

# Endogenous development: potentials and pitfalls

Gareth Davies

This article presents a number of discussion points related to the work and approach of Compas. The author presents his ideas on indigenous knowledge specialists and gender in endogenous development. On page 42 some questions for discussion by the same author are presented.

## About knowledge specialists

The indigenous knowledge system in traditional communities is usually sub-divided into specialised fields. Numerous 'knowledge-holders' co-exist and operate in well-demarcated domains. Together these specialists conserve, apply and develop the community's fund of knowledge. Knowledge specialists can be classified into two broad categories: pragmatic and esoteric specialists.

The *pragmatic specialists'* activities are linked firmly to their physical environment, like small farmers, metal-smiths, birth attendants and brewers. As specialists they provide goods and services such as foodstuffs, beverages, tools, midwifery, and veterinary services. Acquiring goods and services from them may involve prayers, sacrifice, or offerings. These pragmatic specialists may participate in, but generally do not lead these ceremonies.

The *esoteric specialists* are the custodians of the oral history, the legends and the belief system of the community. Such knowledge generally confers prestige and high status on the specialist, who may also be entitled to receive tribute or have significant influence in community decision-making. Additionally, the esoteric specialist may be empowered to exercise direct

administrative and legal power over other community members, as a territorial administrator, revenue collector, war leader, arbitrator, or as a judge. Recruitment may result from birth and not from demonstrable ability. Therefore the training and initiation process may include assimilating the prevailing system of social organisation and authority.

It is, however, an oversimplification to claim that the endogenous knowledge system of rural communities is shared by just two categories of specialist. Both pragmatic and esoteric knowledge specialists generally require the assistance of people with other skills; a blacksmith may depend on charcoal makers and miners, for example.

## Old and new knowledge

Indigenous knowledge represents a precious, invisible link between a region, its resources and the store of experiences nurtured by the specialists in the community. The adoption of new practices and the dominant Western systems of learning and scientific investigation appear to threaten these indigenous knowledge systems. Both new and traditional inputs are essential within endogenous development, however. Constant assessment and the

incorporation of new phenomena characterise all knowledge systems.

New techniques should therefore serve to describe, analyse, validate and classify the beliefs and processes of the traditional knowledge system. Such validation can confirm the long process of observation, analysis and evaluation that determines each unique culture. It may also represent the basic point of reference in the process of exchange between cultures.

## Gender and indigenous knowledge

Within the rural communities certain activities are commonly considered appropriate for either women or men. Such knowledge and actions, however, rarely relate to any inherently female or male capacity; childbearing and nursing being among the obvious exceptions.

Creating distinct categorisation of knowledge and action appropriate for females or males is therefore a characteristic of the knowledge system itself. Even in the most isolated communities the indigenous knowledge system comprises at least three interacting systems of learning and practice. Women and men in the community each have gender-specific activities and fields of knowledge. Additionally, women and men share a 'common pool' of knowledge that is passed on to both girls and boys.

Gender-based knowledge is not necessarily only known by persons of one sex. Young boys assisting their mothers and sisters may learn and practice 'women's skills', but deliberately drop these skills when adult. Similarly, life crises like the loss of spouse or migration from home, may oblige persons to undertake essential gender-defined activities that are usually considered inappropriate for them.

Women contribute significantly to the pragmatic knowledge base of their communities through skilled management of available natural resources. Moreover, women may be the only custodians of certain forms of esoteric knowledge within the community, of its language, health beliefs or rituals. However, women may not be taught certain skills, and their status as knowledge specialist may be disputed.

Women with acknowledged ability may



Road sign Ghana: one of the many options in traditional practices

nonetheless be obliged to negotiate their status carefully, to avoid hostility and personal attacks. Such hostility may arise from the community's elite, from men, or from less qualified women. Salaried officials may also regularly harass specialists, such as traditional midwives, or food and beverage makers, for something like the contravention of public health regulations. In contrast, male specialists, who avoid any overtly political assertion of leadership or privilege, may be treated indulgently by the same officials.

### Of water and buckets

Pragmatic innovations by women often focus on reducing their time constraints and other limited resources. The decision to innovate may depend on positive social attitudes to innovation, on the recognition of her right to invest in new techniques and on the way by which she is compensated for successful innovations. Still, there may be differences in the process of pragmatic innovations, due to social and cultural differences. One example is drawing well-water by village women and by nomads in a semi-arid Sahel zone of West Africa.

In this area large-diameter open village wells provide the only source of drinking-water for humans and for livestock. Each year, nomad communities with livestock migrate through zones with agricultural villages. During this period nomads and farmers draw water at the same wells, from some 25 to 70 metres below surface. The women and children from the villages use ropes and flexible buckets to draw water. The operator stands over the well rim and draws up full buckets with a hand over hand movement, bearing all the weight of a full bucket on the arms, shoulders, and back.

Nomads too, use buckets and rope to draw water. Both men and women draw water for their herds and families. Additionally, they use a small, hand carved wooden 'pulley system' that is balanced on the rim of the well. This pulley supports the strain of the filled bucket, enabling the operator to raise it by pulling the cord on a horizontal plane. Draught animals can also be harnessed to the rope, raising and lowering the bucket as they move to and from the well. Surprisingly enough, over the years this pulley system was not copied by the village women.

This retention of the slower, more laborious water lift system can be understood in the context of the gender-based obligation to draw water (Box 1). Rural



Photo: G. Davies

*The water lift pulley on the rim of the village well is used by nomads, but not by the women in the village*

women have no legitimate means to obtain the more efficient technology. Moreover, using bucket and rope enables women to have a justified, task-related absence from the male-controlled homestead. Private social interaction and knowledge exchange with other women at the village well is socially accepted. The village well is a safe and relaxed feminine meeting-place.

Gareth Davies  
Clos des Rocailles 8  
B-1410, Waterloo, BELGIUM  
gedavies@usa.net

*Box 1 : Comparison of objectives, knowledge and technology of villagers and nomads drawing water*

Variable	Nomad system	Sedentary system
Principal water end-use	Livestock and domestic use	Domestic use
Daily water requirement	Major – livestock watered at well	Modest – constrained by capacity to transport water
Daily responsibility for fetching water	Men (and women)	Women and children
Water-lifting method	Rope, pulley, bucket	Rope and bucket
Knowledge of pulley lift systems	Endogenous	Alien but familiar
Value of effective water-lift system	High	Not expressed
Ability to acquire new tools and techniques	Yes	Constrained/No
Relationship to well site	- One site of many during migration with livestock. - Essential end-day task before corralling livestock and making camp. Short term functional resource-use relationship	- Only available resource - Well-site socially accepted location for women's social and information exchanges - Well distant from the male-controlled homestead.