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Technical Assistance, Knowledge Gatekeeping and IK: Re-thinking the International Development Practice

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Abstract:

This paper presents results from a multi-disciplinary conceptual analysis of development theory and practice. It reviews issues raised and proposes a shift in the epistemology of possession towards an epistemology of practice which is guided by the following aspects (1) The consideration of the learning culture of parties involved, (2) the ability and willingness for decontextualisation of the knowledge by the source and (3) the ability to embedded it by recipients (embeddedness ), (4) the importance that is attached to knowledge of the host country as reflected through (5) Similarity in culture, values, understanding of context and knowledge bases; (6) the Consistency with mutually beneficial interactions between parties, as reflected in the anticipation of participation levels in the process through which the source's knowledge is made accessible to the recipient and (7) similarity in priorities in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge (IK) technical assistance, technical cooperation, knowledge gatekeeper, indigenous knowledge, international development, knowledge transfer, capacity building

I Introduction

The role of indigenous knowledge in development; its perceived value by the international cooperation agencies and technical assistants, have long been discussed among development studies scholars from different perspectives, reflecting an interdisciplinary debate. When it came to problem solving however, finding answers across disciplines has been challenging. Among groups of scholars are those who challenge the current philosophy and practice of
technical assistance provided as a short-gap measure; in the form of expertise, capacity building and systems development for the less developed, recipient countries. Other scholars are debating problems associated with indigenous knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems in the development process. In this regard, unfortunately, no answers have been forthcoming, beyond enumerating the problems concerned.

Those who have analysed the relevance of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) have so often tended to limit themselves to the value-alternative (Briggs 2005). To date however there are still more problems that arise when IK is considered as an alternative to other forms of knowledge amongst others, a tendency towards the “commodification” of IK. Commodification refers to attaching a monetary value to this form of knowledge. This approach has however generated tensions between communities and those well-intentioned development partners. Briggs (2005:183) sums up the issues that arise while working with or researching indigenous knowledge as follows:

A number of problems and tensions have resulted in Indigenous Knowledge not being as useful as hoped for or supposed. These include problems emanating from a focus on the (arte) factual; binary tensions between western science and IK systems; the problem of differentiation and power relations; the romanticization of IK; and the all too frequent decontextualization of IK.

The issues raised by (Briggs 2005) have a far-reaching impact in the way the development cooperation and its process takes place, and there are indications that the current way of thinking and practice has not delivered the much anticipated results (Wilson 2007). The problems raised elsewhere (Wilson 2007) have some resonance with the issues raised by Briggs (2005); Wilson concludes:

The evolution has been driven by persistent issues concerning capacity and knowledge-in-context and by changing approaches to development practice. …. however….a further epistemological turn is needed that conceives of co-operative learning as ‘learning with’,

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1 The World Bank (1998:1) defines indigenous knowledge as knowledge that is “unique to a particular culture and society. It is the basis for local decision-making in agriculture, health, natural resource management and other activities. IK is embedded in community practices, institutions, relationships and rituals. It is essentially tacit knowledge that is not easily codifiable”.

2
where difference between actors is conceived as a resource, rather than a problem, for knowledge production (2007:183).

Three issues stand out from these two quotes:

- There are gaps in philosophical approaches (thinking and value)
- There are gaps in perspectives and;
- The knowledge base of the recipient; the indigenous way of knowing, and practice of knowledge are under-estimated.

These problems call for a new philosophy, a change in the epistemological ways of knowledge and knowing of indigenous people, and clarity on the characteristics of international “gatekeeping” (Allen 1977) theory that inform international technical assistance and cooperation (Wilson 2007). The objective of this paper is therefore twofold:

1) To analyse and integrate problems and issues arising in relation to international technical assistance in consideration of the role of knowledge gatekeepers and IK in development.
2) To introduce the new development philosophy and cooperation theory

The hope is that our contribution from this paper will improve understanding in international technical assistance, cooperation and advance theory of IK practice vis a vis international development practice.

II The methodology
We analyse causes of on-going failures as outlined and extend the previous empirical evidence and theories. We develop a new theoretical thinking, informed by borrowed theories from other fields that interact with development policy and practice. A new model of development cooperation emerges from this interdisciplinary analysis, with clarity of characteristics and baselines for effective delivery of technical assistance.

III Indigenous Knowledge, Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance: The role of the Knowledge Gatekeeper
Whether IK is important or not should not probably be subject to debate at this stage. We believe that every aspect of knowledge can be of value. Rather, what remains challenging is
to understand how two knowledge systems can work systematically, connected together, to achieve global properties and provide much needed added value for the public good. Such an analysis includes the possibilities of IK systems as inter-linked systems with those of modern universal knowledge, making experience accumulated from developing countries useful to their progress but with clear recognition of its limitations and challenges.

Such a development however meets resistance from those with vested interests. Briggs (2005) has identified challenges while attempting to work with IK. In this paper, we assume that there is enough good to recognising identified challenges and developing possible answer options, collectively, and move towards a better understanding of the concept. To move forward, however, needs to take into account other issues; among others, relating indigenous knowledge to the theory of development cooperation and technical assistance.

International development is a concept that has no universal definition. In most instances, it is used in a holistic and multi-disciplinary context of human development (Gregory 2009). International development can be studied from various perspectives of development such a way it incorporates how much foreign aid is given and how it used, systems of governance, food supply, healthcare, education, poverty reduction, gender equality, disaster readiness, infrastructure, economics, human rights, environment and issues associated with these. International development differs from simple development in that it is specifically composed of institutions and policies that arose after the Second World War (see the Breton Woods agreement). These establishments focus on poverty reduction, and improving living conditions in Third World decolonised countries (Gregory 2009). The term ‘development cooperation’ is used to express the idea that a partnership should exist between donor and recipient, rather than the traditional situation in which the relationship was dominated by the wealth and specialised knowledge of one side (World Health Organisation 2005). This idea is against a background view that most development aid comes from the Western industrialised countries, but some poorer countries also contribute aid (OECD 2008).

Following criticisms levelled against the failure of aid to deliver desired change prior to the 1990s, the West shifted from the old concept of being “donors” and adopted a more cooperative oriented, friendlier language which conveyed a message of mutual respect; in the concept of “development partners”. This concept was gradually introduced around the 2000s. From 2005 onwards the concepts of international technical assistance and international partnership were widely adopted. This nuanced language was to be accompanied by
Technical Assistance to help bridge the capacity gaps in aid-recipient countries (Wilson 2007).

With so much not known about the systems of knowledge management (with the exception of the indigenous knowledge) within developing regions (Dinucci and Fre 2003), the concept of Technical Assistance was drawn in to help bridge the gaps (Wilson 2007:203). This way, it is possible to have a cooperative arrangement where the aid provider contributes towards problem solving in partnership with the recipient country. The relationship however remains superficial and it is subject to an imbalance of power (Briggs 2005); with the donor controlling the important aspects of the decision-making process.

There are issues however that emerge from the way this process is undertaken. Available evidence indicates that attempts to take knowledge from the source (sender) and use it to close the gap at the recipient’s end (host) require that certain prerequisites are in place. These are similarities in tasks, routines and network (Argote and Ingram 2000); the context, and priority given by the recipient (Cumming and Teng 2003), and complementarity of knowledge at the source and that of the recipient (Harorimana 2008). Our lesson also is that at the heart of the issue, the profile and exposure of those knowledge gatekeepers to foreign countries can prove to be the most important factor in donor-recipient relationships. Not least is the commitment of the leadership, and mutual trust between donor and recipient (Dasgupta and Gupta 2009). Another important aspect is the relationship between the source of expertise (technical expert or gatekeeper) and the recipient (Cumming and Teng 2003) – in this case not the donor and the recipient government, but rather the direct recipients who are benefiting from the expertise. This is either a company or the community.

Over time the technical assistant will provide information about the country to receive support (profiling and beyond), and on basis of this information flow, decisions are reached on whether to provide support or not. This process has been the cause of genuine dissenting voices from recipient countries– some economists qualifying the failure as “dead aid” (see Moyo 2008). Figure 1 below captures key elements that are required for effective partnership in development on the basis of technical support through technical assistants.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1: Source, Recipient: gap considerations
This figure shows that knowledge is involved in technical assistance, and then there is a strong possibility of having to adjust from one culture to another. Evidence from organisation studies point to the source as the one who should change first, through decontextualising the knowledge being transferred to fit the recipient’s culture and priorities. Given the geographical distance between the donor and recipient countries, physical distance becomes another impediment to successful transfer (Szulanski 1996; 1999). Power distance, contractual obligations and trust are other factors that are positively associated with success (Cumming and Teng 2003; Szulanski, 1999; Harorimana 2010). The role of gatekeepers is the one thus far which is perceived to provide meaning translation but under specific circumstances and only when they fulfil certain criteria (Harorimana 2011). Among others,

a) They are conversant and well vested in recipient cultures as they are with the source.

b) They value at equal measure that developing countries need to demonstrate good understanding of local knowledge (read indigenous knowledge).

Added to the requirement of similarities in identity, internal systems, and culture between the source and the recipient, (Harorimana 2009) it seems that the international gatekeeping role is further called into question, and this then begs the question of how we can improve international cooperation without adapting a different methodology of implementation and philosophy.

Lying at the heart of the technical assistance is an established technical assistance framework through which developed countries send technical experts to host countries. Technical assistants in the host countries are referred to elsewhere as “knowledge gatekeepers” (Allen and Cohen 1977:145). This concept is used within the fields of geography, management, communication studies and management information systems, and it refers to those people who collect information, screen it and pass it on to the inquiring party. Elsewhere, however, Cranefield and Yoong (2007:134) define a gatekeeper as a person who acts as flag-bearer, an advocate, an ambassador, a knowledge translator and interpreter, and an expert. In environmental studies, the term is used to mean a ‘knowledge broker (Sverisson 2001). (Sverisson 2001) uses the concept of knowledge brokers to analyse opportunities and obstacles to entrepreneurial activities and argues that knowledge brokers can identify an opportunity or obstacles in networking.

Recently, following on Harorimana (2009) study the role of knowledge gatekeepers in the process of knowledge transfer in two African countries, we conducted a study using multiple case-study designs and qualitative methods (Yin, 2003) to collect and analyse data in line with (Stake 2006) from ten firms of High-Tech manufacturing and R&D firms in
Rwanda and Uganda. Those companies benefited from sector development funds and they all had international experts who are serving on technical support arrangements to help turn around these industries. The researcher interviewed 60 experts and collected 110 questionnaires from governments and private sector organisations. This study focused on:

(a) An analysis of the characteristics of a knowledge gatekeeper
(b) Ingredients for success in this role

In order to succeed in a gatekeeper’s role, there is a requirement for a formal recognition and command of respect among the host community, understand of local cultures, relate with indigenous communities. Below is some of the evidence from the research on the trust and identity of the gatekeeper:

...once you fail to understand what we value, you’d never be left to get close to our community and families. (Opinion leader)
...it is necessary to make friendship with the community leader....you’d be in trouble if he/she opposes your presence. T. A.
...understanding their practices, their [community] ways of life, their values and culture [etc] is the key to successful learning of their practices, especially when it involves their indigenous knowledge. They [populations] can be very resistant towards their secrets. MGR

One of the staff members recalled a statement made by her counterpart in the village where she worked:

...why should I allow someone I do not know to misappropriate the resources that feed my children? DAFR

It should be argued that the relationship between IKT and culture is deeply embedded in cultural routines and customary practices of communities. In this regard, the notion of “cultural distance” as expressed by the respondent above (MGR U1) explains the obstacles that may accrue to adapting IK and eventual learning of its use by the acquirer. Another indication from this study is findings that it can be difficult to work with countries that use indigenous knowledge-based systems without adjusting to and respecting these. Below is one among many pieces of evidence:

... I do not like those who push me around because they have money.....unless my own right over what I have is respected, I cannot talk to them [name withheld]. The
populations I represent are bitter about forcing them changing the variety they are familiar with. Respondent (34) ... It is not because the intention is bad in itself.....but the message was not well communicated and it has caused alarm since then. .... (opinion leader in Uganda)

To conclude this section, this quote only shows that the populations want their IK respected and protected. This by and large behoves us to answer the question as to whether it is possible to achieve transformation through increased technical assistance without aligning with and fitting within the indigenous knowledge, cultures and systems. Technical assistants requires good understanding of the local dynamics - but technical assistants, although well-educated and experienced, often lack the knowledge of local dynamics including the IK systems.

IV Conceptual problems
Previous studies (e.g. Sonnenwald 1995) have indicated that knowledge gatekeepers appear to behave like boundary spanners. Boundary spanning is said to have two primary roles: (1) to detect information and bring it into the organisation and (2) to send information into the environment presenting the company in a favourable light. Boundary spanners, as their name suggests, however, move around and between the gated, bringing in and sending out information to the party that requires it. From this perspective, boundary spanners are not insiders. Although they can be trusted partners, facilitators or mediators in development have not met the requirements of (a) cultural attachment (see Cumming and Teng 2003; Heinz 2009); (b) their identity (Wenger 1998) and social connection (Granovetter, 1983) between the source and recipients.

V Need for clarity of definition and characteristics of the gatekeeper
Taken as it is today in the development studies, knowledge gatekeepers are comparable to technical experts, but this field has not been associated with this developed concept as yet. To start with, technical experts (technical assistants) is a concept that can expand from a person to an organisation, with the responsibility of a gatekeeper (see Allen 1977). The gatekeeper could also be an interest group, especially in the form of communities of practice (Johnson 2007).

The first problem that arises here is this: if an organisation (such as an international cooperation agency) is a gatekeeper, their employees who are posted oversees serve as links and facilitate relationships, they translate relationships, cultures and values of their sending
countries to the recipient one. While the sending agency may have collective experience of the technical requirements on the ground, the gatekeepers do not necessarily reflect local culture, values and beliefs (Harorimana 2009; 2010). Because of this loose attachment to the recipient, some countries and indeed some United Nation Agencies call these staff in developing regions “consultants”. They bring in expertise as and when they are required to do so. Cooperation Agencies call their staff technical assistants because of the perceived capacity-building needs of the recipient (Wilson 2007). As Wilson indicates in her research, however, the concept of cooperation in the name of capacity building has not delivered its promise of a much desired impact.

The relationship between the recipient country and the sending agency/government depends to a great extent on the information that is collected by the gatekeeper/technical expert on the ground: but the role between this technical expert/gatekeeper and the host country is very informal. The interpretation of what they see on ground is limited by the gatekeeper’s cultural understanding.

The gatekeeper relationship between themselves as individuals and the sending institution constitutes an overlapping role of a knowledge gatekeeper (Harorimana 2009). A question as to what the role of the gatekeeper/technical expert is in the recipient’s view is called for.

VI Philosophical differences

The recipient countries continue to argue about a master-servant relationship that has prevailed in the development decisions. Certainly one advocate of this has been (amongst others) the president of Rwanda, Paul Kagame. Countries raise the issue of “deux-poids deux-measure in French” to mean “the double balance approach” practice. Already Briggs (2005) has summed up the issue of positivism philosophies that are rife in developed (donor) countries in the field of development where indigenous knowledge is involved. We can focus on this particular area for the moment. The positivists’ view tended to devalue indigenous knowledge. IK is “locally bound” or “culture-based and context-specific” (Bovin and Morohashi 2002:13). This knowledge is said to be “non-formal”, and is “orally transmitted”, and generally not documented. IK is dynamic and adaptive to new situations by virtue of being “holistic in nature.” (Ibid: 13). Those positivists question whether the indigenous knowledge should be valued or not (Battiste and Henderson 2000); however, this philosophy is questionable for many reasons.
Is IK a different type of knowledge or is it a way of knowing? The more fundamental question in this regard is this: What is the difference between what we know, and what we know that we know. Is it possible to separate knowledge from the systems that produces it? If these questions could be answered, then we may have to pose a further question - if the knowledge such as the indigenous one cannot be separated from the system that has produced it (Briggs 2005; World Bank 1998), then why should we seek to subject this knowledge to Western systems that are distant in nature and characteristics from the way IK is produced?

That is not to say, though, that IK should not be subjected to a certain form and level of the rigour of scientific testing that has to be tested in the laboratories. Indigenous knowledge relies on subjective interpretations and experiences. Identifying IK requires acknowledging that its primary goal is self-knowledge (Cajete and Skyland 1999), to understand and attempt to contain the energies that infuse everything in order to create a lifestyle that is harmonious with the local eco-system. In short, knowledge is developed on a personal level through subjective reflection and participation in ceremonial and stage-based processes (Henderson 2000). An appropriate test should therefore come from those perspectives; this calls for an understanding of the knowledge that is possessed - here called “possessed knowledge”, and the knowledge that is practiced - here called “practiced knowledge”.

**Possessed** because is based on “the web of relationships between humans, animals, plants, natural forces, spirits, and land forms in particular localities, as opposed to discovering particular ‘laws’ (Battiste and Henderson 2000: 44); and

**Practiced** because it is used in their daily lives as a source of food, heath, and spiritual life and is based on the changing eco-system that is the ultimate source of knowledge - that is the common expression of IK in that vibrant relationship between the people, their eco-systems, and spirits with whom they share the land

**VII The new thinking**
Rethinking about where we started this argument; (Wilson 2007 and Briggs 2005); we now have the gatekeeper who lacks knowledge about IK systems. Those who advocate for the Western philosophy argue that once knowledge is possessed, then it should be possible to extract and transfer or indeed even sell it like a commodity - a view that has been challenged by some quarters (see Briggs 2005); it seems to respond to regional studies theory (see Pinch
et al, 2003), and it resonates with the organisational science (Cook and Brown 1999) epistemologies which argue that, unlike possessed knowledge that can be generated and transferred in codified forms through reports, possessed knowledge is generated by a system and through interactions with that system, a relationship that makes it impossible to attribute to a single person without reference to the system that has generated that knowledge. From this emerges:

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

**Figure 2: Emerging philosophies around IK**

The figure N0 2 reflects the current thinking along the lines of economic geographers and development scientist with regards to knowledge creation and transfer in regional studies. They have developed this line of thinking for some time, especially with regards to knowledge networks and social network theory (Granovetter 1983) where the compatibility of knowledge networks between the source and the recipient is seen as key to success (see Cumming and Teng 2003), and the tie strengths which are characterised by the social connections and emotional intensity are vital for knowledge transfer and learning by the recipient from the source (Cunning and Teng 2003; Granovetter1983; Johnson 2007).

Knowledge can be possessed by an individual and through interactions and socialisation or indeed as communities of practice (Wenger 1998) and it is possible to share experience with and impart knowledge to one another through group interaction (Johnson 2007). Through the social networks, the relationship with nature, the spirit and the soul, local people practice knowledge to solve their problems. Economic Geographers (Pinch et al, 2003) have considered this idea from the architectural knowledge perspective too to show that M4 Corridor has developed knowledge “architectural knowledge “is possessed and practiced locally; it is specific and embedded in that very region, making it difficult to be accessed by outsiders.

Because the value of indigenous knowledge is assessed and attributed based on the lines of problem solving, this way of thinking through the lens of problem solving constitutes a basis upon which problem solving constitute a basis upon which its validity is determined. This of course is opposed to the process through which universal knowledge is assessed – against a set of scientific rules and conformity with the laws of the scientific field. It can be argued that the identity, cultures, beliefs, social structures and networks are the fundamental
aspects that make the indigenous knowledge distinctive from other forms of knowledge, making its value more collective, society-oriented, and morally grounded instead of commercially driven.

Indigenous knowledge gains its value through practice; in action. When the problem cannot be solved through the initial application of a solution (practice of knowledge), further attempt is made to adjust, and combine various practices until a solution is found. It is through this series of trials and combinations that new knowledge is generated, and it is combined with and informed by experience. Cook and Brown (1999: 383) have seen this before; they termed it the “generative dance between knowledge and knowing”.

VIII New model for international cooperation
Our model suggests that there are streams of factors to consider in a cooperation that involves knowledge transfer from the source to the recipient host. They include: the knowledge context, the relational context and the recipient context. The sign (+) in brackets indicate level of similarities as may be required (high=+ and low = -).

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Figure 3: A model of cooperation for International Development through knowledge gatekeepers

- **Culture, identity and values** need to be similar or at least must be understood and respected in similar ways.

- **The learning culture** at the recipient site may predict the outcome. At the source however, the most important determinant of success is the articulability of the type of knowledge embedded in the people, the routines and the tools.

- **Decontextualisation** of the knowledge (source)

- **embeddedness** (recipient)

- **The importance attached to knowledge of the host country should be reflected through** Similarity in culture, values, understanding of context and knowledge bases.
f. **Consistent and mutually beneficial** interactions between parties

g. **The anticipation of participation** levels in the process through which the source's knowledge is made accessible to the recipient.

h. Similarity in priority in a mutually beneficial relationship (not a master-servant relationship).

This list may not be exhaustive. It is, however, indicative of key areas to focus on in an international technical cooperation which involves knowledge transfer and capacity-building initiatives. This model however poses problems; not least because people’s cultures, routines, values, priorities and knowledge at the recipient (the host) end are factually very different from those of the sender (normally a super power and Western country). The aspect that has been the source of greatest discourse has been the relationship between the indigenous knowledge and how it has been understood, and the universally accepted form of knowledge. There are competing philosophies here, especially from those in the modern, Western-driven scientific communities.

IK should not be seen or perceived as inferior, parochial, un-intellectual, primitive and backward (see problems as identified by Briggs 2005 and Semali and Kinceloe 1999). It is our view that IK and Western forms of knowledge do not compete; they are not mutually exclusive, because one does - and should be seen to do- the job that the other cannot do. This is reflected through prevailing tensions (see Briggs’ review of the progress in the IK field, 2005). There are three major ideas we put forward: (1) we redefine the knowledge gatekeeper; (2) provide a theoretical basis of new characteristics, and (3) propose a nuanced shift towards a philosophy based on epistemology of practice, a philosophy which recognises that at the heart of knowing and knowledge lays the system that generates new knowledge. A good understanding of the role of knowledge gatekeepers constitutes only one step towards finding appropriate solutions to prevailing problems .There is need to develop a strong evidence-base for the theory we are proposing from various perspectives relating to both the sending country and the recipient country.

**References**


