



## Twenty reasons why local knowledge will remain relevant to development

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## VIEWPOINT

### Twenty reasons why local knowledge will remain relevant to development

Oluwatoyin Dare Kolawole\*

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Local knowledge has continued to gain popularity among development practitioners in the last four decades. However, the future of local knowledge seems hazy to some academics and researchers, perhaps due to the methodological challenges in operationalising local knowledge in development research. Rather than appropriate its full potential for sustainable (global) progress, renditions on the relevance of local knowledge in development research agenda have largely become rhetoric. Nonetheless, this viewpoint outlines 20 pertinent reasons in support of the relevance of local knowledge and why it has a future in development theory and practice.

Les connaissances locales ont continué de gagner en popularité parmi les praticiens du développement au cours des quarante dernières années. Cependant, l'avenir des connaissances locales semble flou pour certains universitaires et chercheurs, peut-être du fait des défis méthodologiques pour ce qui est d'opérationnaliser les connaissances locales dans les recherches en matière de développement. Au lieu de s'approprier leur plein potentiel en vue de progrès (mondiaux) durables, les interprétations de la pertinence des connaissances locales dans l'ordre du jour de recherche en matière de développement sont devenues largement rhétoriques. Néanmoins, ce point de vue présente 20 raisons pour lesquelles les connaissances locales sont pertinentes et explique pourquoi elles ont un avenir dans la théorie et la pratique du développement.

En los últimos cuarenta años, los conocimientos locales han cobrado cada vez más importancia para los operadores de desarrollo. Sin embargo, algunos académicos e investigadores consideran que el futuro de los conocimientos locales parece incierto, posiblemente debido a los retos metodológicos que se presentan a la hora de incorporarlos a la investigación sobre el desarrollo. En vez de aprovechar todas las posibilidades del conocimiento local para el progreso sostenible a nivel mundial, en las investigaciones de desarrollo este tema generalmente se ve reducido a interpretaciones retóricas. A pesar de ello, el presente punto de vista expone veinte razones que respaldan la concepción de que dichos conocimientos son relevantes, señalando por qué los mismos continuarán siendo importantes en futuros ejercicios teóricos y prácticos vinculados al desarrollo.

**Keywords:** Aid – Development policies; Civil society – Partnership; Environment (built and natural); Labour and livelihoods – Poverty reduction

#### Overview

In recent times, indigenous or local knowledge has continued to gain wide recognition among development experts.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, few people are convinced that it is the best path to follow. Many African academics and researchers have tacitly recognised local knowledge infrastructures as an important component of human development. Although a majority of these

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experts lend their voices to pushing sustainable development, they have, in reality, fallen short of the desire to drive an endogenous development agenda. They thus appear to exhibit traits of anti-endogenous innovations and wisdoms through their actions and utterances. Others may have been indifferent or disillusioned, not knowing what to do or say about the “*disturbing noises*” and “*works of the rhizomes*” (Milovanovic 1997). Nonetheless, the incessant advocacy for a shift in the development paradigm in a bid to save the planet engenders the need for new and radical development thinking. Indeed, the current emphasis on environmental protection, biodiversity conservation, and economic progress that is cognisant of equity and efficient resource use, all of which are enshrined in sustainable development, demands that development is pro-poor and people-centred. Regardless of whether or not our action or inaction leads to the labelling of indigenous knowledge as inferior to Western science (Sillitoe and Marzano 2009), the thought patterns of some elite academics and researchers might be difficult to alter. Local knowledge has a crucial role to play in any development agenda. This viewpoint outlines 20 pertinent reasons why local knowledge will continue to perpetuate itself now and in the future.

## **Twenty reasons why local knowledge will remain relevant**

### ***Usage preference***

Local problems often demand local solutions. The peculiarity of places and people necessitates the deployment of context-specific approaches and strategies for overcoming ecological and cultural challenges, which threaten people’s well-being and survival. Paradoxically, modernity surreptitiously drives the desire for the preservation of indigenous peoples’ cultures. As pointed out elsewhere, “[r]egardless of the degree to which they have embraced modernity, local people continue to prefer concrete knowledge, which belongs to them in time and space” (Kolawole 2001). Over the years, research and observational evidence continues to buttress this proposition (Kolawole 2012a, 2001). In the midst of growing technological advancement and modernisation, local wisdom still finds expression in many forms, even in the most complex urban societies.

### ***Familiarity with own products***

It is easier to use and improve one’s own product than others’. The drive towards the application and use of indigenous innovations and technologies is stronger among local people when compared with the use of modern technologies. This is particularly so for innovations which appear intimidating, tricky, and complex in terms of use, application, and delicateness. Regardless of whether they are seen as modern or otherwise, people generally refrain from using technologies and hardware which they are not familiar with. A sizeable number of well-read people and even academics who had their educational training before the computer and internet revolutions now find it difficult to use some of the new electronic technologies pervading modern-day societies. Ultimately, the fear of the unknown associated with certain value orientations such as traditionalism is one factor influencing local people to stick to their cultural practices.

### ***Adaptability***

Local knowledge is easily and locally adaptable; its development is ecologically induced. While the adaptability of local technologies and innovations enhances their sustainability, their sustainability in turn engenders their perpetuity.

### ***Pure local content***

The development and use of local knowledge innovations centre on local resources. This makes it easier for indigenous peoples to adapt to certain local conditions, and in the process become resilient to daunting life challenges. Local innovations are largely informed by the natural resources available to a people within a local space.

### ***Lack of financial capital and other related challenges***

Many local people are financially poor. It is, therefore, more rational for them to use local products, which are relatively cheaper than imported items. In a bid to circumvent the socio-economic challenges with which they are constantly faced, community people devise local strategies to overcome certain development problems peculiar to their immediate environment in a given time frame. Thus exigencies continue to compel local people to gain *awareness* about a particular phenomenon (e.g. soil erosion or pest invasion) in their surroundings. This makes them exhibit certain *perceptions* about the phenomenon as either constituting a problem or not, and whether it requires urgent actions or not depending on its perceived magnitude. Where the people consider the phenomenon as a threat, they gain *motivations* to address the problem by embarking on a process of *experimentation* to create a platform for result *evaluation* in order to gain insight into the efficacy or otherwise of the trial being carried out. Ultimately, if the people adjudged the local technology as worth trying out, they go a step further to ensure the *utilisation* of the knowledge acquired in the process. This six-stage local knowledge utilisation (Kolawole 2012b, 1–97; 2001) is rooted in the peculiarity of the environment and local experiences, which further engenders the perpetuity of indigenous wisdom in any rural area.

### ***Habitus***

This concept, which explains how society is deposited in individuals (Bourdieu 1977, 1–239; Wacquant 2005), is a strong driver of people's willingness to stick to their cultural capital (both material and non-material culture). For instance, food, clothing styles, music, etc. are closely associated with habitus. Examples abound where immigrants in foreign lands crave and yearn for local food and delicacies wherever they find themselves. They seek satisfaction in local food at the expense of sophisticated Western cuisines that just would not appeal to individuals who are originally raised within certain local contexts.

### ***Globalisation***

This is a process seeking the entrenchment of international integration through advocacy for global economic and socio-cultural integration, which it is assumed will enhance the drive towards “glocalisation” – a term used to urge individuals to think global while acting local. However, globalisation can only achieve its goal of socio-cultural and economic integration when and if developing countries play unique roles in economic production processes, including the distribution of goods and services at a global scale without being restricted. Thus endogenous development and industrialisation are crucial in the drive towards global economic integration. Scholars pushing for import substitution industrialisation (ISI) may have originally supported this notion. The development and universal acceptance of local knowledge and innovations will engender a level playing field for all stakeholders, both in developing and advanced economies. To even out development as the West constantly advocates, there is need for the hegemony to recognise local knowledge, genuinely seek its improvement (wherever appropriate), and then let it be.

***Endogenous development***

Sustainable development stresses the need for individual countries and communities to look inwards. Indigenous knowledge is the backbone of endogenous development; it is the life wire and conduit pipe for entrenching and sustaining local-level appropriate technology and development.

***Identity preservation***

Local knowledge entrenches a people's identity. Languages and dialects form one of the primary means through which people express and preserve their identity. Indigenous people pride themselves in their unique identity. Given that identity lost is a people forgotten, local people put in place mechanisms to ensure the preservation of their culture. And as long as people strive to showcase their material and non-material cultures, local knowledge will endure the test of time. The creation of Oyotunji African Village at Sheldon, Beaufort County in South Carolina in the USA in 1970 by an African American known as Oba Efuntole Osejeman Adelabu Adefunmi (whose original name was Walter Eugene King) (Hunt 1977, 1979, 1–130; Goldsein 1978, 18) attests to indigenous people's innate desire to promote their culture wherever they find themselves. In Oyotunji, the Yorùbá tradition and culture is vividly lived and practised within the USA (Hunt 1977). The fervour with which African traditions and culture, the Yorùbá norms and values, are passed to younger generations in faraway North America underscores cultural resilience and perpetuity in a modern world. More importantly, the establishment of special study centres dedicated for teaching and researching African culture in some American and European universities further provides the impetus for sustaining local traditions. For instance, a teaching programme in Yorùbá studies runs at the John L. Warfield Centre for African & African American Studies (CAAAS) based at the University of Texas. Established in 2002, the Yorùbá Studies Program encompasses the teaching of Yorùbá language, history, and culture.

***Complementarity of knowledge***

The strength of Western knowledge is manifest in the existence of a local knowledge infrastructure, which is juxtaposed with universal science. The axiom "variety is the spice of life" accentuates the viewpoint that a monolithic knowledge world cannot truly prosper in the midst of many competing demands. Ideas seeking expression and meta-narratives produced in multiple sites serve as means to understand the application of Western science in specific geographical locations for the benefit of people and the environment. While the grand narrative has its place and role, the *enthymemes* and *works of the rhizomes* cannot be suppressed in a world full of diversity.

***Culture as the foundation of indigenous knowledge***

Culture does not make people poor; it is the lack of it that makes people impoverished. Culture bolsters community solidarity and cultural capital. Societal breakdown and disorder are not uncommon where good cultural grounding is lacking. Ultimately, poverty of culture is thus a precursor for the "culture of poverty". When the essence of a people's culture is lost, the people are like sheep without a shepherd – they are like a child who lacks guidance, support, and sustenance.

***Socialisation***

As long as rural communities remain, future generations will continue to learn and imbibe indigenous values and aspirations. Urban-based people and those in the diaspora whose roots are

directly connected to the village continue to promote community knowledge and values wherever they are, particularly as a result of nostalgia. They form voluntary village associations to promote traditional cultures, particularly in environments where cultural identities appear threatened.

### ***Boundary maintenance***

Local people take pride in ensuring that they stand out from the rest. They do so by engaging in closed cultural activities which remain inaccessible to outsiders. Individuals who are not members of the group are prevented from gaining access through the use of special codes, language, peculiar style of dressing exclusively meant for a particular assemblage. For instance, wearing red caps is the exclusive rights of certain chiefs in *Goemai* land in Plateau state, Nigeria. Infractions occur – whether advertently or inadvertently – when an individual goes against the norm and then becomes liable to some sanctions (Kolawole 1990).

### ***Ecosystem-dependent livelihoods systems***

Community livelihood systems are a product of local knowledge. As long as people are dependent on the ecosystem for their existence and survival, they will continue to use the knowledge particular to their immediate environment, for example, artefacts, basketry, textile, ceramics, sculpting, etc. All things being equal, local people enjoy and benefit from ecosystem services, while also in turn managing the environment to ensure the sustainability of the means of their livelihoods.

### ***Compulsive re-orientation and reversal***

Some aspects of humanity seek recourse to traditions in devising solutions to certain wicked problems. For instance, the efficacy of orthodox medicine is not always foolproof; there are cases in which certain stubborn ailments in the developing world defy Western solutions. Unable to find a solution to “*some complicated disease*”, sophisticated medics would advise their patients to “*go back to the village*” and seek local solutions to their medical problems (Hountondji 1997, 14). The acknowledgement by Western-trained medical experts that alternative solutions could prove efficacious in solving existing health problems attests to the indispensability of other knowledges.

### ***Resilience***

While certain aspects of indigenous knowledge may no longer stand the test of time as a result of enlightenment and technological advancement (e.g. the killing of twins in some traditional societies), a whole gamut of beneficial and pro-development local knowledge systems continue to withstand the pressure exerted by modernisation and other Western influence. For instance, no amount of indoctrination and campaigning can stop community people from strictly observing basic cultural festivities from which people derive pleasure and happiness. Even Westerners engage in cultural tourism to see for themselves the unique ways of life of community people all over the world.

### ***Efficacy***

Certain aspects of indigenous knowledge work efficaciously to the extent that indigenous people continue to utilise them for social stability. Invocations of certain traditional instruments are often

made with a view to maintaining social order and control within grassroots communities. For instance, there are still communities where stealing and infidelity are taboo. Whoever flouts the rule faces the consequences of their actions through stringent sanctions such as humiliation, ostracism, or a mysterious death. This efficacious nature of local knowledge is linked with the immediate point below.

### ***Failure of the state***

Institutional failings and government inability to resolve basic societal problems like insecurity and poverty lead to a strained relationship between the people and the government. More often than not, where (local) people do not substantially reap the dividend of good governance, they disregard state directives and exhibit hostile disposition towards government programmes. Naturally, lack of trust for corrupt and inept politicians thus warrants the need for people to seek alternative solutions to their problems. In the developing world, there exist community self-help initiatives such as vigilante groups in both rural and urban settlements where people wield local knowledge in protecting lives and property. Indigenous conflict resolutions have always proved more effective than government coercive approaches of wielding guns and other sophisticated weapons to maintain social order.

### ***The suppressive nature of Western science***

Science, surreptitiously or otherwise, labels local knowledge as irrational and illogical. Resilience is the strategy of engagement where a group of people realise that they are perceived as inferior and their knowledge infrastructure seen as minor literatures that subvert or question the dominant form of knowledge. Thus the notion of supremacy, which science and scientists confer on themselves, and the tussle between local knowledge and science, continue to strengthen local knowledge infrastructures in finding their voice and relevance in the development process.

### ***The emergence of complexity studies and cultural studies***

In a bid to find explanations to natural phenomena as opposed to the simple straight line model of Newtonian and quantum physics, the rise of a new group of scholars and scientists appreciating the complexity of the natural world attests to the need to look beyond Western science and explore other sources of knowledge (Wallerstein 2007). The recurring environmental and socio-economic problems confronting humanity in spite of the advances in science and technology call for a rethink in approach to finding solutions to the day-to-day challenges confronting the world's population. Meta-narratives as opposed to the grand narrative therefore find relevance and recognition in a world reeling in the stupor of modernity and its trappings.

### **Conclusions**

Clearly, no knowledge can exist on its own. Knowledges need to complement one another to provide holistic solutions to concrete and diverse problems. There is a window of opportunity for knowledge producers to allow grand narrative to complement meta-narratives. The story told today could ignite the idea for sophisticated but context-relevant innovations tomorrow. It is not only uncharitable to see no good in the "others", it is also parochial to confine oneself to only one form of possibility in the midst of many other possibilities. The 20 reasons outlined above provide the scaffolding for building an enduring development edifice for the common good. While it is plausible to see the strength of local knowledge in the development process, it is

nobler to admit that indigenous knowledge systems have their weaknesses as well. Seeking to enhance plausibility can truly be achieved where and when mainstream science complements local wisdom to advance local-level, human development. Among others, openness, effectiveness, compatibility, resource efficiency, and cost-effectiveness are some of the characteristics to which attention must be paid in any knowledge systems that seek to promote the overall well-being of the people. Ultimately then, policy driven towards the improvement and valorisation of local knowledge in any development agenda is an imperative in the twenty-first century and beyond.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

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### Note

1. The word “indigenous” is used interchangeably with “local” throughout this article.

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