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Indigenous Knowledge: the East Africa-South Asia Learning Exchange

An Example of South-South Cooperation

In March 2002, a multi-sectoral team of 33 World Bank staff from the Africa Region embarked on a learning tour of five East Asian countries — Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam — in order to better understand the Asian development process. The main objective of pioneering learning across regions was to enable staff to provide better quality service to clients by helping expand their knowledge of successful development practices, and by enhancing their behavioral skills in adapting good practices from one region to another.

Inspired by the success of the pilot study tour, the Africa Region embarked on an initiative to build cross-regional partnerships between E. Africa and S. Asia seeking to integrate indigenous knowledge and practices into Bank-supported operations. The aim was to leverage the experience of IK good practices from South Asia into Bank-supported projects in East Africa. This would also help foster new partnerships for South-South dialogue, cooperation and technical assistance.

The focus was on indigenous knowledge as it is a key element of the social capital of the poor, assisting them in their struggle to improve their livelihoods. For example, farmers have used organic fertilizers to increase soil fertility in parts of Asia and Africa for centuries; similarly, local healers have used medicinal plants in India and Tanzania to treat common human and animal diseases.

Many local organizations, institutions and communities have a wealth of knowledge of IK practices. However, these practices are not disseminated effectively because community-based organizations lack the capacity to capture, document, validate and share them. As a result, IK is underutilized in the development process, and local communities are constrained in their

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ability to shape the debate on development priorities and lack the means to achieve them. To bridge the knowledge gap, the Africa Region organized a cross regional IK learning exchange between East Africa and South Asia.

The first step was to identify potential projects in South Asia and East Africa that had either already developed effective IK components to promote community driven development and those lacking these elements. The purpose was to match knowledge-seeking communities with those having made effective use of their local assets for development.

Proposed activities

The cross-regional partnership is being built in four phases. The first phase will build linkages between the East African and South Asian projects. The second phase will involve a learning exposure for project personnel and CBO partners from project communities on actual project sites in India and Sri Lanka. The third phase will focus on building capacity for integrating IK into project activities and strengthening country-level initiatives in the East African projects. The fourth phase will help the projects to continue the partnership for further cooperation and learning. The activities are designed in these four phases to emphasize the importance of building and continuing the partnership rather than merely undertaking study tours.

Phase I. Building linkages

Mapping exercise. The first activity to be undertaken was to identify nodal persons from each of the participating projects and develop shared perceptions on the purpose of the initiative and role of the partners. Information and guidelines already available on integrating IK and practices into project planning and implementation were shared with the projects.

Initiating dialogue. Contacts between the various partners was initiated and initial information on the initiative was exchanged. The use of IT for exchange of information was encouraged. Those projects already having web sites will be encouraged to post IK-related information and the progress that has already been made in identifying the IK and practices. If needed, a common web page for the partnership will be created to link to project specific information.

Finding a facilitator. Given the broad range of clients and variety of topics to be covered during the exchange, it was necessary to identify a facilitator to ensure a structured learning process during the exchange. The Executive Director, Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) was selected as an appropriate facilitator.

Video conference and exchange of information. A video conference was arranged involving all participating clients where specific information on the use of IK (case studies) was presented and discussed. This gave them an opportunity to understand the importance of IK and to voice their opinions on what they hoped to get out of the exchange, thereby giving the organizers an opportunity to design the study tour in way that met the needs of the clients. A separate video conference was held with the facilitator, to familiarize him with the planned activities and agree upon a modus operandi.

Phase II. Learning exposure for EA countries

In September 2002, a group of clients (16 development practitioners) from Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, accompanied by 5 Bank staff visited India and Sri Lanka. The participants included project staff from early childhood development and medicinal plants projects, civil society representatives, a traditional healer, a parliamentarian and a minister. The learning exposure comprised of (a) field visits to selected project sites/communities to understand how the process worked, (b) interaction with field functionaries to understand how IK catalyzed the communities' environmental and social assets into economic gains (c) meetings with three State Chief Ministers in India to understand how good governance and leadership have led to relatively sustainable development policies.

Learning through reflection: In addition to discussions with counterparts and visits to project areas in South Asia, the learning exchange included opportunities for the group to reflect on their learning through debriefings. This learning approach, recently pioneered in the Africa Region, involves video-taped narratives based on open-ended questions designed to distill a "story". Over 5 debriefings the partici-

pants were encouraged to reflect on what they learned, how relevant the learning was in the East African context, and what adaptation to the observed practices will be needed to replicate it in East Africa. The debriefings results were synthesized into short video clips that are available on-line on the Intranet.

Phase III. Capacity Building at country level and strengthening country level initiatives

The participants from Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia developed Country Action Plans for strengthening the incorporation of IK and practices in their projects and also to share their learning experiences with other partners in their country such as NGOs and Ministries of Health. The activities will involve training and technical support to undertake initiatives using IK for development and also for networking with other partners in the country. Each country team focused on the following key areas for South-South Cooperation:

- *Partnerships and Networking* (mainstreaming IK into development policies, documentation and exchange of IK practices, use of ICTs for rural development)
- *Cross-Institutional Capacity Building* (institutionalization of traditional medicine, collaborative research on medicinal plants, policy formulation and resource mobilization)
- *Policy Level* (legal protection of traditional knowledge, validation of IK practices, integration of IK into ECD programs)
- *Grassroots* (integration of women's empowerment in all programs, involve communities in project design and implementation, use ICTs to link communities with markets)
- *Awareness Raising and Dissemination* (seminars to share South Asian experiences with national stakeholders, interministerial Meeting to raise IK at the policy level, press conferences to disseminate experiences to public).

The East African delegation felt that South Asia was more advanced in several key areas related to the application of indigenous knowledge in early childhood development practices, the conservation of medicinal plants and the use of ICTs for rural development. They were particularly impressed by India and Sri Lanka's holistic approaches to development and were keen to test some of these methodologies in an African context. In exchange, they also felt that South Asia could learn from East Africa, particularly from their efforts to tackle the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The key lessons learned and areas for future cross regional cooperation include the following.

Ethiopia

The Conservation and Sustainable Use of Medicinal Plants Project seeks to initiate support for the conservation, management and sustainable utilization of medicinal plants for human and livestock healthcare in Ethiopia. The Project is into its second year of implementation. Project staff visited a similar project on medicinal plants in Sri Lanka that is near completion. There were a number of lessons learned from the Sri Lankan experience that the Ethiopians plan to integrate into their project. These include the legal protection of IK and benefit-sharing mechanisms, documentation of IK practices and exchanges of experiences, institutionalization of traditional medicine, in-situ and ex-situ cultivation of medicinal plants. To this end, the project team intend to consult IUCN Sri Lanka on the Medicinal Plants Project and the Tropical Botanic Garden Research Institute of India on conservation and benefit-sharing mechanisms.

Uganda

The Nutrition and Early Childhood Development Project seeks to improve the growth and development of children under five years of age, in terms of nutrition, health, psychosocial and cognitive aspects. The project is near completion and a second phase is in the pipeline. A number of lessons learned from India and Sri Lanka are planned to be integrated into the new project. These include the integration of IK into ECD policies, integrated approaches to early childhood development, training of care-givers and adolescents in integrated ECD services and parenting, use of ICTs for community data collection, documentation and information-sharing to improve access to information for decision-making and market access. In this context, as a follow-up to the Learning Exchange, the Minister for Primary Healthcare recently took another official delegation to India and plans to host a regional training workshop in Uganda on traditional medicine. The Uganda National Council for Science and Technology

(UNSCT) is sponsoring a group of IK practitioners to visit India and Sri Lanka. UNCST also plans to develop an IK proposal for South-South Cooperation, with NASTEC - its counterpart in Sri Lanka.

Kenya

The Early Childhood Development Project seeks to improve the quality and education of poor Kenyan households, with a focus on improved teacher performance and community capacity building. The lessons learned from South Asia related to IK and ICTs were similar to the ones mentioned in the Uganda case. The project is in its third year of implementation and plans to also focus on issues that were being effectively tackled in India and Sri Lanka. These include: community empowerment, women self-help groups, income-generating activities, microfinance, multi-sectoral approaches to development and poverty reduction that involve the community at all levels of planning and implementation.

Phase IV. Continuing linkages for further cooperation

The last phase will have activities that will ensure that the partnership is continued beyond the initial exchanges and visit. Two activities are envisaged at this stage: (i) The South Asia and East Africa projects will access and use information on IK already available to them through the web and be part of a regional partnership that builds on IK and people's participation; (ii) The participating projects will also put together a newsletter on IK initiatives and participatory M&E. In case more than one project is involved in a country, one of the institutions/projects will be chosen as a nodal agency.

Client feedback

In a client survey, the East African delegation provided the following feedback on the study tour:

- This is a window of opportunity for opening up institutions to each other's programs.
- One can see the different options and approaches that can be used to implement development activities.
- Such exchange visits are beneficial in guiding policy objectives and targeting vulnerable groups; and help redirect efforts to move towards holistic approaches towards development.
- Participants should be selected from multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary activities to include legislators, researchers and community workers.
- There is a need to develop networking for both regions and also between the institutions that have common programs. The East African country teams should organize exchange visits among themselves.
- Learning experiences once documented and disseminated to rural communities can strengthen poverty alleviation efforts in each country.

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