

The Relevance of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems for Development in Africa

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Overview

This policy brief explores how African Knowledge Systems (AIKS) can impact the practical realities of the African people and contribute to the socio-economic development of Africa. It argues that the relevance of AIKS should not be limited to the realm of epistemology as it can be used to guide the way of life and practices of Africans. The brief proposes that we must move beyond the myopic view that AIKS is just an alternative form of knowledge to enable us to acknowledge that it is an entire system that comprises knowledge, beliefs, practices, concepts, and value systems that can better improve lives and contribute to development in Africa.

Executive Summary

The embrace of AIKS as an epistemological frame has and continues to garner increased attention in academia, policy and community circles. Indigenous Knowledge Systems have been ignored for a long time due to the dominance of the Western-centric knowledge framework. Thereby translating into the adoption of a Western lens of knowledge and practice across different contexts. African scholars have decried the superiority of the Western lens and the adoption of this lens for understanding Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Others have argued that it is important to move beyond reaction to action, that is, embracing Indigenous Knowledge Systems as a means of knowledge and practice (Olaitan and Oloruntoba 2023a). These different perspectives have led to the attention that Indigenous Knowledge Systems is garnering. However, this attention is limited to understanding AIKS as an epistemological frame that can underpin the ways of knowing. Chikaire et al. (2012) contend that there has been a significant rise in understanding the contribution that Indigenous knowledge can make to authentic participatory sustainable development approaches. This growing interest is evident in the various initiatives undertaken within communities, where they are documenting their knowledge for integration into their educational systems and for strategic planning in national organisations. Understanding the contribution that AIKS can make to development requires the acknowledgement of its transformative impact beyond knowledge. This is also in consideration that AIKS has many benefits for improving governance, medicine, technology, entrepreneurship etc. The myopic view of AIKS as alternative knowledge will only restrict it to a knowledge system, whereas it has numerous useful practices that can be applied to the African context. We must recognise the relevance of AIKS beyond just being an alternative means of knowledge production. Therefore, this brief argues that discussions on adopting AIKS must not be limited to the realm of epistemology as it can be used to guide the way of life and practices of the African people.

AIKS as an epistemological framework promotes cognitive justice by facilitating communication between what is sometimes thought of as incommensurable knowledge and encouraging the identification of alternative knowledge[s] (Olaitan and Oloruntoba 2023a; Fataar and Subreenduth 2016). By advancing a democratisation of the knowledge system, it transforms knowledge from its singular nature to that of multi-versatility, where different knowledge systems are allowed to exist. This enables the recognition of Indigenous knowledge as a legitimate knowledge system rather than a mere alternative to Western knowledge framework.

Emeagwali (2020) explains that the African Indigenous Knowledge Systems is a combination of different fields and intersecting ways of knowing and values, originating from societies that have established paradigms and lifestyles in their ancestral lands. Chikaire et al. (2012) substantiate that Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) refers to complex knowledge systems passed down through generations by communities as they engage with the environment. This includes technological, economic, philosophical, educational, and governance systems. The holistic-ness of AIKS is reflected in its fundamental nature, which is that it encompasses all aspects of life but is fragmented as no single individual possesses all of them. It is influenced by conventions, practices, rituals, proverbs, and oral stories and is rooted in the community, existing in the unwritten form but preserved in the oral tradition and collective memory. It is dynamic and fluid and is neither complete nor systematised (Dondolo, 2005, p.115; Nel, 2008). Nel (2008) contends that the term "system" is often used to describe IKS due to its holistic nature, as it connects and relates to all aspects of life and the environment, and also signifies the diversity of its properties and functions.

AIKS refers to a holistic system that Indigenous people use to guide their knowing and doing. It should be noted that it is not a homogenous system that applies to every Indigenous population, it is rather a network of systems. This means that every Indigenous population in Africa has its set of epistemological, belief, value and cultural systems. It is therefore important to correct the misconception the indigenous knowledge system of the Ijaw people, for instance, is the same as that of the Batwa people. There are unique differences between these systems even though certain similarities can be drawn.

The Potential of AIKS for Africa's Development.

There is so much potential that AIKS can offer for the socio-economic development of Africa. Dei et al. (2008) state that the epistemological capacity of AIKS, diverse ways of knowing, various understandings of the world, its past and present challenges and successes are essential components of the post-colonial transformation process, as well as the rediscovery of Africa's history and its historical awareness. Chikaire et al. (2012) highlight that the concept of sustainable development is viewed more broadly as an offshoot of Indigenous knowledge. African philosophies emphasise the responsibility of the present generation to consider future generations and honour ancestors. This responsibility recognises three elements in the human community: those who went before us, those who are with us here and now, and those who are yet to come.

Emeagwali (2020) asserts that Indigenous Knowledge Systems has significant impacts on the curriculum, strategies for development, job creation, sustainable growth, and social movements. For instance, she explored the potential of AIKS to frame the discussion on environmentalism in Africa.

Noting that within African indigenous religious traditions exist nature deities, several of which have connections to the natural environment. E.g., Osun, the Goddess of the river, serves as a guardian of water. Additionally, religious and nature-based belief systems and customs, such as the safeguarding of sacred forests have been developed in different regions of the continent. These forests have contributed to environmental preservation and climatic adaptation for ages. Indigenous communities have long held well-established knowledge systems for managing the environment and adapting to change, making them more resilient. This knowledge remains widely accepted among the populations where it is preserved. Chikaire et al. (2012) further posit that Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) have empowered and still empower various Indigenous communities globally to adjust to and endure environmental shifts and other societal changes. Additionally, numerous well-established groups that have intermingled with Indigenous populations have devised knowledge systems to effectively oversee their local resources. The environmental benefits of AIKS can be applied to the current climate crisis that is plaguing Africa and the world at large.

Agriculture in Africa has benefitted from Indigenous knowledge-based practices such as modes of farming, crop preservation etc. Warren and Cashman (1998) argue that African traditional agriculture is considered to be an Indigenous farming system that has evolved, with planting patterns based on local agricultural knowledge, expressed in the native language, and believed to be in a balanced relationship with the environment. This system is influenced by innovations from within the system and those adopted from other indigenous systems, as well as national and international agricultural systems (Warren and Cashman 1988).

Chikaire et al. (2012) add that before the introduction of synthetic pesticides, the use of plant derivatives for insect control was widespread in tropical regions. One environmental benefit of most natural products is their ability to biodegrade. Appiah-Opoku (1999) explains that the main Indigenous farming practices are intercropping and bush-fallowing. Intercropping entails planting different crops in the same field in a rotational manner. Typically, farmers sequentially plant 6-10 crop species on the same plot of land. The crop mixture usually consists of varieties with varying moisture, soil nutrient, and resilience levels. This approach helps to prevent total devastation of the entire farm in the event of a disease outbreak or pest attack. There are relevant strategies that can be adopted from the Indigenous farming system. Thereby allowing us to recognise the benefits that Indigenous farming can contribute to the agricultural sector in most African countries if embraced at the macro level rather than just the individual or micro level.

Current governance problems that bedevil the African continent expose the need for a new and effective governance system. In precolonial times, governance institutions were in place, leading to the rise of powerful empires, kingdoms, and chiefdoms. These empires operated based on norms, customs, and taboos that held political leaders accountable to their institutions, ensuring security, economic prosperity, and cultural pride. These institutions displayed essential characteristics of accountable and inclusive governance. Despite the philosophical principles, recent research suggests that the democratic systems of African governance institutions have been largely neglected. Gender flexibility in pre-colonial Africa allowed women to hold positions of power and authority within a system of matriarchy, creating a unique political structure (Olaitan 2020; Isike 2009). Evidence shows that African women were involved in the public sphere, participated in politics alongside men, engaged in warfare, and even ruled kingdoms as Queens or Regents, as seen in the cases of Queen Amina of Zaria in Northern Nigeria and Tlokwa of Lesotho (Olaitan and Oloruntoba 2023b). The structures and operations of these empires can teach us important lessons about governance, even though some of them had underlying inconsistencies that ultimately contributed to their downfall.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the intersection of Indigenous knowledge systems and entrepreneurship, presenting a distinctive and inventive approach to sustainable livelihood. The concept that many enterprises are founded on the rich knowledge and wisdom of Indigenous communities, embracing their customary practices, cultural heritage, and sustainable lifestyles, is gaining increasing traction. By harnessing Indigenous Knowledge Systems, businesses can generate economic prospects while safeguarding and rejuvenating Indigenous cultures. Ampumuza et al. (2020) argue that the transfer of Indigenous knowledge from the older generation to the younger generation among the Batwa ensured a self-renewing system for youth employment.

This signifies that Indigenous Knowledge Systems supported not only traditional employment arrangements through the existing governance system, where both Batwa elders and youth were fully self-employed but also facilitated continuous, self-sustaining resource conservation (Kanyamurwa and Oloruntoba 2023). One significant advantage of Indigenous knowledge systems for entrepreneurship is their capacity to connect traditional practices with contemporary solutions.

AIKS encompasses an innovative approach that can enhance the knowledge system by transforming how research is conducted in Africa. The distinctiveness of Indigenous communities necessitates that researchers not only consider the cultural interests of these communities but also show respect for their experiences, thus the necessity for Indigenous methodology. Indigenous research methodologies emphasise the use of techniques and methods rooted in the traditions, customs, and exceptional knowledge of Indigenous people. Indigenous methodology is primarily evident in qualitative research, but it possesses distinct characteristics that go beyond this framework. By acknowledging the various ways of perceiving and comprehending the world, Indigenous methodology can advance fairness, inclusivity, and cultural awareness in academic investigation. The primary advantage for Africa lies in its scholars utilising Indigenous knowledge and sharing it globally using unique methodologies and perspectives.

Recommendation

AIKS has enormous potential for contributing to development in Africa based on the above discussion. To adequately harness this potential, we must fundamentally acknowledge it as a legitimate knowledge system rather than secondary to the Western knowledge system. This acknowledgement allows us to de-centre Western knowledge systems and re-centre African Indigenous knowledge systems in the knowledge ecosystem. This re-centering will underpin the subsequent embrace and application of AIKS as an epistemological framework and a holistic system of life to facilitate development.

Furthermore, AIKS should be featured in discussions about how to improve the systems that guide the everyday lives of Africans. We must start applying Indigenous knowledge-based practices into our governance structure, agricultural system, education, medicine etc. We must move beyond fighting for the recognition of AIKS as a legitimate frame of knowing into adopt it as a way of life.

Disciplines such as the natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences should include a curriculum on Indigenous Knowledge to teach students how IKS can complement and, where possible, replace Western knowledge systems towards sustainable development in Africa. Governments and think tanks should fund research on how Indigenous Knowledge can better enrich the lives of the population with a focus on aspects of life such as finance, entrepreneurship, technology, health, etc. Efforts to build a comprehensive guide on how AIKS can inform practice will further consolidate its legitimacy. There are a lot of Indigenous Knowledge-based practices buried deep, such that they can only be uncovered through alternative means of research methodologies such as orality. Hence, we must embrace Indigenous methodology to gain access to some of the Indigenous practices that can help us advance as a society.

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