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## **Knowledge, Change and the Preservation of Progress**

*by Daniel Moralez-Gomez*

As geographic borders become more permeable, and knowledge more easily transformed into a marketable commodity, there is a growing realization that the traditional wisdom imprinting our cultural identities is being lost.

At the doorstep of the 21st century, both North and South face a tremendous diversity of global challenges. More than ever before, change invites reconsideration of the value of cultural practices, conventional social attitudes, traditional beliefs, and ancient forms of collective behaviours that many people thought had been transcended by progress and modernization.

Despite the captivating rhetoric of the development discourse in the early 1990s, the blueprint for remodelling the world order continues to be drawn by a Western concept of correctness, science and progress. Although the current trend is toward cultural homogenization, the spread of science, and the centrality of capital as the currency of development, there is also an emerging attempt to recover what modernization has systematically ignored over the years: traditional cultural knowledge.

Throughout the centuries, societies evolved by learning from experience. The collective ability to accumulate and transmit knowledge from generation to generation, and to apply it to produce new knowledge, have underpinned development. However, the speed of change today, the insatiable demand for solutions to the problems of a modern world, and the predominance of technology centred around market power rather than the empowerment of people, present new threats.

Developed and developing countries are finding it increasingly difficult to preserve the shared products of human learning. Science and wealth create for a relative few the ability to amass and transmit facts, rearrange social structures, and alter the natural order in dimensions never imagined before. For both developed and developing societies the meaning of collective symbols, customary practices, cultural identities, and, ultimately, the history of peoples, fades at a worrisome speed.

Unquestionably, international development priorities have suffered dramatic shifts in the last few decades. From a bipolar geopolitical order in the post-war period, attention moved toward expanding a dominant economic order and its perceived benefits to all corners of the globe. All along, the premise underlying the development discourse has been to extend the "gains" of progress beyond the industrialized world. However, reality shows that poverty, malnutrition, preventable child mortality, and various forms of discrimination persist in most of the world.

### **CULTURAL SPECIFICITY**

Present-day concerns focus on yet another politically correct development agenda driven mainly by the North, that of environmental sustainability. Today's changes are global in scope, and national and corporate in their motivation. But people in the North often misunderstand the cultural specificity of the

South. They continue to neglect the human and socio-cultural base of knowledge at the root of sustainable development.

Nonetheless, a trend is growing to reclaim traditional cultural knowledge as a driving force of development. Northern countries in particular are recognizing what people in the South have understood for years: that to enter the next century, modern societies must comprehend traditional cultural knowledge. Questions then arise about how to better understand traditional knowledge, how to preserve it in a meaningful way, and how to apply it to sustain development. The responses are not easily found and are often controversial.

Traditional cultural knowledge is a complex concept that reflects an even more complex set of empirical, intellectual, social and spiritual factors that constitute human culture. It refers to the integrated expression of collective values and customs that guide interaction among peoples, and between people and nature.

By definition, traditional cultural knowledge is systemic and addresses aspects as diverse as how communities use and help reproduce their natural environment, how they manage their social organizations, and how they educate their children. Because of the diverse realities it reflects, there is no consensus about what traditional knowledge is, or how it is most genuinely expressed. Efforts to understand traditional knowledge tend too often to frame the concept within politically correct dimensions currently in vogue. In a world system engineered to respond to measurable parameters of consumption, efficiency, and constant change, culture and human learning too often become convenient instruments by which to manage crises created by neglect of the human side of development.

## **CONTRADICTIONS**

The notion of traditional cultural knowledge is not free from contradictions. It helps some to legitimize static visions of the world, while others see idealized hope. In essence, however, traditional knowledge is a combined expression of culturally diverse individual and collective capacities to manage the social, political, economic and natural environment. To restrict its meaning to any single set of issues, or to see it as the domain of a single cultural group, separate from the collective, oversimplifies its development potential and makes it purely instrumental to short-term concerns.

Pressures to find quick solutions to the problems confronting industrialized culture lead to romanticized visions of traditional cultural knowledge. Too often it is perceived as an ancient pre-science that holds universal solutions to modern world problems. Unfortunately, these perceptions fail to grasp the integral, holistic and cultural roots of traditional knowledge.

When perceived strictly in a time-line dimension, traditional knowledge becomes a collection of facts and practices frozen in the past. Its relevance for the modern world becomes tangential, reduced to ahistorical and acultural attempts to bring clusters of information forward to resolve diverse problems of the present. Traditional knowledge under such circumstances ceases to be systemic and historical, and becomes an accessory separated from its cultural milieu.

Those who look upon traditional knowledge purely from an ethnic perspective label it "indigenous." It is an expression of "curious" traditions and practices of native peoples whom modern societies still fail to see as part of their own social fabric. This perception dehumanizes traditional cultural knowledge and detaches it from the rites, languages and community practices that give it a historical dimension.

If traditional cultural knowledge is reduced to a utilitarian economic notion, its scope and potential impact are limited to the lessons drawn from the survival technologies and practices of materially impoverished peoples. But when it comes to applying such knowledge in modern science and business, little is done to recognize or compensate its originators.

## **DEEPER UNDERSTANDING NEEDED**

Western societies' understanding of traditional cultural knowledge still has far to go to master the deeply rooted values beneath the cultures of peoples at the centre of development agendas. Industrialized societies concerned with preserving their own progress must drastically change their cultural perception of development. From a position of cultural dominance, current Western notions of progress, modernity, and human development must give way to a broader recognition of the ethos that gives meaning to traditional knowledge in cultures different from our own.

A full agenda of issues needs to be better understood before we may place traditional cultural knowledge at the centre of our search for direction in development and change. Rather than addressing traditional knowledge as a curiosity that complements our visions of where societies should go, it should be approached as a source of learning to understand from where our societies come. This perspective implies going beyond functional aspects of traditional knowledge to comprehend the complex interaction among artistic and spiritual practices, language and communication, patterns of social reproduction, practices in community governance, and management of natural and human resources. In sum, it implies a different way of looking at what development is about.

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