

USING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE TO STRENGTHEN LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Indigenous knowledge is now celebrated by many of its advocates as “the single largest knowledge resource not yet mobilized in the development enterprise” (Paul Richards, cited in Warren et al. 1996:476). Recent titles such as “Tradition as a Modern Strategy,” “Modern Dilemmas and Traditional Insights,” “The Indigenisation of Modernity,” and so on reflect the growing prominence accorded culture and tradition in current development thinking and research. For a long time, African customs and traditions were misperceived as irrational and incompatible with the conventional strategies for economic development, or at any rate as ineffective in coping with present-day needs and challenges. But with the development crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, and the policy failures associated with the formal government system, there is an increasing loss of faith in the Western, “external agency” model of development imposed from the top by national governments and international development agencies. The undue emphasis that this pattern of development places on purely economic and quantitative growth is now blamed for the worsening problems of environmental degradation, widespread poverty, inequality, and the undermining of those values and institutions that hold these negative forces in check.

The problems of poverty, neglect, and exclusion are most pronounced at the local community level, in the villages and urban slums, where these communities ought to be encouraged to participate in, and bring their own agendas to bear on governance and development. This study considers how indigenous knowledge and practice can be put to good use in support of local government and public administration in Nigeria, especially in some of those spheres of activity in which local governments have exclusive or concurrent constitutional responsibility:

- agriculture and health care
- environmental protection and sanitation
- land and natural resource management
- basic education and rural finance
- law reform and conflict resolution
- poverty reduction
- provision of essential services

How can development programs in these areas be made to reflect local priorities, and to build upon, and strengthen local knowledge, organization, and capacity?

The renewed interest in indigenous knowledge and institutions is in line with the current advocacy of the minimalist state and the “enabling approach” as conditions for good governance in a period of structural adjustment and public sector reform. Governments are

urged by donor agencies, and are in fact *obliged* to reduce their role to what their dwindling resources and capacities permit; that is, to decentralize the structure of governance, promote genuine partnership, and enlist the broad participation of non-state actors and stakeholders, including traditional institutions and other civil society/community-based organizations. This trend has been reinforced by the UNESCO-sponsored “World Decade for Cultural Development” (1988–1997), the Earth Summit in Rio on Environment and Development (1992), and other global initiatives and debates that have stressed the cultural dimension of development, and the need to take local knowledge and practice fully into account in the development process (UNESCO 1995; UN-Habitat 1998).

This paper questions the uniform, single-tier structure of local government introduced in Nigeria in 1976 for both the rural and urban areas (Fed. Rep. Nig. 1976; cf. Igbuzor 2003). This arrangement, now under critical review, overlooks the country’s cultural pluralism and diverse local practices. We shall revisit the Dasuki and Political Bureau Reports of the late 1980s, which tried to address these concerns, and also highlight the provisions of the laws establishing the Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) and MAMSER (Mass Mobilization for Social and Economic Recovery), which sought to create the framework for reconciling indigenous institutions with the formal state machinery. These programs were meant to link Town Unions and other informal sector groups structurally to the formal government institutions as agencies for community development. In particular, this paper considers:

- The pattern of local governments that would make governance less distant from the people, less bureaucratic, more accountable, and more responsive to local needs.
- How the village or community to which most citizens hold moral allegiance could constitute the primary unit of a multi-tier local government system, as was attempted in some form in the immediate post-civil war period in parts of the former Eastern Region (Odenigwe 1972).
- How certain positive traditional attributes and values can be harnessed to bolster the moral tenor and performance of government and public sector management.
- How to adapt modern ideas and techniques of governance and development to local conditions and organization, and also to adjust indigenous institutions appropriately to come to terms with contemporary realities.

In Nigerian towns and cities, the distinction between indigenes and strangers is still strong, and is even recognized by the Constitution. The study will consider how we could classify the urban centers, and design an appropriate form of municipal government for the various categories of large, medium and small towns. It will also look at how to enlist traditionally based institutions and the associational life of urban neighborhoods and the informal sector in the effort to ameliorate the adverse impact of rapid urban growth, especially in the critical areas of housing, environmental health, infrastructure provision, and services delivery. We shall, for instance, consider the value of local building materials; informal land transactions; and the appropriate laws, codes and standards that are compatible with local conditions and flexible enough to accommodate the urban poor and disadvantaged groups. There are already hopeful pointers in this direction, e.g., how the principles of the traditional rotational credit system and the traditional apprenticeship practices have been deployed in the establishment of Community and People’s Banks and in the programs of the National

Directorate for Employment (Halfani 1996; Dike 1997). A few lessons on decentralization and local government reforms from the recent experiences of other developing countries like South Africa and Ghana, India, Brazil, etc., will be explored briefly for comparative insights.

The paper concludes with some general reflections on the indigenous knowledge movement as an appropriate local response to globalization and Western knowledge dominance, and as a means to promote inter-cultural dialogue, and reaffirm Africa's historic contribution to the larger body of international knowledge. We shall also consider the implications of the indigenous knowledge idea for applied research, for development policy makers, and for international development assistance.

Research and Policy Issues

The indigenous knowledge agenda faces two broad sets of problems: the **scientific** questions of concepts and method, and the **practical** ones of applying this knowledge and its lessons appropriately to development policy and practice. These issues continue to feature in the various conferences, edited volumes, international networks, and newsletters that are devoted to the many dimensions of the subject. When is knowledge indigenous and how does traditional knowledge (also referred to as local knowledge, ethnosciences, etc.) differ from or relate to scientific or Western-based book knowledge? Definitions vary, and are often imprecise, with only general agreement on the main characteristics of indigenous knowledge (see Agarawal 1995; Sillitoe 1998). The World Bank, the IDRC, UNESCO-MOST/CIRAN, and other organizations and networks that promote indigenous knowledge use the term to refer to the vast and largely undocumented body of knowledge, wisdom, skills, and expertise that a given community has developed over time, and continues to develop as it grapples with the challenges of its environment, with outside ideas, and with constantly changing conditions. It represents the heritage of creative thought and practical everyday life that is passed on orally or through experience from one generation to the next. It is usually tacit knowledge, stored in people's individual or collective memories, and often guarded jealously; hence, the saying that "each time an elder dies, it is as if a library had burned down" (Easton, in World Bank 2002; cf. SCESSAL/LIASA 2002). This explains the current anxiety about the threat that modernization poses to indigenous knowledge, and the need to systematically collect, analyze, validate, disseminate, and protect it from extinction, abuse or piracy, and ensure that the original owners of this knowledge are fully acknowledged and equitably compensated.

There is also little consensus on the methods and approaches among the various groups of researchers with an interest in the subject: social scientists in anthropology, human geography, oral history, development studies, as well as those in the natural and life sciences (agronomy, soil science, forestry, human and veterinary sciences, and so on). The subject obviously does not lend itself to the narrow discipline-based approach, as very many related issues are involved in the research and application of indigenous knowledge. While some researchers approach the subject from the purely cultural, antiquarian or epistemological angle, others with a more practical orientation seek to use indigenous knowledge as a model to introduce a locally informed and endogenous perspective in development policy and practice (Easton, in World Bank 2002). Indigenous knowledge is seen not only as a means of rethinking and redirecting development in agriculture, healthcare, natural resource management, etc., but also as a way to involve and enable local actors to participate in their own development. It is in

this sense that the participatory/interdisciplinary approach to the subject has a special appeal. Another challenge in the search for an appropriate method is to identify “best practices” in various cultural contexts, and explore what policy lessons or implications can be drawn from them for a given area or development program.

How does indigenous knowledge relate to modern science and book knowledge? It is really not very helpful to overemphasize how indigenous knowledge compares or contrasts with modern science, as if the two systems of knowledge were in conflict or in competition. Indigenous knowledge differs from place to place, and scientific knowledge changes all the time; hence, there are similarities and some overlap between the indigenous and the scientific knowledge systems. Very few if any serious scholars actually consider indigenous knowledge to be an alternative to modern science and technology; nor is the exclusive use of modern science enough for the complex task of achieving sustainable development in diverse cultural and ecological contexts. The real challenge is how not to romanticize indigenous knowledge or over-idealize modern science, as both have their strengths and limitations, and should complement and not confront or undermine each other (Haverkort et al. 2002). The UNESCO/World Commission for Cultural Development (WCCD) urges the active recognition and exploitation of cultural pluralism and “Our Creative Diversity”; and even the International Council of Science (ICSU) has recently urged “governments to support cooperation between holders of traditional knowledge and scientists to explore the relationships between different knowledge systems and to foster inter-linkages of mutual benefit” (TESU/UNESCO 2002; UNESCO 1995; Haverkort et al. 2002). How does all this relate to the policy and practice of development?

Indigenous Knowledge and the Good Governance Debate

The Secretary General of the United Nations has recently identified good governance as “perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development.” How does indigenous knowledge promote good governance? Much of the current thinking on good governance derives from the recommendations and plans of action of the United Nations-sponsored conferences of the 1990s: on environment and development, combating poverty and inequality, human settlement improvement, gender- and health-related issues, and so on. The policy prescriptions of these congresses have been reinforced by the work of the World Bank, the UNDP, the UN-Habitat, etc., all of which have endorsed the principles of **enablement, democratic decentralization, participation, and partnership**; in addition, of course, to the other main elements of good governance such as accountability, transparency, pluralism, and so on (see Schechter 2001).

In implementing these principles, however, many African governments and donor agencies have tended to focus attention at the national and state levels in their programs for institution building, anti-corruption and human rights crusades, and reform of the civil service, electoral, and judicial systems. The major gap in the good governance agenda appears to be at the local level, where the major issues of poverty reduction, popular participation, and support for an active civil society remain largely under-researched and unaddressed.

It is also at the local grassroots level that indigenous knowledge appears to have the greatest potential to contribute to sustainable development. For most of his distinguished scholarly career, the late Professor Claude Ake stressed the need for a home-grown model of

self-reliant development that can only come about if we learn to “build on the indigenous”:

We build on the indigenous by making it determine the form and content of development strategy; by ensuring that developmental change accommodate itself to these things, by the values, interests, aspirations and/or social institutions which are important to the life of the people. It is only when developmental change comes to terms with them that it can become sustainable. (Ake 1988:19)

In his influential World Bank studies, Mamodou Dia, with his group, has argued that the most promising way to overcome the shortcomings of the state system and its alien formal institutions in Africa is to recognize “the structural and functional disconnect between the informal, indigenous institutions rooted in the regions history and culture, and formal institutions mostly transplanted from outside” (Dia 1996; cf Francis et al. 1996). The remedy, he argues, is to ensure “a reconnect between state and civil society,” and to identify the opportunities within indigenous institutions for building a more pluralistic and participatory form of governance and development. Like the earlier U.N. conference, the Habitat Agenda of 1996 also highlights the need for “partnership among countries and among all actors within countries. Good urban governance entails finding ways of engaging with the urban poor so that their needs can be reflected in the policies and programmes of city governments” (UNCHS-Habitat 1998).

In the various decentralization programs in Nigeria, effort has been made (with mixed results) to transfer some responsibilities from the state to the market/private sector through privatization and deregulation. Political decentralization also has involved the vertical transfer of authority and resources from the central to the lower state/local government levels of governance. The weak link remains the horizontal or further decentralization within the lower levels of governance, especially from local governments to village organizations, urban neighborhoods, and other interest groups (Allen 1990). There is a need to empower and strengthen local communities and their informal institutions to participate in decision making, resource generation and control, as well as in the planning and implementation of development programs. The various dimensions of decentralization, and the major shortcomings of local government reforms in Nigeria are discussed in more detail below.

Rural and Urban Governance, and the Potential Role of Indigenous Knowledge

Many Nigerians were disappointed that the nationwide local government elections originally scheduled to take place in May 2002 were put off—first to August, then to December 2002, and yet again to June 2003. But rather than conduct the election as agreed upon by the Forum of State Independent Electoral Commissions, the Federal Government, under pressure from the State Governors, set up the Ndayako Technical Committee to Review the Structure of Local Government Councils in Nigeria. Ostensibly, the committee was to examine how the system of local government, introduced in 1976, could be modified to ensure greater efficiency and cost-effectiveness; to revisit the idea of Local Governments as a third tier of the federal system; and to consider the excessive cost of electioneering by political parties and individual competitors (Igbuzor 2003). What, from past experience, are the prospects for an improved local government system in Nigeria in the years ahead? What can indigenous knowledge contribute to the reforms?

Local governance before 1976: There is a vast amount of published material on the pre-colonial period of indigenous self rule in Nigeria under various forms of traditional kingdoms, chiefdoms, and village republics. What is clear from the literature is that even in those areas of pre-British Nigeria where Emirs, Shehus, or Obas enjoyed kingly status and wielded considerable influence, they were still subject to established checks and balances such that “the ruler had authority but shared power” through a wide range of customary mechanisms for consultations, participation, accountability, and consensus building (Soyinka and Wole 1993). The British colonial “law and order” administration tried to associate traditional rulers and institutions with local governance in a system of Indirect Rule and Native Administration. But the traditional rulers and leaders who worked under that system faced the dilemma of representing their people while serving as appointees or agents of an oppressive alien regime. This discredited many of them and eroded their traditional legitimacy.

After World War II, there was a policy shift as the British tried in the 1950s to introduce a limited system of democratic decentralization in the form of District Councils, with elected and appointed representatives. The prospects for evolving a stable system of local governance looked promising; but the early nationalists and independence leaders were impatient with tradition and with local government, preferring instead the strong and centralized state system as a surer way to forge national unity and to promote rapid economic growth. Local governments consequently suffered neglect in the 1960s, and their fortunes were further undermined by the civil war and the centralizing influence of military rule in the early 1970s.

The 1976 local government reforms: After ten years of military rule, a bold initiative was taken in 1976 “to stabilize and rationalize government at the local level” and to decentralize some significant functions of the State Governments to the local level in order to harness local resources for rapid development. *The Guidelines for Local Government Reform*, issued in 1976, and backed by the provisions of the 1979 Constitution, created a uniform, multi-purpose single-tier pattern of local government for the whole country, and raised the status of local governments by making them the third tier of the federal system. By this provision the local governments would enjoy a reasonable degree of autonomy as elected *governments*, and not mere appendages of the state governments. To be viable, local governments were to be created for populations of between 150,000 and 800,000. A set of exclusive functions was assigned to them, in addition to other responsibilities that they shared with the other tiers of government; generous provisions were made for funding them; and the *Guidelines* appeared to offer the ideal conditions for LGs to initiate and direct the provision of services, to determine and implement projects of local priority, and to ensure the active participation of the people and their traditional institution in responding to local needs and conditions.

Unfortunately, the constitutional provisions in respect of the relationship between the State Governments and Local Governments has remained ambiguous and a source of potential conflict. State Governments maintain that, as the federating units of the Nigerian federal system, they have the constitutional jurisdiction over the creation and general supervision of local governments in their states. For their part, the local governments have complained consistently of the arbitrary, discriminatory, and highhanded attitude of many state governments in local government affairs, and have on several occasions resorted to the court of

law to arbitrate on the matter.

In addition, the large size of local government (some with as many as 500,000 to 800,000 people) has had the adverse effect of creating physical and social distance between the local government and the communities they are meant to serve. Some analysts have established that the traditional organization of individual communities (the Town Development Unions, the Age Grades, Social Clubs, etc.) account for most of the development programs in their areas, especially in Southern Nigeria. The formal local government agencies account for only a few of the development activities, as they expend most of the Local Government budget on recurrent expenditure items and on projects of doubtful priority (Ogunna 1996; Olowo et al. 1991).

Although General Buhari's regime, which overthrew the Second Republic, abolished the 600 or so additional local governments created randomly by the ousted civilian State Governors, the tension between state and local governments persisted even under the Babangida era (1984–1992), which is generally considered to be the most favorable period of local government consolidation in the country. During this period, effort was made to protect local governments from the arbitrary interference of state governments. The State Ministries of Local Government were abolished, and the responsibility for local government oversight was moved to the office of the Chief of General Staff in the Presidency. The local governments adopted the Presidential system that established their executive and legislative arms. Direct financial allocation to the LGs was raised from 15 to 20% of national revenue, up from a mere 3% in 1976 (see Olowo 1996, 2001; Osaghae 1991; Gboyega 1999). With these measures there was a definite improvement in the quality of political and administrative leadership at local government level, and some advances in the social service sector (in health, education, rural roads, water supply, etc.); but the tension in state-local government relations persisted, and so did the gap between local government and the local communities. Besides, "the heavy hand of uniformity failed to allow for cultural and economic diversity, eg. between the urban and rural areas; and there was an almost total dependence of external funding, mainly federal transfers for the work of the local governments" (Olowo 1991).

Two of the major reviews of the Local government system in this period deserve special attention for this study: the Report of the Dasuki Committee on the Review of Local Government Administration in Nigeria (1985), and the work of the Political Bureau set up to advise on the programs for the return to civil rule (1987).

The **Dasuki Committee** report endorsed the 301 local governments structure established by the 1976 reform, for at least the next ten years, but observed that the system was marred by operational problems and the military context in which it operated. The committee sought to strengthen the revenue base of the Local government councils, but more importantly recommended that seven or so Development Area Committees, each of about 25,000 to 50,000 people, should be established within each of the 301 local government areas in order to *further decentralize* the delivery of services and to promote broad grassroots participation (Fed. Rep. of Nigeria 1985). These recommendations, however, were not implemented, although the Political Bureau, which was set up a few years later, upheld the ideas of the Dasuki report, and went even further to suggest a multi-tier, pyramidal structure for Local governments, with villages and neighborhood organizations forming the primary units and building blocks of the restructured local government system. Village/Neighborhood

Committees would coordinate the work of the various village organizations, monitor the work of local government officials, and nominate their leaders or chairmen to serve at the next level of local governance—the Area Divisional Councils. These Area Councils, with administrative officials appointed or seconded by government as secretary, would play a higher coordination role below the apex umbrella third level of the local government system (Fed. Rep. of Nigeria 1987). The idea is that government is best when power is shared and brought close to the grassroots. Again, for various reason, mainly to do with the crowded programs of the planned transition to civil rule, these recommendations, although accepted in principle, were held in abeyance. Some elements of the report were to be implemented in a modified form by the new and well-funded Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI).

Among other things, this Directorate was to “encourage communities to form their own village, community or town improvements or development unions or associations, under their own democratically elected leaders to serve as the apex organization for mobilizing their communities for the successful participatory implementation of all rural development programmes initiated by the Directorate, each tier of government, or by the communities themselves” (Fed. Rep. Nig. 1987b).

The government would provide matching grants to encourage communities to invest their labor and resources in the development of their local communities. It was hoped that in this way the more than 100,000 communities identified in Nigeria would be structurally linked to the formal organs of government as agencies for community and neighborhood development. Again, for various reasons associated with the frequent changes of government and policy direction, DFRRI was short-lived, and its programs were transferred to the State Directorates for Rural Development (SDRD).

The role of traditional rules and institutions in local governance and development has been examined in detail elsewhere, and need not detain us here (Nwaka 1999; Ray and Raddy 2003); but let me conclude this section with the observation made by the Commonwealth Local Government Form, which studied traditional organizations and leadership patterns in Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Botswana, and South Africa, with a view to providing practical guidance in reviewing relations with traditional leaders and institution. While admitting that some traditional practices were authoritarian and ill-suited to present-day conditions, the Forum suggested that:

traditional leadership, in its form before external interference, operated on the principle of community participation, consultation, consensus, and an acceptable level of transparency through the village council or open tribal consultative meetings. These principles are not too different from the ones which modern democracies prescribe as essential for democracy! It might serve the purpose, therefore, that countries of Africa which are striving to gain Good Governance, should look with renewed detail to the role of traditional leaders, and pay specific attention to the similarities between the principles of traditional governance and the aspirations of new democracies the world over (Venson 1995:2).

Indigenous knowledge and urban governance: Is indigenous knowledge also relevant to modern urban governance? Many Nigerian cities pre-date colonial rule and still have large indigenous populations whose traditional attitudes and institutions are said to constitute a constraint to national development, especially with respect to land ownership and control. Colonial policies

did not favor urban development, but many cities have developed nonetheless, and have grown faster than the development of appropriate institutions to handle the challenges of rapid growth. The country is therefore facing a worsening urban crisis. The six- to ten-fold increase in urban populations between Habitat 1 in 1976 and Habitat 11 in 1996 has overtaken the capacity of national and municipal authorities to cope with the problems of housing, employment, environmental sanitation, and the provision of basic services. Many critics have likened this chaotic pattern of urban development to building a house from the roof down!

... all the institutions of modern urbanization are in place— the banks, the factories, the legal system, the unions etc.; but all these appear to be suspended over societies that have no firm connection to them, and whose indigenous institutions, even when oriented in the right direction lack the necessary scaffolding to connect them to their modern surrogates (Mabogunje 1995).

The laws, codes and standards that operate in the cities were inherited from the colonial period, and are now applied with little rethinking by the local elite and bureaucrats. This anomalous state of affairs has led to the poor functioning of the cities, and the call for endogenizing or “radicalizing” the institutional response to rapid urban growth, especially because there are still strong ties between urban and rural areas, and a large urban informal sector.

To explain the poor performance of public sector management in the cities and elsewhere in Africa, Professor Ekeh has drawn a distinction between the morality of the **civic public** associated with colonial rule and alien institutions on the one hand, and on the other the **premodial public**, associated with traditional sentiments, values, and restraints in various indigenous societies and institutions. The political and administrative structures of the civic realm (the civil service, the police, the judiciary, etc.) were created by the alien colonizers, and therefore tend to elicit a negative and predatory response from the people who see government work as white man’s work and public resources as fair game. There is general apathy and cynicism towards government, and some ambivalence about accountability in governance. By contrast, the general attitude to the premodial realm (ethnic, clan, or village) is much more selfless and transparent, because of the cultural norms, obligations, and sanctions that come into play (Ekeh 1975; cf Honey and Okafor 1998). This partly explains the pervasiveness of ethnic and clan unions in the cities, with strong links to home towns. The argument then is that these traditional values attitudes and institutions should be consciously harnessed and brought to bear on governance and public affairs in the cities and other spheres of public life.

In the same way, Dia’s influential World Bank studies referred to earlier in the paper have urged for synergy or “institutional reconciliation” between state and community, through measures that increase the technical and organizational capacity of community institutions, and also create a more responsive and accountable public sector. Both formal and informal institution are here to stay, and need to be more flexible in their relationship to each other. The formal sector and its institutions need to adapt to local conditions for greater legitimacy and enforceability; informal sector institutions, in some cases, also need to be renovated and adjusted in order to remain relevant. Local institutions, which are sometimes handicapped by limited skills and resources, need support links to the budgetary and technical resources available in government and its numerous agencies (Dia 1996).

This concept of institutional reconciliation can be given practical support in urban

governance by consciously trying to integrate the vast urban informal sector to the economic and administrative mainstream; and by encouraging and utilizing informal urban neighborhood associations, not only for the well-known functions of local security and solidarity, but also as active agents for governance and development. For instance, the South African Municipal Structures Act requires all Municipal Councils to develop mechanisms to consult and involve the community and community organizations through Ward Committees and other structures for consultation and collaboration (see IDASA Local Government Briefs, 2002). We have referred earlier in the paper to how the traditional system of rotational credit has influenced the establishment of Community Banks and Peoples Banks in Nigeria. The first of these banks was opened in December 1990, and by 1992 the number had grown to 401. Together they had built up assets of more than 981 million naira, mobilized more than 640 million in savings or deposits, and disbursed some 150 million as loans and advances to small informal sector producers (Mabogunje 1995; Halfani 1996). Unfortunately, recent studies of the informal sector in Nigeria suggest that only a small percentage of informal sector operators take advantage of these new opportunities. Only about 10% were aware of how to avail themselves of the services offered by the Community Bank and the apprenticeship programs of the National Directorate of Employment (NDE). There appears to be general apathy and cynicism toward government and the public sector, perhaps because “the informal sector lacks the institutional base to link up effectively with debate on public policy” and ensure effective engagement with public policy issues (Dike, 1997). The challenge lies, therefore, in how best to build active institutional channels to mobilize and link up individuals and groups in the informal sector to the mainstream of urban government and development.

Conclusions

More work and space would be needed to address in detail all the issues raised in the opening paragraphs; but the paper has argued that the conventional model of development, which has sought to transform African societies into the Western image of what these societies ought to be, not only has failed but has tended to alienate the people from their roots, and to undermine local capacity-building and self-confidence. We also have tried to show that local governments are better placed than distant central and state bureaucracies to promote development and poverty reduction, especially if the citizens are given a sense of involvement in making decisions about policies and programs that affect them. Also, the nearer government is brought to the people, the more likely it is that the positive traditional norms, values, and institutions will be brought to bear on development action. It is in this sense that decentralization broadens participation, and helps to build democracy from the grassroots (cf. Inter-American Foundation 2001).

Unfortunately, the record of decentralization and local governance in Nigeria has been rather disappointing, in spite of the political rhetoric about power sharing and popular empowerment. With the economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, and the poor functioning of the state system, more and more functions have been off-loaded onto the lower levels of government without allotting them the resources and the institutional support needed to ensure effective performance. Indigenous knowledge may not be the panacea for the multifarious problems of governance and development in Nigeria, but it is certainly a useful if sadly overlooked resource that, with appropriate support, can strengthen local governance, and

promote a more self-reliant, endogenous, and sustainable form of development.

The challenges and opportunities of integrating this knowledge in the process of governance and development are enormous; we can only highlight here some of the policy implications for national planners and the international development community, which must provide the enabling and supporting environment for indigenous knowledge to realize its potential.

First, the local people themselves who are the custodians and practitioners of indigenous knowledge must overcome doubts and diffidence about the merits of their ideas, skills and practices. While they should not idealize or romanticize the merits of their cultural practices and traditions, they must be encouraged to appreciate the strong and weak points of their knowledge, and to seek, through experimentation, to improve and modify them appropriately in the light of change and new ideas, especially in the vital areas of agriculture and food security, human and animal health care, education, and natural resource conservation/management. Marshal Sahlins has rightly emphasized the need for peoples in the developing world “to indigenize the forces of global modernity, and turn them to their own ends,” since the real impact of globalization depends on the response developed at the local grassroots level (Sahlins in Hopper 2000; Harvecort et al. 2002). They also should actively engage government and its agencies in genuine dialogue and partnership to ensure that the interests of all stakeholders are served.

For its part, government at the national and sub-regional levels should create the appropriate legal and regulatory framework to facilitate decentralization and broad-based civic participation. Part of the rethinking needed in this regard would imply a policy shift from the top-down centralist model to a bottom-up grassroots approach that would rely not solely on the state or on market forces, but also on genuine partnership with the organizations of civil society—with renewed emphasis on indigenous moral and material resources in all spheres and sectors of national life.

The indigenous knowledge movement has important implications for development assistance as well. Hitherto, donor agencies have tended to engage numerous outside consultants and experts, who sometimes work on pre-conceived assumptions and solutions. When technical assistance underrates and overlooks local knowledge and expertise, it reinforces the problems of dependency and underdevelopment instead of reinforcing and building upon existing local capacity. Aid agencies that seek to alleviate poverty must focus more clearly on assisting peoples, not states and governments exclusively, and explore more actively the mechanisms for decentralized cooperation. They also need to adjust the ways they operate so that they can more effectively support and strengthen local institutions that relate more closely to the needs and priorities of the intended beneficiaries.

With the increasing tempo of globalization, Africa cannot now opt for an insular and entirely home-grown approach to its development, but must follow a pattern of development that recognizes the merits and limitations of local knowledge and global science, and explores the interface between the two. Like the Japanese and the rapidly developing countries of Asia, Africa must aspire to achieve endogenous development that has a distinct African cultural fingerprint.

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