Unit Six

6. Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Practices

6. INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS (IKS) AND PRACTICES

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6. Definition of concepts

6.1. Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)

- **Indigenous Knowledge System:** is defined as technical insight of wisdom gained and developed by people in a particular locality through years of careful observation and experimentation with the phenomena around them. (Mangetane, 2001).
- ✓ **Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS):** refer to a body of empirical knowledge and beliefs handed down through generations of long-time inhabitants of a specific locale, by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings with each other and their environment (Warren 1991).
- ✓ IKS is embodied in culture and is described as an integrated pattern of human knowledge, beliefs and behavior.
- ✓ It consists of language, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, artifacts, rituals, ceremonies, folklores and gender.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS (IKS) …

- This culture is passed down from one generation to the next generation and generally it provides a holistic view of how to use natural resources based on traditional ethical perspectives (Atteh,1991).
- ✓ **Indigenous Knowledge (IK):** According to Warren, indigenous knowledge is the local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society.
- ✓ It is the basis for local-level decision making in agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, natural-resource management, and a host of other activities in rural communities (Warren, 1991).
- **The World Bank:** refers IK as a large body of knowledge and skills which is developed outside the formal system including development planning, environmental assessment, resource management, local conservation of biological resources, and conflict resolution (World Bank, 1998).

Special Features of Indigenous Knowledge

- **Ellen and Harris (1996):** identified the following special features of indigenous knowledge that distinguish it broadly from other knowledge. As to them IK is:

- ✓ **Local**: IK is rooted in a particular community and situated within broader cultural traditions; it is a set of experiences generated by people living in those communities.
- ✓ **Tacit knowledge**: IK is not easily codifiable. i.e codifying may lead to the loss of some of its properties.
- ✓ **Transmitted orally**: IK Transmitted through imitation and demonstration. Codifying it may lead to the loss of some of its properties.
- ✓ **Experiential rather than theoretical knowledge**: Experience and trial and error, tested in the rigorous laboratory of survival of local communities constantly reinforce IK.
- ✓ **Learned through repetition**: which is a defining characteristic of tradition even when new knowledge is added. Repetition aids in the retention and reinforcement of IK.
- ✓ **Constantly changing**: being produced as well as reproduced, discovered as well as lost; though it is often perceived by external observers as being somewhat static

SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

- Indigenous knowledge is important in that people in a community value whatever resource they get from the environment through sustainable production systems.
- These communities are conscious of the need to self-reliant in capital stocks and management skills (Mangetane, 2001).
- The knowledge of local people is an enabling component of development.
- In this regard; a large percentage of the earth's genetic diversity has been maintained and managed through farmer's IKS (Dewes,1993).
- Indigenous knowledge system enables people to develop strategies for handling household and communal activities .
- For example in Ethiopia Debo and Jige are an important uniting forces in communal activities.
- Members of the community unite to provide essential inputs, including direct labor to operations (Mangetane,2001).
- In general, indigenous knowledge is an important part of the lives of the poor.
- IK is a key element of the “social capital” of the poor; their main asset to invest in the struggle for survival, to produce food, to provide for shelter or to achieve control of their own lives.

SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE…

- Furthermore, one cannot overlook indigenous knowledge's ability to provide effective alternatives to Western know-how.
- IK offers local people and their development workers further options in designing new projects or addressing specific problems and wider disasters.
- Instead of relying on imported Western technologies, people in the developingnations can choose from readily available indigenous knowledge or, where appropriate, combine indigenous and Western technology.
- However, it is important to note that not all indigenous practices are beneficial to the sustainable development of a local community; and not all IK can a priori provide the right solution for a given problem.
- Typical examples are slash and burn agriculture and female circumcision. Hence, before adopting IK, integrating it into development programs, or even disseminating it, practices need to be scrutinized for their appropriateness just as any other technology. (A frame work for action, 1998).

SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE…

- According to Paula Puffer Paula (1995), indigenous / local knowledge can help find the best solution to a development challenges.
- For example, familiarity with local knowledge can help extensionists and researchers understand and communicate better with local people.
- Over the years, IKS authorities (elders) make local rules to protect important resources such as useful plants, water bodies, stone terracing, agro-forestry, watersheds and rivers, food preservations, conflict management, calendar, fallowing as a soil regeneration practice, etc.
- Needless to mention again, indigenous knowledge refers to what indigenous people know and do, and what they have known and done for generations practices that evolved through trial and error and proved flexible enough to cope with change (Melchias, 2001).

SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE…

- Indigenous knowledge passes from one generation to the next and enable indigenous people to survive, manage their natural resources and the ecosystems surrounding them like animals, plants, rivers, seas, natural environment, economic, cultural and political organization.
- In other words,''IK is relevant to development process such as agriculture, animal husbandry, traditional medicine, saving and credit, community development, poverty alleviation, and peaceful coexistence'' (Boven and Morohashi, 2002).
- Indigenous knowledge may help identify cost-effective and sustainable mechanisms for poverty alleviation that are locally manageable and meaningful.
- It increases and enhances livelihood options, revitalize agriculture, increase food security, improve health and promote a sense of cultural pride within the community (Kudzayi, 2013.
- Indigenous knowledge is used at the local level by communities as the basis for decisions pertaining to food security, human and animal health, education, natural resources management, and other vital activities (Nicolas, 2000).

INDIGENOUS CONFLICT RESOLUTION INSTITUTIONS

Intra and inter-ethnic conflict resolution institutions

- Conflicts and disputes exist in every society and community. Conflicts may arise between individuals, groups and communities within the same ethnic group.
- Peoples across Ethiopian regions have indigenous institutions and mechanisms of conflict resolution and peacemaking.
- Major features of customary justice systems, institutions, and practices are discussed in this section.
- There are different indigenous institutions of conflict resolution and peacemaking across regions and cultures in Ethiopia.
- Authors use different terms to discuss these indigenous institutions.
- The following are some of them: customary dispute resolution mechanisms, traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution; grassroots justice systems; and customary justice institutions.

INDIGENOUS CONFLICT RESOLUTION INSTITUTIONS…

- Indigenous justice institutions and mechanisms share several common aspects including the following:
- High involvement of elders at different stages of conflict resolution and peacemaking process.
- Preference and respect for elders known for their qualities including experience in dispute resolution; knowledge of customary laws, procedures, norms and values of the society; impartiality, respect for rules and people; the ability of listening and speaking politely; honesty and tolerance.
- Indigenous dispute resolution practices focus on restoring social relationships, harmony, and peaceful coexistence.

PRESERVATION, CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF IK

- Indigenous knowledge, which has generally been passed from generation to generation by word of mouth,
- is in danger of being lost unless it is formally documented and preserved.
- The future of IK, that reflects many generations of experience and problem solving by thousands of indigenous people across the globe, is uncertain (Warren, 2004).
- The loss of IK would impoverish society because, just as the world needs genetic diversity of species, it needs diversity of knowledge systems .
- The rapid change in the way of life of local communities has largely accounted for the loss of IK. (Labelle, 1997).
- IK can also be eroded by wider economic and social forces. Pressure on indigenous peoples to integrate with larger societies is often great and, as they become more integrated,
- the social structures pressure by multinational agrochemical companies eager to break into new markets (Thrupp, 1989).

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF IK

Regarding the **challenges and limitations of IK**, Amare (2009) states the following :

- Although the knowledge of indigenous communities has been found to be very useful, the, exploitation of natural resources, and increased competition for employment, has set off a problematic chain of events.
- This modernization has influenced indigenous traditional spread of industrialization threatens the preservation and continued development of IK systems (Sherpa, 2005).
- Industrialization, along with its attendant processes of urbanization African which generate IK and practices can break down.
- Added to this is the commercial society in many ways and Ethiopia is no exception.

LEGAL PLURALISM

- **Legal pluralism:** refers to the existence of two or more legal or justice systems in a given society or country.
- Legal pluralism: indicates the co-existence of multiple legal systems working side-by-side in the same society.
- Legal pluralism is evident in the Ethiopian context.
- Multiple legal institutions, including customary laws and courts, state laws and courts, and religious laws and courts (e.g., the Sharia Law) work side-by-side in most parts of the country.
- The FDRE Constitution provides ample space for religious and customary laws and courts to address personal and family cases.
- Legal pluralism is a pervasive phenomenon in Ethiopia. This is because a single legal system does not have a capability to address all legal cases and maintaining peace and order.
- the following justice institutions work side-by-side in most parts of the country, especially in remote and rural areas: state/formal justice institutions, customary justice institutions, and religious courts.

Intra and inter-ethnic conflict resolution institutions

- Conflicts and disputes exist in every society and community.
- Conflicts may arise between individuals, groups and communities within the same ethnic group.
- In some cases conflicts may involve groups from different ethnic background.
- Peoples across Ethiopian regions have indigenous institutions and mechanisms of conflict resolution and peacemaking.
- These institutions are parts of indigenous systems of governance.
- Major features of customary justice systems, institutions, and practices are discussed in this section.
- As Ethiopia is a big multicultural country, we need to discuss these issues taking some examples.
- You, as a student, are expected to read different materials and discuss issues with your classmates to expand your knowledge.

Intra and inter-ethnic conflict resolution institutions…

- There are different indigenous institutions of conflict resolution and peacemaking across regions and cultures in Ethiopia.
- Authors use different terms to discuss these indigenous institutions.
- The following are some of them: customary dispute resolution mechanisms; traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution; grassroots justice systems; and customary justice institutions.
- Study findings reveal variations and similarities among indigenous institutions of conflict resolution in Ethiopia.
- Indigenous justice institutions and mechanisms share several common aspects including the following:

Common aspects of indigenous justice institutions

- High involvement of elders at different stages of conflict resolution and peacemaking process.
- Preference and respect for elders known for their qualities including experience in dispute resolution; knowledge of customary laws, procedures, norms and values of the society; impartiality, respect for rules and people; the ability of listening and speaking politely; honesty and tolerance.
- Indigenous dispute resolution practices focus on restoring social relationships, harmony, and peaceful coexistence.
- Indigenous justice systems also have differences in terms of hierarchies, procedures and level of complexities.
- The compositions and responsibilities of council of elders also vary from society to society.
- Getachew Assefa and Alula Pankhurst (2008) have outlined ten major characteristics of indigenous dispute resolution in Ethiopia.
- Public participation, voluntary and consensual proceedings, and forgiveness and compensation are among the major features listed by the authors.

Indigenous/customary justice institutions

- Indigenous/customary justice institutions have been widely used across Ethiopian regions and cultures.
- With some exceptions, customary justice institutions include three major components. The three components are:

  1) customary laws,

  2) council of elders, and

  3) customary courts or assemblies.

- *Customary law: it* refers to a body of rules, norms, and a set of moral values that serve as a wider framework for human conduct and social interactions.
- In most cases, customary laws are available orally.
- Some customary laws are published in recent years.

Customary Law…

- For example, the Sebat Bet Gurage published their customary law named *Kitcha: The Gurage Customary Law* in 1998.
- ***2. Council of elders:*** *It* is the second important institution of customary justice systems.
  - The council of elders embraces highly respected and well-experienced community members who have a detail knowledge of the customary laws.
  - Members of the elder's council are also known for their personal qualities such as truthfulness and experience in settling conflicts.
  - Elders often serve their communities on voluntary basis without any payment.
  - The number of the elders varies based on the nature of the case.

3. *CUSTOMARY COURTS*

- *Customary courts:* are public assemblies that serve two major purposes:

(a) hearing, discussing and settling disputes, and

(b) revising, adapting, and making laws.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF CUSTOMARY JUSTICE SYSTEMS/INSTITUTIONS

Strengths of customary justice institutions

- Incur limited cost in terms of time and resources/money; elders do not request payment for their services;
- fines and compensation are relatively small;
- Conflict resolution process are held in public spaces in the community;
- different parties (victims, offenders and community members) participate in the process;
- decisions are communicated in public;
- Decisions are easily enforced through community-based sanctions including social exclusion;
- compliance ensured through blessings and the threat of curses;
- Customary systems aimed at restoring community cohesion, social relations, collective spirit and social solidarity
- Rely on respect for elders, the tradition of forgiveness, transferring compensations, embedded in indigenous beliefs

Limitations of customary justice institutions

- Limitations related to protecting and safeguarding women's rights.
- Indigenous justice institutions are dominated by men.
- For example, the council of elders are not open to elderly women.
- Women are excluded from participation at customary courts and assemblies with a few exceptions.
- Indigenous institutions of dispute resolution and peacemaking are effective to resolve dispute and restore peace within the same ethnic group.
- Their potential in resolving inter-ethnic conflicts and restoring long-lasting peace is very limited.

THE END