

BOOK LAUNCH:
***Indigenous Knowledge in Development — Local Pathways to Global
Development; A Compilation of Five Years of IK Notes***

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The Africa Region's Indigenous Knowledge (IK) Program recently marked its coming of age with the publication of a volume titled *Indigenous Knowledge: Local Pathways to Global Development*, a compilation of sixty IK Notes cases and ten thematic lead articles, edited by Reinhard Woytek, Preeti Shroff-Mehta, and Prasad C. Mohan.



Reinhard Woytek.



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The World Bank launched the program in 1998 in response to a call articulated by government and civil society leaders at the Global Knowledge Conference in Toronto, Canada, in 1997. It is intended to enable the Bank not only to provide know-how, but also to learn from the practices of the communities it serves so as to leverage the best in global and local knowledge systems. In the context of development projects, IK refers to knowledge embedded in local communities that, if tapped, could allow better adaption of global knowledge.

The lead-in to the IK Notes provides an in-depth background to an area of knowledge whose role in development across Africa, the lead authors admit, has not been paid due attention. This, in turn, has led in some instances to avoidable complications in project implementation.

Benjamin Mkapa, the President of Tanzania, sets the tone with an overview that situates IK at the center of development programs, debunking the jaundiced view that tends to denigrate IK as something unworthy of consideration, let alone incorporation, for modern development project planning and implementation.

The Tanzanian President makes the point that empowerment of a people is an essential stepping stone to project ownership, and therefore, sustainability. It is contingent on recognition that locals probably have a deeper understanding of the problems they face and probably the potential solutions as well. They have a time-tested knowledge base.

In a foreword, World Bank President Jim Wolfensohn predicts that greater appreciation and application of IK in the development process will accentuate positive results all round, a point reiterated by Callisto Madavo, AFR Vice President, in another introductory piece.

Project implementers have sometimes ignored this basic lesson at great cost, a point that is succinctly explained by Frannie Leautier, Vice President of the World Bank Institute, author of the second lead article in the volume. She writes: “The IK Notes have demonstrated that assuming the perspective of the communities and their existing capacities helps create increased ownership, sustainability, and relevance of capacity enhancing measures.”

The lead authors in their various articles admit that local or indigenous knowledge is an area that has not been paid due attention to in the development agenda, and they indicate that this in turn has often led to dissonance in project design and implementation.

Incorporating local knowledge is more likely to lead to increased ownership, better results and enhanced project sustainability. Three basic goals guided the launching of the IK Program: (1) raising awareness of the importance of IK; (2) enhancing local capacity to document and exchange IK; and (3) applying IK to development programs. The IK Notes can be grouped according to how they relate to these three goals.

Examples of the successful adaptation of local knowledge to the changing educational needs of societies across Africa display a remarkable sense of innovation by several West African communities. The secret of their success lies in their ability to identify their problems, suggest solutions, and then to work incrementally with outside help to fashion pragmatic solutions. In nearly all cases, the results were impressive, partly because, for the first time in a long while, the communities had the opportunity to test their expertise, something which armchair development experts tend to play down since it emanates from an “uncertain knowledge base”.

Some of the most fascinating IK Notes in this volume relate to local solutions to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. One article maintains that “local solutions to the spread of the disease are equally or more valid, efficient, and effective than those designed on external models.” It cites Uganda’s “home grown” approach and Senegal’s indigenous solutions as instances where innovative local approaches halted and even reversed the spread of the epidemic. In both cases, the article observes, Western models could not have achieved the results that have so far been registered.

Equally noteworthy are local examples of care, support, and treatment of AIDS patients across Africa. The Tanga AIDS Working Group in Tanzania “is an outstanding example of how positive results can be achieved in the fight against AIDS by combining local expertise, indigenous knowledge, and modern health workers to provide effective low cost treatment for people living with AIDS.”

Writing about the importance of IK in agriculture one of the authors says, “Agriculture probably comprises the largest collection of indigenous practices worldwide,” and cites numerous examples. Indeed, recognition by the Bank of these practices was the spur to the development of the IK program.

Two authors from the World Conservation Union stress that natural resource management is an area of activity in which many indigenous societies have extensive experience. They recommend faster mainstreaming of IK in order to preserve it and to encourage younger generations to learn it.

The first order of business is to take accurate stock of the challenges that the process entails. First, the IK has to be identified and documented, a highly complex process given its content-specific nature. Second, gathered knowledge needs validation in order to empower its bearers. And lastly, innovative intellectual property approaches toward IK have to be established in order to encourage and to reward its practitioners—a daunting task, given that such knowledge mostly reposes in entire communities.

Looking to the future, the volume posits a reasonable way to move forward that will entail, among other steps, scaling up and publicizing successful IK practices, enhancing the capacity of local communities to develop, share, and apply their IK, and developing protocols for the validation and protection of IK.

Indigenous Knowledge: Local Pathways to Global Development is available free while supplies last from World Bank, Africa Region—Knowledge and Learning (AFTKL), MSN J8-811, 1818 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20433; telephone 1-202-473-1641; 202-614-1641; e-mail rwoytek@worldbank.org. Information on the Indigenous Knowledge for Development Program can be found at <http://www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/default.htm>.

— *Book review written by John Mulaa*

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