Chapter 15
Indigenous Knowledge Perceptions and Development Practice in Northern Malawi: Lessons from Small-Scale Farmers’ Agricultural Practices

Boyson Henry Zondiwe Moyo
Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Malawi

Dumisani Z. Moyo
Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Malawi

ABSTRACT
This chapter discusses contested issues in development related to Indigenous knowledge, and conventional development practice and theory. Drawing on findings from triangulated field research including interviews with farmers and experts, participant and field observations, focus group discussions, and soil sampling; this chapter argues that although development aims at improving the quality of life of people concerned, the understanding of such improved life quality is different between local people and development experts. Experts emphasize economic growth as measured by per capita income, which is sometimes inadequate in explaining local people’s understanding of development. The findings of the study lay bare the underlying values of local farmers in northern Malawi that contribute to improving quality of life and living standards. Indigenous knowledge developed by farmers shows that progress is understood in terms of adequate food, fresh tasty value-laden food available for consumption and utilizing more than one part of the crops grown, and not just adequate income.

INTRODUCTION
This chapter sets out to unpack the underpinnings of farmers’ understanding of their farming practices with a major objective of examining and critically analysing the use and role of Indigenous knowledge.
in small-scale agricultural systems in northern Malawi. In this chapter, the viewpoints of local farmers are articulated bearing in mind that the differences between scientific knowledge and Indigenous knowledge may be very small. After all, Western knowledge is also based on culture and has roots in Indigenous knowledge that are Western in nature (Briggs, 2005; Thompson, 1999; Eriksen, 2007). The chapter thus compares and contrasts the farmers’ endogenous system with that being introduced from external sources, and draws conclusions about these approaches from the perspective of competing ideas about the purpose and nature of agriculture and development in general.

**INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE VS. WESTERN WAYS OF KNOWING**

Rural communities in both developing and developed countries have an extensive base of widely available knowledge which is indigenous knowledge (Lwoga, 2011; Riseth, 2007) that can be at variance with a body of knowledge generated by scientists referred to as western knowledge in its widest sense (see Agrawal, 1995). The importance, relevance and use of Indigenous knowledge in development theory and practice have been demonstrated by many development experts such as Briggs, Sharp, Yacoub, Hamed and Roe (2007), Chambers (1983; 1993), Orr, Mwale, Ritchie and Lawaon-McDowall (2000), Peters (2002), and Sillitoe (1998). The World Bank (1998; 2007) also acknowledges the importance of local knowledge in achieving progress in rural development. However, some of the importance and relevance of Indigenous knowledge in development is based on western ways of knowing as depicted in the term Indigenous technical knowledge (Lado, 2004). Briggs et al. (2007) and Briggs and Moyo (2012) have suggested that Indigenous technical knowledge including Indigenous environmental knowledge be re-conceptualised, improved and re-worked so that it can be more valuable at individual level, over time and space leading to development in practice.

Krätli (2008) notes that in a Sahelian ecosystem, with temperatures up and above fifty degrees centigrade at the peak of a nine-month-long dry season, where it is difficult to feed even sheep and goats, the WoDaaBe herders breed the largest cattle in West Africa. This is despite the unforgiving nature posing a challenge of breeding animals whose feeding requirements (given their size) are out of proportion with the capacity of the pastures. The WoDaaBe herders demonstrate development of a special livestock breed suitable for their specific environment that seems to be at odds with the scientific understanding related to adaptation of livestock to adverse (hot low feed available) climatic conditions that would otherwise favour a smaller type of livestock breeds. Development is seen here under indigenous knowledge in creating a livestock breed. In western knowledge creation of a breed is associated with scientific knowledge in breeding either in livestock or plants trained in western ways of knowing and such practices and training are directly related to and represent development.

Despite acceptance of societies’ utilitarian nature of resource use demonstrated by for example the WoDaaBe by some development experts (Briggs et al., 2007; Kratli, 2008), the dominating effect of western science and technology persists in some circles because it meets a need and provides a useful discourse (Eriksen, 2007), leading for example to the over-valorisation of the use of resources for the generation of monetary income. In this connection, if wealth in form of such income is not seen to be generated, the power of western science is (sought to be) maintained by the construction of crisis narratives where local people are seen to mismanage their resources in the absence of development experts’ interventions (Briggs, 2005). It is not surprising therefore that for many in the ‘North’ resources such as dryland areas in particular have to be managed in a rational, technocratic manner, as befits fragile and