Chapter 13

Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Zimbabwe: Some Ethical Considerations

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ABSTRACT

The chapter discusses the ethical considerations that have to be observed in the preservation of indigenous knowledge following observations that there is no documented evidence of efforts in Zimbabwe to protect indigenous knowledge from unethical practices by researchers and companies as they tap and use the knowledge. The chapter brings to fore the importance of ethics with regards to research aimed at tapping and preserving indigenous knowledge systems before the knowledge becomes extinct. Therefore, a review of literature was done in order to provide a conceptual overview of the importance of ethics, and measures that can be taken in the preservation of indigenous knowledge are also explored. The chapter recommends that policies promoting ethical practices in the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems of the indigenous communities, be put in place as a measure against theft of innovations and knowledge and the filing of bad patents.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous knowledge is critical to sustainable development of nations as an alternative to conventional knowledge, hence, it has attracted a lot of attention and debate at many forums nationally and internationally. This knowledge sustained the traditional or local communities’ livelihoods for centuries in various ways before the advent of colonialism. Scholars in Zimbabwe are indeed carrying out research on the country’s indigenous knowledge in the various disciplines such as agriculture, botany, medicine, education and governance. However, it appears there is no evidence of deliberate efforts in the country to protect the local knowledge from unethical practices by researchers and companies as they tap and
use the knowledge for commercial purposes. This can be attributed to the fact that generally “indigenous knowledge (IK) has been ignored in the management of information in Africa” (Ngulube, 2002, p. 95). Indigenous or traditional knowledge is threatened with extinction if it is not harnessed before the holders of the knowledge die. Since this knowledge contributes hugely to sustainable development there is need for it to be preserved for posterity. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss ethical considerations that have to be observed in the process of preserving and documenting indigenous knowledge. The importance of indigenous knowledge systems in sustainable development is highlighted, hence the need for the knowledge to be recorded or codified and preserved for posterity. The chapter suggests strategies that can be adopted for documenting and preserving the local knowledge.

BACKGROUND

The concept of indigenous knowledge (IK) has become a topical issue across the globe, as evidenced by the writings of Mapara (2009), Msuya (2007), Ngulube and Onyancha (2011), Ocholla (2007) and Twarog (2004) just to mention a few. Indigenous knowledge is essential in resolving local problems, to help in producing “more and better food, to maintain healthy lives, to share wealth, to prevent conflict, to manage local affairs, and thus contribute to global solutions” (Mkapa, 2004, p. 1). The term ‘indigenous knowledge’ is alternatively known as indigenous ways of knowing (Nyota & Mapara, 2008, p. 1), traditional or local knowledge. Several competing definitions of IK have been proffered “by innumerable voices related to diverse disciplines and professional interests” (Ngulube & Onyancha, 2011, p.130). Rajasekaran, Martin, and Warren (1994, p. 25) define indigenous knowledge as “the systematic body of knowledge acquired by local people through the accumulation of experiences, informal experiments and intimate understanding of the environment in a given culture”. The knowledge is unique to a particular community and does not transcend beyond defined community boundaries (Ngulube & Onyancha, 2011). Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it does not exist in written form but people are the repositories of this knowledge and are responsible for its transmission from one generation to the next, which makes it difficult to access since they have the prerogative to decide when to transmit it and to whom.

In the years before 1992, international and national legislation controlling access to genetic resources was non-existent; as a result, indigenous knowledge and resources were regarded as “the common heritage of mankind” (Prakash, 2004, p. 132). This resulted in increased commercial use of indigenous traditional knowledge and biological resources from developing nations. Therefore, debate at the national, regional and international fora became rife with developing countries expressing concern over the abuse and theft of their local knowledge by Westerners without acknowledgement. A good example is that of the ‘Hoodia gordoni’ plant of the San people of South Africa whose intellectual property (IP) rights were licensed to Unilever South Africa, a multinational company which manufactures home and personal care products, without recognition of the local people. After a public outcry, instigated by the media around the country, the anomaly was addressed and “a benefit sharing agreement was signed with the San people, giving them an 8% share of milestone payment and 6% royalties on sales” (Scheinberg, Norgren, Perera, & Alange, 2009, p. 3). While South Africa adopted an IK policy known as the Indigenous Knowledge Systems policy in 2004, which “seeks to protect indigenous knowledge, holders of such knowledge against exploitation” (Saurombe, 2009, p. 197), Zimbabwe has not.