



IAIA
International Association
for Impact Assessment

The effective integration of the world's Indigenous and Local Peoples' traditional knowledge (TK) can significantly improve impact assessment (IA) and the sustainability of development projects.



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Indigenous and Local Peoples and Traditional Knowledge

Traditional knowledge (TK) encompasses the diversity of knowledge acquired and held by the world's 500 million Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

"Traditional knowledge refers to the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities around the world. Developed from experience gained over the centuries and adapted to the local culture and environment, traditional knowledge is transmitted orally from generation to generation. It tends to be collectively owned and takes the form of stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language, and agricultural practices, including the development of plant species and animal breeds. Traditional knowledge is mainly of a practical nature, particularly in such fields as agriculture, fisheries health, horticulture, and forestry". (Convention on Biological Diversity)

Men, women and children can hold TK. Therefore, it is linked directly to the groups who create it. It is important to ensure that its use in IA values and preserves the culture of the Indigenous and Local Peoples. TK is inseparable from the people who use and manage it.

The traditions of Indigenous and Local Peoples are a repository of knowledge that can improve IA by filling information gaps, as well as complement and reinforce contemporary scientific knowledge. TK provides valuable information that has not been previously gathered, and can save time and money during IA. It can also be used to assess impacts and identify suitable mitigation approaches. For example, for an assessment in Sudan, farmers' knowledge of soil fertility and texture was more applicable for decision-making than science, and it took just a few days to gather. Through the use of TK, project developers obtained the trust and cooperation of the affected communities crucial for the success of the project.

Numerous international requirements ensure that Indigenous and Local Peoples' knowledge systems are respected. These include, but are not limited to:

- United Nations Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples with particular reference to the provisions of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)
- International Labour Organisation Convention 169
- Rio Declaration
- Convention on Biological Diversity - Akwé: Kon IA guidelines for development affecting indigenous communities
- Statement on Principles of Forests
- Agenda 21

The World Bank, the International Finance Corporation and all the regional development banks have developed policies and guidance documents addressing how to interact with the Indigenous peoples who hold and manage TK.

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE SUPPORTS DEVELOPMENT

Most Indigenous and Local Peoples are not against development. Rather, they would like to be respected, valued, and involved in deciding how their territory and resources should be developed (or not) to protect the elements that define their identity (spirituality, language, culture, livelihood, and TK) and that are crucial for the resilience of their communities and preservation of their culture.

The richness and continuity of TK is threatened by the way development can affect its holders. IA practitioners and managers must therefore involve Indigenous and Local Peoples as active partners in IA, so that communities retain an adequate level of control and influence to ensure the permanence of environmental and social factors that allow to TK continue and evolve.

TK is a critical component of IA and development planning, since it is linked directly to the function and resilience of ecosystems. Climate change has amplified the need to use TK in IA. Without the involvement and respect of Indigenous and Local Peoples and their TK, development projects may not be sustainable. Affected peoples and communities may also lose their resilience and identity.

Many national IA policies and legislation now recognize the importance of TK to help ensure that the rights of Indigenous and Local Peoples are respected throughout the IA process.

FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW

1. TK, contrary to disciplinary science, evolves from a more holistic and integrated understanding of reality. The holistic outlook can enhance the integration of social and cultural impacts in IA and provide new biological and ecological insights.
2. Much TK is relevant for natural resource management. Principles developed by Indigenous and Local Peoples are in many ways as good as conventional scientific approaches.
3. TK can be used in education initiatives involving conservation projects. Where the local communities jointly manage a protected area, its use for conservation education is very effective.
4. Using TK, development agencies can provide more realistic evaluations of environment, natural resources, and ecosystem services. Involving local peoples and their knowledge in the planning process improves development outcomes.
5. TK enables communities dependent on local resources for their livelihood to have an in-depth knowledge of the local area that is essential for effective IA. With their knowledge, communities can often assess the true costs and benefits of development better than an external party.

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FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO

1. Use participatory impact assessment methods that include traditional customs, protocols, etiquette and decision-making processes that do not marginalize or demean indigenous and local ways of knowing. Ensure that equality, trust and respect are the foundation of all interactions and that women, children and all TK holders are involved.
2. Identify and implement culturally appropriate protocols for all aspects involved in acquiring, using, and sharing TK. These protocols should be defined by the Indigenous and Local Peoples and agreed to by all.
3. Use “do good” as a guiding principle in all TK and IA matters. The IA must determine how a project will effect the peoples who hold the TK, and include conditions necessary to maintain and allow it to keep growing.
4. Recognize the important status and interest of Indigenous Peoples as holders of unique aboriginal and land rights, and ensure that the development activity complies with national and international laws, policies, and conventions applicable to Indigenous peoples and their TK.
5. Collaborate with indigenous and local communities to identify their dependency on the ecosystem goods and services that development might affect, and to determine thresholds, major constraints, and high risk areas. Seek to use TK to achieve a lasting, net positive contribution to ecosystem goods and services in the project’s area of influence and to the resilience of indigenous and local communities.

FURTHER READING, EXAMPLES, ETC.

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