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Mbuyu Foundation

(statement by Tarek Maassarani) Agenda Item 6

Thank you Mr. Chairperson, honorable brothers and sisters. As I am a university-trained anthropologist and ecologist, I thought it important to talk about indigenous knowledge as it relates to Western science.

Knowledge comes in many diverse forms from the wisdom of an elder to understand the cycles of life, to the logic of the theoretical physicist or the literacy of the bushman who reads subtle animal tracks brushed into the dust. Nonetheless, it is Western knowledge that has ascended to a global ideology at the expense of all others. And not surprising, since this knowledge tenders a monetary value on the market. In the industrialized world where the process of production and consumption is a societal imperative, the backbone of collective existence, knowledge extracts the resources, mobilizes labor, processes, and distributes the product. Knowledge then becomes synonymous with economic growth and progress.

Science creates a language to describe the world through a complex vocabulary of hierarchies and classification schemes. As a rigorous process that expands our understanding of the world by testing verifiable hypotheses, it has led to amazing advances in technology: from life-saving medicines, telecommunications, and computers to the very instruments of measurement that will propel science yet further. And the success of science lies in its approach. It is ultimately reductionist, simplifying complex systems into their component parts, scrutinizing them under the canon of a microscope, evolving through infinite lives of revision.

However, scientific knowledge is still a creation of the human mind, susceptible to the interpretations and partiality of the human that tries to interpret what her senses tell her. This very fallible science is rooted deep in the cultural context of the European Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and Western Secular Capitalism. Its development reflects the dominant values of the time, gender-biased and Eurocentric. It is reductionist to the same extent that that West has shifted focus from the community, the people as a whole, to the individual. Modeling on the perceived "objectivity" of the natural sciences, the social sciences such as economics and sociology arose with similar tendencies toward reductionism and a Western cultural bias.

Ask yourself. Why does taxonomy refer to humans as higher life forms? Why is fertilization attributed to the sperm? Why does the GNP not include the value of unexploited resources? Why do we not consider the rearing of children as a component of the "labor force"?

The following example drawn from a case study demonstrates the power of indigenous knowledge to be anti-reductionist or holistic. In Papua-New Guinea, indigenous peoples classify their soils according to combinations of characteristics that include moisture, organic content, structure, and others features that we may not yet recognize. Instead of dividing a cross section of soil into certain soil layers, called horizons, they focus on the larger plot of land and recognize it for its qualities as a whole. Their conceptualization of soil is not based on thousands of chemically analyzed soil samples, rather it has developed through generations of informal empirical learning and transmitted through a strong oral tradition. It is knowledge that is local and sensitive to the context of its application. As a result, this type of knowledge is also powerful, allowing indigenous people to instantly recognize what land will yield which crops.

So the lesson is two-fold; science is not the be all and end all. Firstly, indigenous peoples have been conducting practical experiments for centuries with results that are invaluable to the modern world. Unfortunately, this knowledge is at a danger of being misappropriated and commercialized, ultimately at the expense of its true proprietors. Secondly, just like agriculture, the world is a complex ecosystem where the relationships between parts are as important as the parts themselves. The holistic approach that indigenous knowledge has to offer is therefore not only useful, but necessary. Indigenous knowledge does not traditionally hold a conventional market value, yet it does incorporate a whole system of ethical values and meanings which regulate its use. Scientific reductionism has trouble dealing with complex systems and with the abuse of its own power. And where Western knowledge has failed in that respect, indigenous knowledge may be an invaluable asset.

My recommendations to the Working Group are therefore:

1. To strengthen the intellectual property rights of indigenous peoples under international law and the World Intellectual Property Organization.
2. To set concrete standards that oblige governments and UN agencies to inform indigenous peoples of their intellectual property rights and ensure their protection.

Accessibility is crucial for indigenous peoples both in the process of relevant decision-making and their recourse to legal protection.

3. To mandate the incorporation of indigenous interpretations into all relevant studies undertaken by UN scholars, research organizations, and University academic institutions.

Thank You.