

# IKNotes

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## Indigenous Knowledge - Cross - Regional Distance Learning Course (India, Sri Lanka, Uganda and Tanzania)

### Introduction

The World Bank's Indigenous Knowledge (IK) Program (Africa Knowledge and Learning unit) organized a pilot cross regional distance learning course (March/April 2005) on *Using Indigenous Knowledge for the Millennium Development Goals* in collaboration with the Global Development Learning Network (GDLN). Over 100 participants attended the course through local GDLN centers in Uganda, Tanzania, Sri Lanka and India. These included policy-makers from health, agriculture and environment ministries, researchers and academia, engineers, NGOs, civil society and IK practitioners including farmers and healers. The primary objective of the multi-media course was to demonstrate to participants how development challenges can better be addressed through the appropriate use of Indigenous Knowledge. Specifically, the exchange demonstrated the role of IK in helping achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The focus was on success stories in using IK to help increase food security and agricultural productivity, reduce maternal mortality, treat the opportunistic diseases associated with HIV/AIDS and help conserve biodiversity. The course facilitated clients in incorporating IK into their programs/policies and promoting South-South dialogue/cooperation among IK practitioners.

The course comprised of a combination of presentations by experts, case studies, interactive group and cross regional discussions. These were facilitated through video-conference sessions

by the GDLN centers. The training course was delivered through a series of presentations of IK case studies and subjects related to IK development and application, by selected resource persons with IK knowledge and experience from different countries. The lectures were delivered by (i) IK experts and practitioners who shared their lessons of experience; and (ii) experts from the scientific community (US-NIH) and UN agencies (WIPO) who addressed critical challenges related to the efficacy, validation, protection, documentation and conservation aspects of IK. Each center had a local facilitator who was an IK expert that served as a resource person to guide the participants through the course, address their concerns, and help them develop individual action plans during offline sessions. The

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outputs from the course have been integrated into a DVD which serves as a stand-alone IK Toolkit<sup>1</sup>.

## Outcomes

### *Facilitators' reports*

The facilitators' reports identified the expectations of the participants and assessed the extent to which these were met through the course. According to the reports, the cross-regional exchanges and lectures enabled the participants to:

- Understand the concept of IK and its practical application to development and specific MDGs.
- Gain more knowledge on how to work with IK bearers in development as well as to help people with HIV/AIDS, through exchanging knowledge on different IK therapies used for AIDS.
- Gather knowledge and experience on IK relevant to agriculture and food security from other countries.
- Learn about specific IK practices, such as the use of Neem that could be adapted to solve local development challenges.
- Gain knowledge on how information technology can be integrated with IK for socio-economic development and provide a cost effective way of disseminating local knowledge across regions
- Learn from international and national efforts to address the dual challenges of IK validation and protection from cross-regional experiences and institutional arrangements.
- Learn from various approaches towards mainstreaming IK at the policy, project and community levels and build on these to integrate IK into respective work programs.
- Appreciate the value of community-to-community exchanges as a tool to promote the widespread exchange of IK practices among local communities and development partners.

### *Action plans*

At the end of the course, the participants developed an action plan outlining how they intended to incorporate IK and the relevant course materials (i) into their own work programs; (ii) at the project level; (iii) at the policy level, (iv) through cross-regional exchanges and dialogue, and (v) through specific activities to promote South-South Coop-

<sup>1</sup> Each DVD contains the course description, agenda, course materials, video conference sessions, participant action plans, facilitators' reports, course evaluations, local media coverage and participant contact details.

eration. The most notable achievements to date include the following actions that have been planned or are under implementation in the four countries:

1. Ten National Agricultural Research and Training Institutions have begun to work with local farmers to document and incorporate local farming practices into their programs. These include post-harvesting techniques, food processing and local crop varieties that are drought/flood resistant. Agricultural Ministries plan to incorporate IK into national food security and livestock policies.
2. Seven universities have begun to incorporate IK into their curriculums, including geography, botany, medicine, science and technology faculties. Some plan to develop specific degree courses devoted to IK.
3. Four Ministries of Health have begun to mainstream IK into national development projects and policies. Efforts are underway to help document and validate the work of traditional healers to test the safety and efficacy of traditional medicine.
4. Five World Bank projects have begun to integrate IK into health, agriculture and rural development projects, after attending the course. Some have begun to engage local IK experts to help design specific IK components into projects. Others have allocated project fund resources to finance IK-based activities.
5. Sixty-five participants have begun to incorporate the lessons learnt from the cross-regional exchanges into their core activities, such as the use of traditional medicine to treat the opportunistic infections related to HIV/AIDS, promotion of local food varieties, cultivation of medicinal plants, institutionalization of farmers' field schools and the integration of IK into national IPR policies.
6. The course also attracted a number of IK skeptics such as public engineers, who, however, realized the potential for IK in development. For example, the Colombo Municipal Council now plans to use indigenous technical knowledge to improve the effectiveness of its core activities.

## Key issues raised by participants

### *Sri Lanka*

- The course highlighted the usefulness of having a systems approach versus a segmented approach which makes it easier for validation of IK.
- There is a need for more active participation from the government to promote the use of IK. Also needed is stronger advocacy from stakeholders to their particular

constituencies.

- The presentations by WIPO helped to compare our situation with that of the international scene. The participants were able to clear doubts with regard to IPR and also think of ways and means to close the existing loopholes in the present legislation.
- There is a need to design a new approach for Traditional Medicine clinical trials which test the holistic Traditional Knowledge management interventions, consisting of drugs, diet and mental health inputs in place of the conventional drug trials.

### **India**

- Knowledge interventions in HIV-AIDS are ‘outstanding’ and appear extremely important for management of HIV. The low, almost negligible investment in Indigenous Knowledge and HIV need to be urgently stepped up, given the significant outcomes of its intervention.
- A new scientific hypothesis has emerged from Indigenous Knowledge use, which shows that improved immunity and functional health of patients is possible despite the viral load. The question that arises is whether the debilitating effect of the virus can be reduced in an altered immune environment created by Indigenous knowledge based therapies.
- There is scope for South-South Cooperation between Africa and Asia in medicinal plant conservation and sustainable use based on the recent experiences in Sri Lanka and India.
- Participants were enthused to hear from the WIPO that the Intellectual Property Rights regime is undergoing rapid changes and today innovations articulated in the theoretical framework of IK are also being recognized, as patent-worthy.
- WIPO should set up “expert inter-cultural panels” to resolve disputes related to the ‘non-obviousness’ of an innovation based on IK. This is because what may be novel in one cultural knowledge system may be obvious, in the other, although their expressions and categories may be culturally different.
- The Indian Plant Breeders Rights initiative is an innovative grassroots, initiative for the revitalization of Indigenous Knowledge. It needs to be managed in a creative way with full participation of and control by local communities.

### **Tanzania**

- The experience of the Tanga AIDS Working Group (TAWG) provides an insight into ways that local communities and NGOs can access government and donor

funds to help scale up their best practices. The Tanzania National AIDS Commission has provided TAWG with small grants to train other communities across the country in their holistic approaches to prevention, care and treatment.

- TAWG also presents a good model for developing a multi-sectoral approach towards mainstreaming IK. It first partnered with doctors and nurses in the regional hospital to integrate traditional medicine into allopathic treatment regimes prescribed for HIV/AIDS. TAWG is now collaborating with the Forestry Department to address the challenges related to the protection and conservation of medicinal plants.
- The course helped address the challenges related to the documentation of IK practices that tend to be rooted in oral traditions. Tanzania needs to learn from other countries such as India and Sri Lanka how to systematically identify and document local IK practices and help institutionalize them into national development policies and projects. India’s Traditional Knowledge Digital Library provides a way forward for Tanzania.

### **Uganda**

- The presentation on the Iganga TBA in reduction of maternal mortality sparked off a heated debate. Participants observed that the Iganga case should have addressed the whole range of the reproductive system (anti-natal, child delivery, post-natal and child health care) to explore the intervention of IK. It appeared that the project had been designed to test the contribution of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in improving the work of traditional birth attendants (TBAs).
- The TAWG experience was very relevant to the Ugandan situation. Information on herbs with nutritional value and the process of gender mainstreaming in operations was desirable. However, more information would be needed. Networking to promote South-South cooperation on IK could address this need.
- The Kani Tribe Benefit Sharing Model ( Kerala, India ) was very relevant to Uganda in view of the high bioprospecting activities in the country by people from outside the country.
- The development of the IPR regime to address issues of property rights as they relate to IK was an urgent matter. While WIPO’s initiatives in this regard were recognized, it was also useful to note that there were on-going national efforts especially in the field of traditional herbal medicine.
- Networking among institutions and individuals at the national, regional and international level should be

encouraged. Publications like Country Newsletters could be used in information sharing. Country-to-Country Exchange Visits by an interdisciplinary group would also enrich country programmes. The World Bank could facilitate this process through funding specific activities but participants would also be expected to contribute to the budgets. Conferences and workshops at national and regional levels should be organized to review progress and chart the way forward.

## Conclusion

Indigenous knowledge is usually shared among local communities and transferred from one generation to the next, through oral traditions and story-telling. The IK distance learning course was an effort to facilitate this process among IK practitioners, development practitioners and policy makers across four countries and two continents. Information communications technology (ICTs)

enabled the bridging of the geographical and perceptual distance between the 102 participants through the video-conference facilities of the global development learning network. The course effectively demonstrated how leveraging traditional and modern knowledge systems can help address development challenges.

The course has contributed significantly towards mainstreaming IK across the four countries. The case studies demonstrated the practical applications of IK in helping clients achieve the MDGs. As a result, a number of participants have begun to and/or plan to integrate IK into their work programs. Given that most of them work for NGOs, government ministries, universities and national research and training institutions, they have provided effective entry points for mainstreaming IK. Through the impetus provided by the course a number of activities are underway to promote IK at the community/local, project, national and policy levels in India, Sri Lanka, Uganda and Tanzania.