

# Indigenous Communication and Indigenous Knowledge

by Paul Mundy and J. Lin Compton

*Development Communication Report 74, 1991/3. Clearinghouse on Development Communication, Arlington, VA.*

*An elder in a Pacific island fishing village stands in a beached outrigger canoe. A circle of younger villagers sits in the sand around the boat. The old man peers beneath the canoe as if searching for fish, gestures, hauls on an imaginary net. Too old to go fishing himself now, he is explaining fishing techniques to the less experienced youths.*

*The old man is passing on to the younger generation a lifetime of experience and knowledge. Knowledge of fish behavior, subtle changes in the sea and the sky, ways of handling nets and boats. Knowledge that means the difference between boats coming home full of fish and boats returning empty. Knowledge that represents the villagers' very survival.*

—

*An old woman has just died in this village in Kenya. She was the last person to know of a forest plant that could be used to treat epilepsy attacks. She had no children and no pupils. No one wanted to learn her skills. Now her wisdom is gone forever.*

—

*The agricultural researchers were satisfied with their farming systems project. They had successfully introduced a new rice planting technique in southern Sumatra. Instead of waiting for their fields to flood in the rainy season before transplanting their rice, farmers now plant rice seen in the fields as soon as the rains begin. The new technique, called gogorancah in Indonesian, gives the plants a head start; a gogorancah crop could be harvested at least two weeks earlier than a transplanted crop. That leaves time for an extra crop of soybeans.*

*The farmers didn't know, and the researchers sometimes forgot, that gogorancah was not a new technique. It had been used for many years by rice farmers in other parts of Indonesia. The researchers had merely adapted it for the climate, soils and rice varieties of Sumatra.*

—

Indigenous technical knowledge is a new focus in development circles. Growing numbers of scientists and organizations are recognizing that it offers cheap, locally adapted solutions to development problems, or that it can be melded with scientific knowledge to boost productivity and living standards.

But, as the above examples illustrate, most indigenous knowledge is not written down. It is held in people's heads, passed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth. But how is this information communicated? How do people learn indigenous knowledge? Who is involved? How is the communication organized? We have few answers to these questions.

Indigenous communication includes the transmission of entertainment, news, persuasion, announcements and social exchanges of every type. While these topics are important, this article focuses on the communication of technical information, since this parallels the interest in indigenous knowledge for development.

## Why Study It?

Studying indigenous communication is important for many reasons.

**Indigenous communication has value in its own right.** It is an important aspect of culture and it is the means by which a culture is preserved, handed down and adapted. But indigenous communication is being eroded by exogenous systems - the mass media, schools, agricultural extension, bureaucracies - endangering the survival of much valuable information.

**Exogenous channels have limited range.** Television and newspapers are largely confined to urban areas in the Third World. Even the most widespread exogenous channels, extension personnel and radio, fail to reach many rural people. Indigenous channels, by contrast, are ubiquitous. They are needed to convey messages to people out of the reach of exogenous channels.

**Indigenous channels have high credibility.** Because they are familiar and are controlled locally, indigenous channels are highly credible. Local audiences are often skeptical of the externally controlled mass media.

**Indigenous channels are important conduits of change.** Research has shown the importance of informal, interpersonal contacts in persuading people to adopt, or reject, innovations. Such contacts are often made through indigenous channels.

**Development programs can use indigenous communication to collect and to disseminate information.** Outsiders can tap indigenous channels for information on the local situation and for feedback on project initiatives. Many projects rely on indigenous channels to diffuse innovations and development messages. Some have made explicit use of indigenous channels such as folk media and village organizations. There remains much untapped potential in using such approaches.

**Indigenous channels offer opportunities for participation by local people in development efforts.** They allow local people to communicate among themselves and with development professionals and decision makers. Local people can retain control over local media more easily than over technology-intensive media.

**If indigenous communication is ignored, the result might be inappropriate development efforts.** For instance, planners failed to recognize the role of a network of "water temples" in controlling irrigation in Bali, Indonesia. This led them to introduce cropping methods and construct canals and dams that were not appropriate to local conditions.

<p><b>Indigenous communication is being eroded, endangering the survival of much valuable information.</b></p>
--

## Forms and Channels

Indigenous communication can take many different forms. Here are six.

**Folk media.** Folk media are the indigenous equivalents of mass media. They are used primarily for entertainment, but also to promote education, values and cultural continuity. They include festivals, plays and puppet shows, dance, song, story telling, poetry, debates such as the Filipino balagtas, parades and carnivals. Many have been adapted to transmit messages about family planning, politics and other exogenous topics.

**Indigenous organizations and social gatherings.** Indigenous organizations include religious groups, village meetings, irrigation associations, mothers' clubs and loan associations. Apart from the formal communication they permit, such organizations provide many opportunities for informal interaction.

**Deliberate instruction.** Parents teach children, craftspeople instruct apprentices, elders guide young people, adolescents undergo initiation rites. Many societies have traditional, often religious, schools. Most of what we need to survive, we learn not through the occasional puppet show, or even at school or through the media, but through deliberate instruction. This is true even in modern societies. Yet deliberate instruction has received little attention from development specialists.

**Records.** Many societies keep formal records - written, carved, painted or memorized. South Asian treatises on animal management written on palm leaves, ancient *bai lan* scripts on leaves preserved in Thai Buddhist temples, and similar leaves containing records of land ownership and tax obligations in Bali are examples. Such records do not have to be written: African storytellers narrate memorized historical epics and genealogies at length. Proverbs and folklore are other vehicles.

**Unstructured channels.** Indigenous communication occurs in many other settings: talk at home and at the well, in the fields and on the road, in the teahouse and coffee shop, in the chief's house and at the market, and wherever else people meet and talk. This communication is not organized or orchestrated but spontaneous and informal. The importance of such channels is illustrated by the role of informal networks in Iranian bazaars in the overthrow of the Shah of Iran.

**Direct observation.** Communication doesn't have to be intentional. A farmer may see a neighbor's bumper crop and conclude that the variety or technique used is good. Nor does the source have to be another person: a dark cloud tells us a thunderstorm is coming just as clearly as another person could.

## The Knowledge/Communication Link

Technical information can be transmitted through both indigenous means or through exogenous channels such as mass media and schools. And the information can be based on exogenous or indigenous knowledge. So we can think of four types of communication (see table).

**Exogenous communication of exogenous information.** This is the extension worker telling farmers of the latest rice variety, the school science teacher's biology lesson, and the village doctor explaining a disease to a patient in terms of germ theory. It's a necessary and growing part of all societies, and it has received the lion's share of research attention. But it's not the only form of communication, or even the most important.

	<b>Exogenous Knowledge</b>	<b>Indigenous Knowledge</b>
<b>Exogenous Communication</b>	Technology Transfer	Indigenous-knowledge-based development
<b>Indigenous Communication</b>	Diffusion; co-opting of folk media	Cultural continuity and change

**Indigenous communication of indigenous information.** Just as exogenous information is communicated mainly by exogenous channels, indigenous information is transmitted almost exclusively through indigenous channels.

The study of traditional communication has fallen to cultural anthropologists.

We can think of two types of communication in this quadrant. Intergenerational communication is the passing down of knowledge from father to son, mother to daughter, teacher to pupil. Lateral communication is the spread of information among peers and from place to place.

**Indigenous communication of exogenous information.** A new crop variety spreads without promotion by the extension service. Traditional midwives, trained in oral rehydration therapy, teach mothers how to use this inexpensive way of treating diarrhea. A puppet show includes messages on family planning as well as traditional themes.

Two main areas cover this quadrant. Diffusion research has focused on how innovations spread through a society. This research has shown the importance of such features as opinion leadership, the importance of homophily, socio-economic status, interpersonal networks, and so forth. But most studies have looked at innovations developed by outsiders rather than by local people. We know very little about how indigenously generated innovations spread.

Folk media began to attract attention in the 1970s. They have been used to promote themes as diverse as family planning, agriculture and politics. But they have two major problems when used for such purposes.

Though they may contain morals or substantive messages, they are primarily entertainment in the same way as are Western mass media. And audiences may resent the adaptation of traditional forms to convey development messages.

**Exogenous communication of indigenous information.** Indigenous information isn't often transmitted via exogenous channels, though there's great growth potential for this. One such area is represented by the growing scientific literature on indigenous knowledge and the efforts of Iowa State University's Center for Indigenous Knowledge for Agricultural and Rural Development (CIKARD - see description on p. 21). Another is farming systems research and the movement toward farmer-managed research. This allows local technologies to enter the scientific information system, and from there to filter through to the extension services or to neighboring farmers.

Another area of potential growth is using exogenous channels to help farmers to learn indigenous knowledge. Among the few examples of this in the developing world is Minka, a low-cost magazine for farmers in the Peruvian Andes that summarizes other farmers' knowledge. (See article, p.1) The "farm tips" pages of US farm magazines and the growing number of sustainable agriculture newsletters are First World equivalents. The potential for developing research and extension systems that draw on indigenous knowledge and farmers' proclivity to experiment is enormous.

*Paul Mundy, from the United Kingdom, is an associate of Iowa State University's Center for Indigenous Knowledge for Agriculture and Rural Development (CIKARD). He is currently studying for his PhD at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. J. Lin Compton is professor of extension education and international agriculture at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. This article is adapted from a chapter by the authors in a forthcoming book entitled Indigenous Knowledge Systems: The Cultural Dimension, edited by D. Michael Warren, David Brokensha and L. Jan Slikkerveer.*