

## Indigenous Knowledge Systems beyond Biological Diversity

# Harnessing Indigenous Knowledge Systems for Global Knowledge Co- operation

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Bonn, 28 October 2024. The ongoing 16<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties (COPs) to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD) in Colombia, and the upcoming UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) next month, are currently shining a spotlight on the critical importance of Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in shaping sustainable futures.

Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), a body of knowledge, practice, and belief about the relationship of humans with each other and with other non-human living beings, passed down from human ancestors over generations and yet thriving in many parts of the world, forms an essential conduit for the past to inform the future. Not surprisingly, the CBD recognises the

importance of traditional knowledge (Art. 8j) in biodiversity conservation and its Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework highlights the crucial role of IKS in biodiversity. The critical role of integrating IKS in climate change adaptation is also acknowledged in the Paris Agreement under UNFCCC. IKS are predominantly used in the Global South, mostly in rural and land-dependent communities in the fringes of modern city-centric life, which delimits their relevance in the Western science-based world order. They offer, however, a far greater contribution towards finding answers to the complex challenges of our times.

### **A bridge between the heritage of the past and the future**

Ideas for incorporating IKS into sustainability initiatives are gaining popularity. In terms of the ecological aspect, more and more studies and reports show the importance of IKS for effective natural resource management. In addition, nature's contribution to more sustainable health outcomes is increasingly recognised. In Germany, the recent publication by the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) on Health calls for greater awareness of the global challenges at the interfaces of environmental and climate change, biodiversity and human health.

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The spiritual beliefs often at the base of IKS, can offer a more responsible perspective for harmonious coexistence with the environment than the ideas of revealed religions, which establish human domination over the earth and other elements of nature. While the relevance of IKS for environmental protection, health and biodiversity is already being addressed, there are other areas to which it can make important contributions, such as gender, governance and economy. Incorporating these perspectives can contribute to a more equitable approach within societies, representing a decisive step toward decolonising knowledge production.

### **Towards more interaction of knowledge systems**

While IKS are increasingly recognised, the challenge lies in recognising and mainstreaming such knowledge forms when Western knowledge systems

dominate all forms of knowledge and means of knowing. In the 20th century, IKS were increasingly pushed back while industrial growth and modernisation projects gained momentum. Expansionist policies from colonisation to the present day created a clear separation between so-called 'modern', 'Western', 'universal' knowledge and "nonwestern" knowledge. Further, IKS are specific to local contexts forming the basis for a peoples' development in their natural historical context. Though knowledge systems have always been enriched by consciously borrowing from other cultures, the development of knowledge systems of (formerly) colonised peoples has been interrupted and long neglected. As a result, there is now an unequal exchange. Western science, even when informed by IKS implicitly or explicitly, has higher credence. Therefore, IKS can be co-opted by Western science as formal education systems are yet to be decolonised to make space of Indigenous methods of knowing and learning, endangering the intellectual heritage of mostly marginalised Indigenous People.

The interaction of IKS with the prevailing scientific thinking is, therefore, of utmost importance. This can be achieved through respect, curiosity, openness, and dialogue to break cultural stereotypes that create hierarchies where Western science is placed at the top and all the 6,900 documented IKS somewhere at the bottom. Initiatives such as 'Healthy Earth - Healthy People' prioritise the environment and the harmony of people with nature. This principle is in line with the maxim 'prevention is better than cure', a cornerstone of the health systems of many Indigenous communities. Elsewhere, many attempts are being made to integrate the findings and applications of conventional medicine with Indigenous practices.

These examples of the adoption of knowledge systems on both sides show that there is mutual benefit, which can be extended to many other fields beyond ecology and medicine. No knowledge system is universal; each is deeply rooted in a specific cultural context. Understanding this and building bridges between the different approaches is crucial to create an ideal way of achieving equitable knowledge cooperation and making a diverse range of knowing available to everyone.