



Indigenous knowledge systems: the successes and the polemics

Policy initiatives on indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) have come a long way, but implementation remains problematic and answers are not straightforward, writes *Ina van der Linde*, reporting on a recent seminar on the topic of *Bringing cognitive justice and restorative action into public policymaking*.

Where to start implementing IKS policies? Professor Narend Baijnath, CEO of the Council on Higher Education, believes the national education strategy is the most logical way of nurturing indigenous knowledge. In the development of the new curriculum statements, there has been a strong drive towards recognising and affirming the critical role of indigenous knowledge, especially with respect to science and technology education.

'After two decades of policy development, we have carefully crafted legislation and we have ambitiously conceptualised policies, but all of these fall flat at the level of implementation,' says Baijnath. One of the reasons is that all the carefully crafted legislation and policy comes out of the dominant paradigm of how knowledge is produced and recognised.

'There is a major disconnection at the level of implementation. There is disengagement, even aloofness and obliviousness, to the social, cultural and linguistic processes that shape understanding and meaning, and ultimately how communities respond to policies and implementation,' Baijnath explains.

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Bajinath was one of the speakers at the joint seminar on cognitive justice and restorative action hosted by the Department of Science and Technology (DST), the HSRC and the South African Research Chair Initiative (SARChI) in Development Education at the University of South Africa (Unisa), Professor Odora Hoppers (also see previous article).

DST had two broad areas of interests in IKS, DST deputy director-general, Thomas auf der Heyde, explained, namely research into and for indigenous knowledge, and the promotion and growth of indigenous knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems in the country.

The department had provided IK holders and practitioners with an opportunity to record their knowledge so that their interests would be protected and taken into consideration by the public, policymakers, researchers and other stakeholders in socio-economic development.

Professor Yonah Seleti, acting deputy-general of Human Capital and Knowledge Systems at DST, brought some soberness into the conversation. Expressing his frustration with participants in IKS who have vested interests and aspirations, he asked: 'What is it that drives you when you are involved in IKS?', highlighting the issue of individual rights versus collective rights.

'A lot of us mentally, and probably spiritually, are committed to the concept of cognitive justice or a democracy of knowledges, to put it differently. Yet, in meetings, I keep on coming up against claims by traditional healers who believe "this is my knowledge and therefore I must register it as my personal property".'

'Indigenous knowledge is defined as having passed from generation to generation and inter-generation, so how do you, at this moment, claim that this is yours?' asked Seleti.

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He also warned against the 'reductive approach' towards Western knowledge. Western knowledge does not have one philosophy, there are many philosophies. So it is important that in addressing issues of IKS, the 'competing forces' are recognised.

Then there is the tension between how academics view investigative methods into IKS, namely that IKS practitioners and scholars need to provide a mass of evidence of their claims to the sceptics of IKS. To this purpose a Bachelor in IKS has been introduced at some universities, such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal, University of Venda and North-West University.

'We take barefoot professors, organic professors, for them to participate in shaping the minds of those young people with their world views and creating a new basis, a new foundation, of that epistemology [theory of knowledge],' Seleti said.

IK practitioners held discussions to determine for themselves what competencies should be incorporated into a Bachelor in IK. This was followed by a discussion with the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA), setting down criteria for qualifications. These will soon be going into legislation to be discussed in parliament. The proposed IKS Act will include collective intellectual property rights, but not individual rights.

Auf der Heyde emphasised that the department would continue to look at what it could do in terms of strengthening the frameworks, the policies, the platforms and the institutions, which was its primary role. But, he said, the department's primary role was not to act as activists within the community and to run community-based organisations (CBOs). That was the role of the IKS community and academics.

And we are on it, declared Professor Odora Hoppers, the convenor and driver behind this initiative. ■

