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Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Overview

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Rural people in Africa have always maintained a certain formidable power that guards their indigenous institutions and knowledge systems, thereby maintaining some level of self-reliance. This measurable power is based upon the capacity to resist what they do not have a voice in. Recent reports from donor agencies documenting the failure of projects over the past twenty years to initiate sustainable action and make a positive difference in poverty levels in Africa tend to substantiate this thesis. These decades of failed visions did not happen because donor agency staff were uncommitted, nor because African communities were uninterested. They happened because local people's voices—their involvement and control were thought to be part of the goal of development, rather than the process of development.

The power of the rural people to resist the development projects that regard them in this manner, and include them as only "beneficiaries," but not as "actors," is admittedly a power that has not expanded their resource base; and there is now, of course, an increasing fragility of this resource base in terms of environmental and economic deterioration. Despite these almost paralyzing problems, many people and groups throughout Africa strongly believe that positive new development can happen, but only if the people themselves stay in control of their resources, economies, and culture.

This capacity for local control only happens, however, when people are allowed to internally work from, expand,

and change their own institutions and knowledge systems. Thus, the opportunities surrounding initiatives to bring together indigenous knowledge systems and natural resource conservation are immense—however, so are the dangers. The opportunity is the possibility of working from within, consequently establishing expandable natural resource initiatives which are congruent, and therefore sustainable, with existing institutions and systems. The danger is that indigenous knowledge items or outputs—identification of plans, or methods of planting, for instance—may be identified with no regard for their other components of rules and roles—which are no less important because they often seem invisible to the outsider. When this particular incorporation happens, the ownership factors that are critical to both sustainability and self-reliance begin to fade away; and local people find themselves even more bereft of their self-reliant heritage.

*This article is a considerably modified version by Paula Donnelly-Roark of Annex 2 of the publication, **Perspectives on Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Southern Africa** by Jeri Larson, 1998, Discussion Paper No. 3, Environment Group, Africa Region, World Bank, in collaboration with the World Conservation Union (IUCN). For more information on these sources and this specific article, please contact Ms. Paula Donnelly-Roark, Rm. J2-115, World Bank, 1818 H Street NW, Washington D.C. 20433. Tel. no.: (202) 4737574; e-mail address: Pdonnellyroark@worldbank.org*

It is the intent of this article then to briefly define some of the dangers so that they may be avoided, and define some of the opportunities so that they may be more thoroughly and solidly developed. To accomplish this objective, some issues are briefly outlined below which seem to contain strong elements of both danger and opportunity.

Defining How Far We Have Come

Over the past 40 years, the international development community has primarily operated on the premise that input-output development models which offer fast, efficient transfer of goods and structural entities, were the key elements in a country's economic and social development. However, failure of these programs and institutions to achieve sustainability and effectiveness, assumed to be dependable by-products of the input-output model, has finally brought into serious question the efficacy of this approach. Expanding perception of this new reality has initiated a paradigm change away from mechanistic top-down models primarily concerned with economic development, toward dynamic participatory approaches concerned with all facets of human development. The power of this paradigm shift is that it not only provides new solutions; it also provides new insights as to what are the problems.

The key to understanding how far we have come in embracing these new perceptions is to focus on how much has changed in terms of defining what the problems are. Here the "necessity for sustainability" has accomplished what "equity" and "basic human needs" concepts, despite their efforts over several decades, have been unable to do — make the case that people-oriented, participatory development is not only preferable from a social justice perspective, but is also necessary from an effectiveness standpoint. However, this emerging consensus on what are the nature of the problems, does not necessarily indicate similar agreement on how to solve these problems, and indeed there is no such agreement.

The danger here is of two kinds. First, those who have been advocating these changes for so many decades may continue to assume that there has been no success because it has not been total; not realizing that while enduring policies of the input-output era may not have yet changed, "voice" has indeed been achieved for an alternative viewpoint. The alternative danger is to assume that because

there is emerging consensus on what the problems are there will be a similar consensus on how to solve these problems. Thus, it seems the opportunity and the way forward depends upon keeping in mind two things: on the one hand because "voice" has been achieved and therefore people are listening and willing to collaborate, increased efforts need to be placed on the how-to; on the other hand, pilot "how-to" modalities cannot assume that people who now agree or what needs to change, have similar perspectives on how things need to be changed. Therefore, these pilot initiatives featuring indigenous knowledge systems and institutions will need to spell out very clearly both the conceptual frameworks and power/control implications so that differences in perceptions and approach can be recognized and mutually attended to, rather than buried in a barrage of rhetoric.

Assumptions Make A Difference

The critical difference in defining how to go about change is dependent upon whether one assumes that economic and social development can be internally initiated or whether one believes that it must be externally induced. The international development community and African governments with their long-standing preferences for input-output models have obviously ascribed to externally induced modes and models. As the notion of sustainability began to emphasize the importance of participant ownership and the resulting responsibility, participation initiatives have become increasingly popular. Here, however, donor organizations have often assumed that participation processes were to be used to induct marginalized groups of people into the presently dominant Western-type economic and cultural systems — but with more sensitivity and within their own time-frames. This essentially leaves the assumptions surrounding the necessity for externally induced change untouched and unreflected upon.

The possibility that existing indigenous African institutions — often distinguished as "customary" or "informal" — could be a base for internally initiated development has been only rarely explored. However, the recent development focus on capacity and institution building has begun to initiate re-evaluation of the efficacy of these institutions. For instance, Mamadou Dia, in a 1991 paper on "why culture matters" proposed that recognition and utilization of Africa's own institutions are essential to the continent's fu-

ture progress. A subsequent regional study entitled *African Management for the 90s (AM90s)* was designed to investigate the efficacy of utilizing indigenous institutions, in particular the management and organization practices. The study's results shed definitive light on how culture and indigenous institutions matter in terms of effecting more positive governance emphasizing participatory processes, creating efficient but culturally congruent productivity, and implementing equitable growth strategies. At the same time, the results begin to point to expanding levels of disconnect at all formal institutional levels and African civil society.

The danger that is faced here is that of unwittingly compounding the existing level of disconnect. This is a strong possibility if attempts are made to utilize indigenous natural resource systems, without explicitly eschewing external change models at both the micro and macro levels. On the other hand, while opportunities abound for necessary reconnect activities and expansion of indigenous knowledge systems, for this to be successful, conceptual frameworks must change, and the actual work will be, to a great extent, complex and uncharted.

Distinguishing Among Participation Strategies

Approaches used to achieve grassroots participation are numerous and diverse in their objectives, operational strategies, and results. Assessing levels of control, and resulting sustainability, provides participation standards that separate action from rhetoric. This categorization, in turn, provides a measurement typology that allows facilitating agencies to be honest about participation initiatives and results. This capacity is particularly crucial when groups decide to set aside externally-induced models of development and begin working from internal initiatives and institutions.

To create basic standards, participation strategies are divided into four major categories. They are then further classified according to the amount of control which rests with the actor/participants. This classification, based upon measurement of power/control transfer, explains how different participatory strategies work and what they can be expected to accomplish from the perspective of both the "actor/participant" and the "external agent." The basic strategies and control focus are as follows.

Mobilization Strategy

The project of development action is chosen and designed by outsiders, usually by specialists within the initiating donor or government institutions, before people's involvement begins. The program leadership then "mobilizes" the "targeted beneficiaries" to endorse, collaborate with, and adopt the decisions taken. This strategy leaves full control in the hands of the external agent.

Community/Institutions Development Strategy

Social surveys are carried out or meetings held to achieve a better understanding of community/institutional perceptions about a specific problem which has been identified as a constraint to development. Local groups may then be involved, using participatory techniques, in planning and carrying out solutions to a problem. Actor/participants share specified amounts of control with the external agent, but decisions as to the actual amount often rests externally.

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Organizing Strategy

Marginalized groups organize themselves, or are organized, to increase their strength and influence in areas of decision-making that affect them. Cooperatives, rural unions, and some community-based NGOs are examples of this strategy. Actor/participants share specified amounts of control with external agents or with elected office holders.

Empowerment Strategy

Community-based groups, often assisted by an outside facilitator, initiate a learning/empowerment process that enables them to define their own goals and objectives; assess the implications of options open to them; decide and assume responsibility for actions to achieve their agreed to objectives. The empowerment strategy places control in the hands of the actor/participants, who claim both their rights and responsibilities.

For sustainable results, the critical question is: *Where does the control rest?* The strategy of “mobilization” keeps the control solely in the hands of project managers and is therefore easy to initiate and manage. But, because local control is so minimal, this approach seldom engenders a sustainable base. “Community development” and “organizing strategies” share some levels of control with participants and are therefore capable of generating adequate levels of sustainability, but only if (a) project management processes adequately match indigenous styles; and (b) the project output meets a strong community need, such as improved water supply. “Empowerment” strategies enable the participants to create and design their own initiatives as well as implement them, thereby placing maximum control and responsibility in participant hands, with consequent high levels of local sustainability. But maximum control can also increase marginalization.

Each of these participation strategies, in addition to their control quotient, has what we may call an “action intent.” In selecting a strategy it is essential to clarify this basic action intent. And critical to the success of a project is an understanding of how the action intent is preserved or distorted during implementation. Mobilization strategies use only specified portions of the participatory process to *consult*; both the community and organizing strategies use it to *negotiate*; and empowerment strategies use it to *create autonomy*. Understanding the action intent of the various participation strategies, and often subtle but critical differences between them, can help us to decide where the locus of control needs to rest for the maximum sustainability, and how we can keep it there.

The danger here is that to work effectively with indigenous knowledge systems, both negotiation and empowerment strategies must be used and sustained for long periods of time, not only at the grassroots level, but also at the policy levels. Sustaining one or the other of these two modes without slipping back to consultation levels is most difficult. On the other hand, the opportunity is that the necessity of this objective will engender extensive new “how-to” knowledge that will make future efforts in this area much easier to accomplish.

Conclusion

In summary, participatory approaches necessary for effectively working with rather than against indigenous knowledge systems do not make for easy analysis or simple solutions. However, these participatory processes do capture the complexity and inter-dependency of the issues themselves. And they effectively outline the required complex problem-solving processes for sustainable solutions. More importantly, it is a first step in returning African development initiatives to internal rather than external forces.

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