



Good Practice
Infobrief



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East Africa–South Asia: Learning and Exchanging Indigenous Knowledge

The Africa Region's Indigenous Knowledge for Development Program promotes client/staff action learning through cross regional exchanges to learn about the impact of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) systems in development. The first such exchange and learning tour was organized in September-October 2002 between three East African countries (Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda) and two South Asian countries (Sri Lanka and India). The exchange involved several innovative features which are highlighted here.

The learning exchange included 16 development practitioners from Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda (i.e., project staff from Bank-supported projects in early childhood development and medicinal plant projects, civil society representatives, a traditional healer, a parliamentarian and a minister) accompanied by 5 Bank staff working on these projects. The group visited counterparts in Sri Lanka and India, including projects using informatics for social sector development.

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 five debriefings, the participants were encouraged to reflect on what they learned, how relevant the learning was in the East African context, and what adaptation 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. (Intranet Website is <http://afr.worldbank.org/aftqk/debriefing/IKLearning/home.htm>)

Impact on the ground

The East African representatives felt that South Asia was more advanced in several key areas related to the application of IK in early childhood development practices, the conservation of medicinal plants and the use of ICTs for rural development. They were particularly impressed by the holistic approaches to development in the two countries visited and were keen to test some of these approaches in an East African context. The IK Learning Exchange :

- Enhanced the capacity of clients in East Africa to adapt and integrate lessons of IK experience in South Asia into Bank-supported projects;
- Brokered networking partnerships to promote South-South exchange and technical cooperation in using indigenous knowledge for development;
- Provided Bank staff with an opportunity to learn about indigenous practices in South Asia and explore alternative approaches for scaling up such practices in East Africa;

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- To date, the learning exchange has led to the following specific actions:

Ethiopia is planning to: (i) develop a national strategy to help mainstream IK in development planning; (ii) replicate experiences from Sri Lanka into the ongoing Medicinal Plants project; and (iii) establish national botanical gardens for medicinal plants.

Kenya is planning to: (i) partner with the Child Development Centre (CDC) and the Sree Avittom Thirunal (SAT) Medical College in India for the early detection of disabilities; (ii) pilot three rural telecenters based upon the Swaminathan Foundation model in India; (iii) work with the National Institute of Public Cooperation & Child Development (NIPCCD) in India on an integrated approach to early childhood development; (iv) partner with the Sri Lanka Ayurvedic Drug Corporation on the use of traditional medicine, and with the Bank-assisted Sodic Lands Project in India on promoting agricultural extension services and women's empowerment.

Uganda took another Ugandan delegation to India to focus on cooperation in the health sector; it plans to : (i) develop a proposal for South-South Cooperation on IK, to be funded by GEF/donors; (ii) host a regional IK workshop in East Africa on traditional medicine; and (iii) take another group of IK practitioners on a learning tour to India and Sri Lanka.

In addition, as an intra-African initiative resulting from knowledge-sharing during the Exchange, Ethiopia is planning to replicate the Iganga/Uganda experience (leveraging modern and traditional knowledge systems using walkie-talkies to reduce maternal mortality) through the proposed Bank-supported ICT Capacity Building Project in Ethiopia.

Lessons learned

- It is important to include project officials, traditional practitioners and senior government officials in the learning team to ensure sustainability of the learning process and its translation into initiatives on the ground.

- *Optimizing learning.* Avoid the “best project site” syndrome if it takes several hours to reach that site because travel fatigue and attendant loss of focus impairs expected learning.

- *Government's role.* South Asia has demonstrated that an enabling policy environment (legal and regulatory) jump starts and supports valid IK practices to flourish. Without adequate government support and investment, mainstreaming of IK is not sustainable.

- *Linkages.* Strong linkages need to be built between the government, NGOs and local communities to accelerate and sustain this process.

- *Community participation.* Community participation is critical in efforts to identify, validate, store and disseminate IK. It is important to bring in the communities early in the process, so as to diffuse social risks and ensure sustainability.

- Documentation of indigenous knowledge and practices is key to its legal protection, benefit sharing and dissemination.

- Women as custodians of IK need to be integrated into all aspects of project implementation as key agents of change.

- *Complementary approach.* While IK can provide effective alternative approaches, it may often be necessary to merge IK with outside tools and technologies to achieve desired results.

- *Two-way learning process.* To ensure sustainability and a longer term impact of the cross-regional Learning Exchange, it is essential to plan for continuing linkages for further cooperation beyond the initial learning exchange tours. An open-ended two-way learning process which may not necessarily be in the same sectoral areas should be encouraged.

- *Role of the World Bank.* The Bank group should play the role of a knowledge broker or facilitator in enabling cross-regional and local communities to share and exchange IK knowledge and practices. This role also contributes to the knowledge base of the Bank group and its partners which could be leveraged in its developmental activities.

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