

CONCEPT FOR THE SEGOU FORUM , FEBRUARY 2008

Local Knowledge, the Engine of Development

The topic for the 2008 forum concerns “Local Knowledge, the Engine of Development”. Within this concept we will first define what we understand by “development”, and then explain why we think that local knowledge can, or even must, be the engine of this development. After these explanations, we will introduce certain sub-topics, on which we wish to focus at the forum. We are still seeking speakers. Your suggestions will be welcome.

Our definition of Development

Local knowledge and development are, at first sight, two paradoxical concepts; the concept of development generally refers to a concept of modernity whereas that of local knowledge refers rather to tradition.

Examination of these two concepts comes within the prospect for a new approach to “development” which breaks with the traditional approach based on transfer of technology. Without condemning all that is covered by the concept of development, it can be said that for some four decades, the activities and programs around this concept have forged a “specific culture”. This culture is based on a rationalist and technological vision that believes in the monetary economy, the market and in technology which is considered necessary for the welfare of the human race.¹

For us, the concept of development is based on the action of man seeking to improve his living conditions. Consequently it covers all aspects of the needs which, once satisfied, contribute to men’s wellbeing: health, food, habitat, education, environment, etc Of course, the concept of development is a relative one (nothing indicates that Paleolithic mankind felt less happy than their 21st century counterparts), insofar as it is constantly equated with progressive improvement of the socio-economic living conditions of human beings.

The importance of Local Knowledge in the process of Development

Local knowledge is defined by *systems of knowledge specific to each culture or society*. This knowledge constitutes the base of the decision-making process in all the fields and activities which characterize the life of rural communities. Such knowledge is transmitted orally from generation to generation, and contrasts with the system of modern or scientific knowledge. The terminology can be pejorative, restrictive at the very least, especially when it is opposed to universal knowledge. But the criterion for universality should not be the only criterion for appreciating the efficiency of knowledge. What is

¹ http://www.iim.qc.ca/html/body_glossaire.html

essential is that it should occupy the various areas of mankind's cognitive field. Various reasons, especially historical, sociological, and economic ones, can explain the closed nature of local knowledge, without calling into question its scientific character or effectiveness.

How then can this local knowledge be a factor of development? Developing countries should have a mission to work out for themselves a harmonious and sustainable form of development, built on traditional knowledge which can sometimes offer unexpected answers to certain questioning. But, developing countries should not remain inward-looking or reject modern scientific knowledge. We think it is possible to identify the beneficial aspects of local knowledge as well as those which can be improved through technologies based on science. Local knowledge is complementary to modern science, which often has often showed its limits in solving certain problems of rural development.

To integrate local knowledge in development planning is a first, decisive step towards true development; it emphasizes needs and human resources rather than purely material aspects; it makes possible the adaptation of technology to local needs. To integrate local knowledge in development planning encourages grass roots level communities to draw up the diagnosis of their own situation, raises the level of awareness and leads to well-founded local pride. It involves the recipients and allows for use of local skills in a system of management and monitoring, prevention and feedback. All these positive arguments (in addition to the negative ones, such as the probability of failure if local knowledge is ignored) constitute good reasons to integrate this knowledge into development programs.

Moreover, the success of a development project often depends on local participation. Familiarization with local knowledge facilitates comprehension and communication between development agents and the local population, thus increasing the possibility of an approach to development that is participative and sustainable. Taking local knowledge into account allows project employees and the local population to work as partners in planning and implementing development tasks; it also increases the project's chances of success.

Local Knowledge in the face of history

Even if today more and more people recognize the importance of local knowledge for development, this has not always been the case. In the past, and until a recent date, the essential body of research on local knowledge was carried out by Western social anthropologists. It involved "dilettante" research, local knowledge being perceived as curiosities, or even relics or superstition. For the dominant development model of the time, i.e. the downward approach of technology transfer, preaching modernization, valid knowledge was only that generated in universities, research stations and laboratories, and then transferred to ignorant villagers and other poor communities.

The knowledge of rural population in this context was perceived as being “primitive”, “un-scientific” and “wrong”. Formal research was intended to “educate”, “direct” and to “transform” the rural communities’ strategies of subsistence and production, in order to ensure their “development”, i.e. to modernize them. This model of development was unaware of, discredited or generally underestimated local knowledge.

Moreover, XIXth century social sciences were determinant in spreading the idea that human societies could be differentiated on a straight line of evolution, going from the simplest (called savage or primitive stage of development) to the most complex (called the stage of civilization). Several social science researchers of the period established standard profiles of races corresponding to these stages prescribed in the evolution of forms of society, Blacks being associated with primitive societies, Red, Yellow and Brown populations being barbaric, and Whites being so-called “civilized”. These ideas contributed to justify the establishment of colonial empires by the European powers, motivated by what they called “improvement” of the colonies, a kind of granted development which resulted in domination and exploitation. It was agreed that all primitive and barbarous societies could upgrade to the status of civilized societies, through Western education and Christianity. The idea that primitive people spoke primitive languages, reflecting a primitive mentality, was not likely to arouse any interest in systems of local knowledge, either among the colonized or the colonizers.

The first indications of early awareness of the importance of local knowledge were provided by Gregory Knight (1974) who, after a very revealing study on agricultural practices of the Nyiha in Tanzania, launched a call underlining “... the need to appreciate the thought of a society as being a body of coherent and rational knowledge, developed and proven throughout the ages, and bequeathed as a culture to successive generations... It could even be the case that Nyiha or other ethnic groups could teach us something about nature”. From the time of this call, a renewed interest in local knowledge systems and the way of life of populations known as indigenous, from Africa and elsewhere, was born in academic circles.

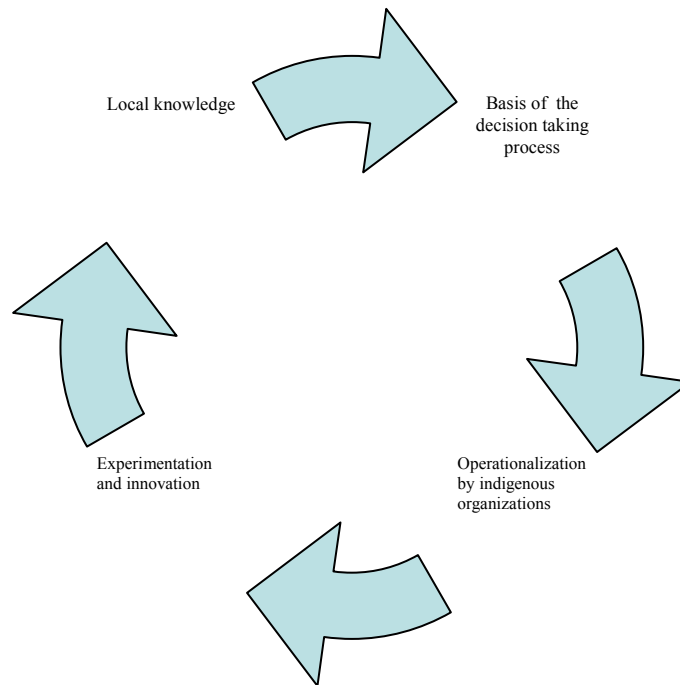
Nevertheless, until the beginning of the Nineties, the large majority of development researchers underestimated the local knowledge and aptitudes of rural populations. To them, and for a long time, “*the rural populations*” and “*what they do not know*” constituted the problem; and “*we the scientists*” and “*what we know*” represented the solution. But the impressive number of publications on local knowledge calls for humility, and underlines the need for us to learn from rural populations before trying to teach them anything. It is a reverse training that consists in “putting the last (i.e. villagers) first”. With hindsight, and taking into consideration the significant progress made in studies on local knowledge, scientists learn, to their cost, that it is indeed “they” who constitute the problem and “the rural populations” who constitute the solution.

This new interest created a diversified field of knowledge which has taken several successive names. The concept of “Local Knowledge” is the most tempting because of its

simplicity. Thus, local knowledge can be compared to knowledge known as modern or scientific. But the only weak point of such a concept is the common perception that local knowledge refers to the knowledge of a given locality rather than to the knowledge of populations as a system of concepts, beliefs and training mechanisms.

Whatever the term used, there is a shared vision that rural communities in Africa and elsewhere have a specialist and extended knowledge of the physical and cultural environment in which they evolve. They also were able to develop mechanisms for sustainable use of this knowledge and of natural resources. This body of endogenous knowledge has been developed and transmitted over generations as the product of interaction between man and his environment. In their development process, the knowledge of rural communities and their natural resource management strategies are shaped and modified by assimilating the knowledge and strategies of neighboring cultures.

The knowledge of rural populations has a holistic dimension, including a broad range of human experience with tangible and intangible entities. Their knowledge includes all possible fields, such as history, linguistics, economics, sociology, political and administrative science, communication, energy technologies, soil water and climate sciences,, biology of plants, domestic and wild animals, insects, etc, medicine, classification systems, time, crafts, religion and many other aspects. In all these fields, each social group developed knowledge capable of attaining an unsuspected degree of sophistication. Such knowledge is so reliable that these traditional societies exploited it successfully and for a long time to ensure the group's survival. Local knowledge thus represents an important side of the culture of rural communities and so constitutes a capital which has potential virtues that are even capable of driving development. Indeed, local knowledge is the starting point of a dynamic cycle of development:



This cycle is facilitated by the endogenous communication system.

Proposals for sub-topics which could be treated by speakers at the forum

Local Knowledge in a context of globalization

Today several indicators demonstrate the goodwill of researchers, decision makers and development partners in integrating local knowledge in the development paradigm. Formerly marginalized, local knowledge is nowadays at the center of development efforts. To give only a few examples: the importance of integration of local knowledge in development programs, was recognized by *Agenda 21* (defined at the time of the *Earth Summit*, in Rio, in 1992), and by the conference on *World Knowledge: knowledge in service for Development in the era of information* (Toronto, 1997). Also, important multilateral and bilateral development institutions like the World Bank (with its Program *Local Knowledge in the service of development*) are more and more interested by the role that local knowledge plays in development.

We ask ourselves if this recognition of the importance of local knowledge has come at the right time?

It is finally recognized that local knowledge and Western science cannot in any case be regarded as monolithic knowledge (neither of them is sufficient on its own); they are, rather, complementary. To deal with this topic does not mean becoming inward-looking, culturally speaking, because no culture is ever isolated, but grows rich in contact with other cultures. What is important is that no culture should let itself be “swallowed-up” by

another culture. But has our local knowledge not been “swallowed up” already? Can it still play a great part in this context of globalization where Western knowledge seems to impose itself ever more insistently.

Local knowledge as a factor in development of agricultural production and improvement of natural resource management

Much research on local knowledge is focused on natural resource management and agricultural systems. We would like to invite a specialist to speak about the richness of Malian knowledge in these fields, but also about the problems local knowledge has to adapt itself to climate change (which seems to be caused for more than 90% by the Western world), and other natural problems.

Local knowledge as an element of the educational system

The domination of our local knowledge systems by those of the colonizers is very visible when we analyze the contents of the educational system inherited from the colonizers and perpetuated after Independence by nationals formed in a mould which taught them the supremacy of Western knowledge. This Western bias and the arrogance which urban elites often express towards the rural poor, sadly remind us of the strength of this negative attitude towards local knowledge; knowledge generated for hundreds or even thousands of years by local communities.

Is the integration of local knowledge in the Malian educational system desirable and realizable?

Local knowledge and social peace

Mali is a country where social order reigns. Do we owe this peace to local knowledge of our different people in the fields of politics and sociology, to our democracy (a concept which was brought to us from outside) that we have known since 1991, or to yet other things?

NB For the development of this concept we took as a starting point the study: Local Knowledge: an Often-hidden Cultural Capital, by Dr. Basga Emile DIALLA, CAPES (Center for Analysis of Economic and Social Policy), Ouagadougou, 2004