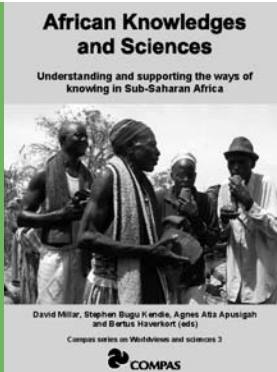


Compas regional workshops on worldviews and sciences

Dialogues within and between different ways of knowing

Bertus Haverkort

During 2005 and 2006 the regional units of Compas in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe have been making a systematic effort to assess the worldviews and ways of knowing in each of the continents. Regional conferences have been held in Latin America, Asia and Europe. The Indian conference will be held in July 2006. A finalising global conference will conclude the series in October 2006.



Over the past ten years, Compas has been learning through community-based studies about worldviews and the ways of learning and knowing of the people in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe, with the aim of developing approaches for endogenous development. This has been a very interesting endeavour. It has led to the conclusion that local processes of learning, experimenting, and teaching are rich, diverse and considered highly relevant by people.

Local views

To a large degree, worldviews determine the way people make sense of their lives. They condition the way people organise themselves, relate to the natural environment, make health care decisions, produce, process and consume food. These traditional views and notions have strengths and weaknesses. They can be used as starting points for development. In this process, however, it is important to use the strengths while modifying the weaknesses. This can be done through internal reflection as well as through dialogues with outside sources.

Knowledge in different cultures is not just a random compilation of subjective facts and culturally bound skills and practices. Knowledge within a culture implies a more or less coherent set of views, perceptions and concepts and, in that sense, can be considered a science. These views, perceptions and concepts have been documented within

some cultures and have been modified through transparent processes of research, testing, publication and dialogues. Scientists, spiritual leaders, policy makers and the public, as carriers and users of the knowledge, all play their role in these interactive processes of learning, testing and dialoguing.

In other cultures the dynamics of views, perceptions and concepts are less transparent, less open or less interactive. Not all cultures have a written tradition, some knowledge is kept secret, and many cultures have been overpowered by others. As a result in many cases the indigenous views, perceptions and concepts have been marginalised or replaced.

Series of conferences

The Compas partner organisations have concluded that many traditional worldviews and practices are weakening under the influences of dominant cultures. They observe that this creates serious problems for sustainable development and cultural diversity. They experience the economic and cultural influences from the West as particularly threatening. For Compas, this raised the need to analyse further the interrelations between worldviews, different sciences and sustainable development. Hence, regional conferences on worldviews and sciences were organised.

So far, three regional conferences have been held. In August 2005, Compas Latin America organised the conference 'Intra- and inter-science

dialogues for strengthening the sciences of the indigenous peoples in America'. In October 2005, Compas Africa organised a conference entitled 'African Sciences'. In November 2005, the European conference 'Moving Worldviews - reshaping sciences, policies and practices for sustainable endogenous development' was organised in the Netherlands.

In July 2006, a similar conference will be held in India, while in October 2006 an international conference will be held, in which the conclusions of the four regional conferences will be brought together and where an inter-cultural and inter-scientific dialogue will take place (www.bioculturaldiversity.net). The proceedings of these conferences will be published in a five-volume series of Worldviews and Sciences.

Latin American sciences

The Latin American conference was attended by indigenous leaders, university professors, students, schoolteachers and NGO staff. In total about 80 participants from different Latin American countries were present.

Participants stressed the importance of intra-cultural dialogues, especially within the communities, to revitalise indigenous cultures and knowledge. Education plays a fundamental role in this. Communities are eager to learn from and with other cultures, especially from the West, in the process of increasing productivity and reducing poverty. But economic development



should respect ecological balances, social harmony and local concepts, such as reciprocity.

Discussions focused on how to reform the public universities within Bolivia and other Latin American countries. The rector of the University of Cochabamba in Bolivia indicated the necessity to re-direct higher education to include intra- and inter-cultural dialogue. This requires new research approaches, and participation of other social actors within the university has to increase. The reform should be a social learning process leading to a transformation of the conventional university into an inter-cultural university, which offers both western and Latin American notions in education and research.

However, unless the indigenous cultures are strengthened and revitalised, and unless the indigenous languages and traditional notions of nature, social cohesion and spirituality are taught at schools, this inter-culturality cannot be achieved.

African sciences

The conference on African sciences welcomed participants from all parts of sub-Saharan Africa, including traditional leaders, people from universities, NGOs and government bodies. The conference made an effort to construct the African way of knowing, by revisiting traditional knowledge and learning systems.

The African conference acknowledged the need to strengthen intra-cultural dialogues. Many African cultures have to a large extent lost the tradition of self-reflection and internal discussion on identity, knowledge, systems of governance, justice and the accountability of traditional leaders. Identifying the strong and weak points of our own culture and traditional knowledge, and identifying ways to improve them, are necessary steps for endogenous development.

The importance of strengthening South - South relationships was stressed, though relationships with the North should be maintained as well. A policy report was formulated in which it

Box 1 Worldview of indigenous societies in the Americas

The traditional worldviews of the indigenous societies in the Americas are based on intricate relationships between the spiritual, social and natural domains of life. Indigenous peoples do not see the world as separate entities. Science is not a combination of individual disciplines, but integrates the natural, the social and the spiritual aspects as one inseparable whole. The traditional economy is based on reciprocity between man, nature and the divine beings. Redistribution of wealth generally takes place through a variety of mechanisms. These notions may provide an alternative to the capitalist economy that is based on individualism, exploitation and accumulation of power.

is stated that in Africa at the material level, poverty is widespread. Yet at the social and spiritual levels, Africa is strong and has something to offer to the other southern as well as northern regions. It recommends that the participating universities strengthen their own curricula with a focus on African sciences.

Moving Worldviews in Europe

The participants at the European conference agreed that the conventional western worldview is dominated by dualist and materialist notions. It separates mind and matter, humans and nature, the creator and the created, object and subject. This dominant western worldview is at least partly responsible for the poly-crisis in the world: ecological crises, persisting poverty, social tensions and insecurity, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. This worldview is being challenged from several angles. The conventional, materialist and science-based approaches to development are being questioned increasingly. Innovative individuals, citizen groups, scientists and policy makers are presenting new ideas on how things can be done.

Conference participants made the following recommendations: (1) Look at our history and reconnect with our historic identity: study the era prior to the introduction of duality. Germanic and Celtic roots of Europe can be source of insights about the roots of Western culture and ontology (nature of being).

(2) Go beyond the reductionist views of disciplinary science and include insights from quantum physics, chaos theories and transdisciplinarity. Include insights

from complementary sciences, for example in health, agriculture and education.

(3) Build on the wisdom of different social actors: NGOs, social movements, scientists, religious and spiritual leaders. Respect the possible differences and complementarities of gender perspectives. Explore complementarity between science, morality and religions. Strengthen links with artists: visual artists, painters, poets, musicians. (4) Learn from non-Western cultures: their non-dualistic worldviews and epistemologies.

Each of these domains requires different methodological tools. In order to ensure that western forms of science reach deeper levels of knowing, a number of participants proposed building a new western way of knowing (epistemology). This can be based on a combination of rationality, intuition, imagination and sensibility, and attaches value to dialogues across ideologies, sciences, religions, economies and policies.

Summing up

The increasing awareness of the importance of culture and cultural diversity is leading to renewed interest in the potential of intra- and inter-cultural education. Innovative initiatives can be found in the South in these domains, and culturally based educational systems, systems of governance and local resource management are receiving increasing attention.

These voices from the South feel challenged to revitalise their own knowledge, to reconnect to their own culture, and to bring about a development path that is not just an imitation of the western model, but that takes advantage of the strengths of their own values, worldviews and expertise. They do not claim isolationism, but expect benefits from South-South cooperation as well as from North-South exchange.

The English publications can be downloaded from www.compasnet.org. The Spanish publication can be ordered at agruco@agruco.org

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Box 2 Worldview of indigenous societies in Africa

In many parts of Africa, traditional worldviews centre around the relationship between people and their ancestors. The spiritual, human and natural worlds are all inter-linked. The cycle of life and death involves the living, the dead, the ancestors and those yet to be born. The transitions from one stage to the other coincide with a number of practices and rituals, for each of which trained and initiated traditional specialists perform certain functions. The processes involve knowledge and skills that are handed on orally, and these make up an important part of African sciences. In many African societies people have a totemic relationship with an animal or plant, entailing an obligation to protect that animal or plant. People with the same totem have a special relationship with each other that crosscuts ethnic, social or professional boundaries.