

IKNotes

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Eritrea: The Process of Capturing Indigenous Knowledge

Located in the horn of Africa, Eritrea comprises six regions and over nine distinct ethnic peoples (Tigrigna, Tigre, Rashayda, Saho, Bilen, Hidareb, Kunama, Nara, Afar)—each with its own indigenous culture and traditional practices.

While indigenous knowledge (IK) is embedded in community practices, institutions, relationships and rituals, it is often difficult to discern due to its tacit nature. With the rapid increase in globalization, many countries and development organizations have recently recognized the threat of losing IK and are putting together initiatives aimed at the preservation and revitalization of this valuable resource.

In 1982, a group of Eritreans organized themselves and launched a scheme to identify and document their local knowledge. The objective of the twenty-year effort was to identify and understand the IK of the Eritrean peoples in a socio-economic context. It attempted to examine the socio-cultural and economic activities of each of the nine different ethnic nationalities in Eritrea beginning with the origins of Eritrean society through colonial times to the current period. In this process, the purpose was to study the cultures and traditional practices of the ethnic nationalities and capture, categorize

and document these for subsequent preservation and publication. What is notable is that funding for this IK initiative was provided by the Public Administration Department till 1990 and by the Ministry of Local Government from 1995 onwards.

This initiative was conceived as being carried out in two phases, of which only the first has seen significant progress:

- Phase I—Collection of IK information
- Phase II—Detailed validation and analysis

Collection framework

The collection of indigenous knowledge revolved around the following steps:

1. Group IK into categories such as—

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land use, farming, astrology, cultural rituals, traditional medicine, family, etc.

2. Select a target culture—by region and/or ethnic group; identify IK bearers within
3. Collect IK— use questionnaires, panel discussions etc.
4. Validate—cross-check across panels, field visits
5. Record and store by category on the computer
6. Publish —delineate into public and private information; publish public IK in print (encyclopedia)

The Eritrean IK collection methodology focused on the study of one ethnic nationality at a time. The entire process of IK collection from one ethnic nationality took between eighteen months to two years. The entire IK collection process was conducted in four stages.

Stage 1

The first step was to determine the region that this ethnic nationality inhabited. A pilot study of some of the areas in

that region was conducted to gather general knowledge about that area, its peoples and traditions. The next step was to conduct several interviews with the district and local administrators, surrounding communities and village elders to pinpoint where the IK collection process would be focused. On the basis of the preceding discussions, the semi-structured questionnaire was modified or refined. This questionnaire was used as a survey instrument to help identify the important items of IK and the important bearers of this knowledge within each ethnic nationality.

Stage 2

The second stage is significant because it helped determine the number of people who were most knowledgeable within the ethnic nationality about its culture and traditional practices. The survey results (from the questionnaire) as well as the preceding interviews in Stage 1 identified this core group, which normally numbered between twenty to thirty people. Most of this core group are Elders, who have traditionally been the holders of this indigenous knowledge. The next step was to agree upon a time and place to convene all these persons for an extended period of time (fifty to sixty days) to enable the IK collection process to move forward .

Stage 3

Panel discussions comprised the cornerstone of the third stage of the IK collection process. The selected bearers of knowledge were divided into three or four different groups and panel discussions were conducted within each group for periods that normally lasted around sixty days. These were focused, intense discussions and the participants were provided boarding and lodging (in addition to a nominal per diem to compensate for loss of income) during this entire period. The objective of this stage was to assess the credibility of data, look for contradictions and finally to cross-check the information gathered from one group with information from other groups.

Stage 4

The final stage in the IK collection process was to carry out field visits to substantiate information gathered during the preceding stages. In this process, the IK collection team met

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would be of interest to:

Name _____

Institution _____

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Letters, comments, and requests for publications should be addressed to:

Editor: IK Notes
 Knowledge and Learning Center
 Africa Region, World Bank
 1818 H Street, N.W., Room J5-055
 Washington, D.C. 20433
 E-mail: pmohan@worldbank.org

with actual practitioners and the wider population within the ethnic groups in their actual real world settings. The purpose of these meetings was to expose each IK collection team member to the indigenous experience to enable data validation and further re-checking. If some questions had not been fully answered during the panel discussions stage, efforts were made to replace or add new members to the selected groups at this stage with a view to get adequate responses.

Constraints

In the twenty years of its existence, the IK collection team went through several crises—both social and political. The war of independence, conflict with Ethiopia, famine, the HIV/AIDS crisis and budgetary pressures have all had some bearing on the pace of collection and analysis of the IK process. The semi-structured questionnaire (which is the initial information gathering tool) is a living document and has changed constantly, the last revision being made in 1998. Eritrean society has slowly been changing while the experience of the IK collection team grew during the same period. An astonishing aspect in this entire twenty-year endeavor has been the strong desire by the Elders (bearers of knowledge within the different ethnic nationalities) to preserve and revitalize their culture and traditions for transmission to the younger generation. Contrary to normal assumptions, it was the Elders who never gave up. Their keenness and perseverance was instrumental in keeping the lengthy IK Collection process going.

Impact

IK collected over the last twenty years is mainly in the form of volumes of a raw data format. However, some sections of Eritrean society have managed to access parts of this collection in an isolated and sporadic manner, resulting in an indirect impact. Examples of usage and indirect benefits include:

- Asmara University faculty and students have referred to this IK collection in pursuit of their theses
- The Ministry of Education has referred to it for traditional education and preparation of cultural messages aimed at ethnic groups

- The Ministry of Health has referred to it for traditional post-natal care and exercises, child birth practices, treatment for 1–5 year old children
- The Ministry of Justice has referred to it for rich customary law, use of Elders and the exercise of traditional methods to resolve conflicts within communities
- The Ministry of Local Government has used some of this IK to help delineate the regions and organize the concerned peoples.

Challenges ahead

The first phase of the project has been completed. Several challenges remain—both in the consolidated analysis of the vast amounts of data that has been collected and also in the usage of the output that is expected to be derived from the above. These challenges include the following:

- The transfer of IK to the younger generation is slow for a variety of reasons such as the movement of the younger generation to urban areas in search of employment, increasing the influence on them of western society and values and globalization
- IK gatherers are mainly liberation activists with a lot of experience but little formal training in the theory of analysis and presentation of the results
- The expected studies have not gone forward as fast as expected due to a variety of reasons such as the lack of fiscal resources, outdated equipment, intervening conflict etc.
- The IK data collected have not been adequately coded, indexed and are often in a crude form
- Some of the data (specially from Tigigna nationality) are in the vernacular text and have yet to be translated into English.

Next steps

Of the nine people who started this IK collection initiative nearly two decades ago, only four are still associated with this effort. Having spent a large part of their working lives on

it, they are keen that the output from this extensive IK exercise be professionally analyzed and presented for the benefit of the Eritrean people. Eritrea has spent around 1.5 million Nakfa (approximately US\$190,000 without accounting for inflation and using an average of 8 Nakfa to a US dollar) to date (since independence in 1991) on this initiative and over 30,000 pages of data are available that needs to be examined. The immediate needed next steps are:

- Funding for and assistance from a multi-disciplinary group (comprising of anthropologists and other specialists) to validate and analyze the raw data collected to date
- Appropriate training for the IK collection team in an accredited university abroad (preferably for a year or so) to enable them to speak/understand the multi-disciplinary team's language (in terms of concepts and jargon), thus facilitating meaningful and effective interaction
- The involvement of Eritrean academia in this IK effort so that specialized knowledge about the IK collection is passed on from the remaining four staff to them. This entails the provision of appropriate exposure while building capacity and interest in IK within the country

The ultimate beneficiaries of this IK initiative will be the rural populations of the nine ethnic nationalities whose way of life, subsistence activities, cultural institutions will be more transparent to the organizations that assist them with services and participate in their development. Indigenous knowledge and practices gleaned from this initiative will not only provide a contextual background for developmental activities but also help in their preservation and revitalization.

For more details or information, contact : Krishna Pidatata (e-mail: kpdatata@worldbank.org); Tel: 202-473-7353); Ministry of Local Government, Dept of Research & HRD, Asmara, Eritrea (Tel: 291-1-121877/ 291-1-115534) or (Fax: 291-1-120014).