Declaration and programme of action emerging from the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights recognises the dignity and unique cultural contributions of indigenous peoples, and strongly reaffirms the commitment of the international community to the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of indigenous peoples and their enjoyment of the fruits of sustainable development. These objectives have been re-affirmed by the UN first and second decades on indigenous peoples and the recent UNESCO's Convention on Culture.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

It may be necessary to mention that **Belgium and the European Union (EU)** have played and continue to play significant roles as regards safeguarding cultural diversity in the world, the rights of indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems. For instance, **Article 151 of the Treaty of Rome and Article 22.3 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of European Union** aim at preserving and promoting cultural diversity among the Community's founding principles. In addition, the EU has elaborated an ambitious development policy, which includes a cultural component with certain regions of the world, particularly the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) region and the Mediterranean. Furthermore, the EU and its member states defend the

preservation and promotion of cultural diversity within the framework of trade negotiations in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in the field of cultural and audiovisual services.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

An *indigenous knowledge system* (IKS) represents a community's heritage and a community's resources. IKS constitutes an *important driving force for sustainable development* (SD) in Africa and many regions in the developing world. These regions have a *rich repertoire of knowledge* based on their cultures, environments, natural resources, political, social and economic institutions that may be the key drivers for poverty reduction, livelihood improvement and attaining SD.

According to Dewes W. (1993), two main categories of knowledge systems can be distinguished – *indigenous knowledge systems* (IKS) and *western knowledge systems* (WKS). While WKS are made universal through western education, which is entrenched in many world cultures, IKS are confined to specific areas and are being suppressed in most parts of the world. Moreover, IKS content and development, especially in Africa, are not adequately researched and documented.

I would like to stress that the **culture and knowledge systems** of indigenous people and their institutions provide useful frameworks, ideas, guiding principles, procedures and practices that can serve as a foundation for effective endogenous development options for restoring social, economic, and environmental resilience in many parts of Africa and the developing world in general. The Convention on Biological Diversity (UN, 1992) calls on all the contracting parties to respect traditional indigenous knowledge with regard to the preservation of biodiversity and its sustainable use.

I would also like to suggest that IKS foster a rethinking of development methods in sectors like politics and governance, agriculture and food production, health, natural resource management, commerce and industry, and the arts and entertainment. These knowledge systems are not simply the result of accumulated passive observations; they often include years of analytical and experimental approaches to SD (Flavier, J.M. et al., 1995).

Why do we bother ourselves about IKS? One compelling reason is the higher incidence of extreme poverty among indigenous people than among other social groups. They benefit much less than others from overall declines in poverty. The widening of ethnic inequalities in countries where indigenous and tribal peoples live demonstrates that conventional anti-poverty policies fail to tackle the social and economic exclusion facing these peoples. This problem needs to be redressed not only for the benefit of these people, but also for reasons of social equity and policy effectiveness. As distinct peoples, they have special rights (group rights) that include, among others, the right to be different and to influence decisions affecting their livelihoods and future.

I am convinced that the distinguished conference delegates agree that IKS is an important part of the lives of the poor. It is the basis for decision-making of communities in food security, human and animal health, education, and natural resource management. IKS points to how indigenous people manipulate their knowledge, which has accumulated, evolved and is practised for generations.

However, despite the enormous value of IKS in a sustainable management of natural resources, the world has suffered and continues to suffer from a *profound loss of indigenous peoples, rural groups and their knowledge about the natural world*, which has been constructed from their intimate ties to land and place. This loss has been accompanied by *neglect and the marginalisation of their practices and beliefs*, often figured as *inferior forms of knowing* that should be replaced by universalised knowledge derived from the *Western scientific tradition* (Preston Hardison, INDKNOW). While the latter has great beauty, power and utility, attempts to apply it universally without regard for traditional knowledge systems has, in many cases, led to failures in sustainable resource use and the erosion of biological diversity. Furthermore, the imposition of scientific management regimes without the *participation of local communities* has prompted debate on whether the neglect of traditional knowledge violates *human rights, civil rights, and indigenous rights*.

I hope I have been able to convince distinguished conference delegates that IKS is a pluralistic approach to conserving and managing natural resources in ways that effectively promote sustainable human development.

KEY CHALLENGES CONFRONTING IKS

I would now like to underline some of the **key challenges confronting IKS** with the hope that you would critically debate and make appropriate recommendations for redressing them.

The first challenge I would like you to investigate is the view that although indigenous peoples constitute one of the *largest vulnerable segments in contemporary society*, they and their knowledge systems have been marginalised mainly because of the *craze for modernity and globalisation*. The distinct culture of indigenous people and their identity, economic activities, religious beliefs, notions, and traditional ways of managing natural resources are often regarded as *backward and superstition*. They are considered to be absolutely *incompatible with modern society and development*.

Second, the *oral and rural nature of IKS* in Africa has made them largely *invisible to the development community and global science*. Indigenous knowledge has often been dismissed as *unsystematic and incapable* of meeting the rapid economic growth needs of the modern world. Modern societies have regarded *indigenous people and traditions as less progressive*, and as a result many groups of indigenous peoples, especially their younger generations, are influenced to devalue their native cultures and to adopt *new lifestyles and technologies*. Consequently, *IKS have not been captured and stored in a systematic way and are therefore endangered with extinction*.

Third, despite the *serious erosion of IKS* over the decades in many communities in Africa and the other regions of the world, *they are still most relevant and appropriate for promoting SD of the continent*.

Fourth, the *widening of ethnic inequalities* in countries where indigenous and tribal peoples live demonstrates that conventional anti-poverty policies fail to tackle the social and economic exclusion facing these peoples.

Fifth, I strongly believe that the *subjugation and continuous marginalisation of IKS* challenges us, both individually and collectively, at the moral, ethical, and philosophical levels. *Development paradigms in Africa are still heavily western-oriented*. From the perspective of research work, higher education and development policy-making and administration, I would urge you to conduct a systematic audit

of development history and practice and make recommendations for converting IKS into a real engine for poverty reduction and SD.

I am informed that a principal objective of this conference is to catalyse a positive change in the minds of development cooperation policy-makers, administrators and stakeholders in Africa, the other developing regions as well as the developed world about the importance of IKS in improving the livelihoods of poor rural communities. During your discussions, it is important to clearly outline how IKS can be effectively integrated in the formulation and the execution of development programmes and projects at the community, national, regional and international levels.

To enable you to effectively address these challenges during your discussions, I suggest that you should investigate the following **fundamental premises** relating to IKS:

- First, in the rapidly globalising world and evolving knowledge systems, the ability of African countries to build and mobilise *appropriate and adequate knowledge capital* is imperative for attaining SD.
- Second, the commonest denominator of *IKS all over the world is that they do less harm to the environment and natural resources* than do modern technologies and development models. Conventional development paradigms have greatly contributed to the apparent neglect of indigenous institutions and knowledge, which have the potential to contribute to global efforts towards attaining SD.
- Third, IKS have *much to offer for biological and cultural diversity and resource management*. Indigenous people are an integral part of the ecosystem and are therefore the best guarantee for the survival of nature.
- Fourth, is it possible to further the *integration of indigenous knowledge in the work of scientists* as a complementary contribution to efforts of science and technology in the search for solutions and strategies to combat poverty and to generate sustainability in the development process?
- Fifth, is it possible to *modernise Africa without renouncing local customs, culture or traditional values*?
- Sixth, are IKS an important tool for *promoting the participation of local people in SD*?
- Seventh, *how willing and prepared are the*

donor nations and organisations to properly identify appropriate indigenous knowledge systems and practices and mainstream them in development policies, programmes and projects so as to ensure a more efficient and sustainable management of natural resources and banish poverty?

CONCLUSION

If you permit me, I would love to *conclude* with a few more observations. Over the past two decades, the plight of indigenous people and their knowledge systems have been discussed in many international and national fora but actual practice and concrete results are still to be seen.

Indigenous knowledge has been and still is an important part of the lives of the poor in Africa and the developing world. The particular ways in which IKS are applied in agriculture, health delivery, trade, industry, construction and the arts (music, dance theatre, etc.) are largely based on the principle that humans should keep equilibrium with nature. It is therefore a key element of the social capital of the poor and a window for investment in human development.

Genuine development has to be people-centred to enable them to take charge of their own lives. Such participatory approaches allow people to define their needs from their own perspectives. I believe that IKS can form the basis for such a development strategy and generate information for SD in at least four ways:

- Facilitate an effective design and implementation of appropriate development policies, programmes and projects.
- Produce appropriate and accessible technologies that can easily be introduced in local communities or even transferred to other regions of the world.
- Establish an effective basis for self-sufficiency and self-determination in indigenous communities.
- Strengthen capacity building on IKS and SD.

What I set out to do in my address was to impress upon all of us about the urgent need to recognise, accommodate, promote and strengthen the role of indigenous people and communities and their knowledge systems in SD at the national, regional and international levels. In order to establish a true and acceptable partnership with indigenous people and to foster SD in Africa, I believe the first important step is to study and

understand their culture and to recognise and accept their conception of the environment, nature and development.

I am very happy to mention that the *Human Ecology Department of the VUB is one of the emerging centres of excellence* in IKS. As most of you are probably aware, the *underpinning philosophy of the VUB on research and the delivery of education* to students and society is that it is done *without any dogmatic stance*. This is what is popularly referred to as “*vrije onderzoek*” or “*free enquiry*”. I would therefore like to call on all Faculties and Departments of my University and other institutions in Belgium to *integrate IKS into their research programmes and educational curricula*.

I also trust that you will make significant contributions on *how we can facilitate an effective integration of IKS in the SD process in Africa and the rest of the developing world* during your deliberations. It is essential that we call on the *governments of both the developing and the developed countries as well as development agencies and actors* to ensure an active participation of indigenous peoples in development activities, especially in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MGDs) and the targets set in national poverty reduction strategy papers in Africa.

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