

Catalysing Africa's sustainable development through university's community-based research: The role of Indigenous knowledge systems

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

Africa as a continent faces many socio-economic challenges, with a significant number of its people living in extreme poverty. These challenges have been exacerbated by natural disasters and the growing influence of climate change. Notwithstanding, there is an array of literature which points to the need and potential of African Universities to respond to the challenges facing the continent. This mission can be rooted in the premise of the ecological and developmentally oriented university, projected as an opportunity to accelerate Africa's drive towards sustainable development. We conducted a qualitative study between the months of February - October 2019, involving a selection of academics, university administrators and local people in Zambia and The Gambia to advance insights into the intersection between community-based research, indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable development in Africa. A cross-case analysis of the datasets depicted Incongruity, Juxtaposition, and Complementarity of Knowledges for Sustainable Development.

Full paper

Africa as a continent faces many socio-economic challenges, with a

significant number of its people living in extreme poverty. These challenges have been exacerbated by natural disasters and the growing influence of climate change (Eten, 2015; Hope, 2009). Taking the case of climate change, it continues to affect the agricultural, health, transport, fishery and energy sectors, amongst others, because of a rise in sea levels, powerful storms, droughts, heavy rains, floods and other extreme weather conditions. Notwithstanding, there is an array of literature which points to the need and potential of African Universities to respond to the challenges facing the continent. This mission can be rooted in the premise of the ecological and developmentally oriented university, projected as an opportunity to accelerate Africa's drive towards sustainable development (Bloom, Canning, & Chan, 2006; Mbah, 2018).

The ecological orientation of the university is one which leads to the generation of knowledge and engages in activities with the intent of helping to improve the living condition of the citizenry (Barnett, 2017). It is about tackling issues of concern to ordinary people in a given region and that might be useful in alleviating suffering or uncertainty. This mission of the university also resonates with Africa's philosophy of Ubuntu which permeates different works of life and exhibits a communal spirit of solidarity and care (Hailey, 2008; Venter, 2004). Given that most African universities operate a tripartite mission, namely research, teaching and service, we will take a closer look at their research potential in changing the continent's development landscape.

Whilst university research is pivotal for sustainable development, Waas et al. (2010) argue that to succeed, new ways of conducting research are needed. It is in this light we address a fundamental question in this presentation: How can the research activities of African academics be optimised toward sustainable development? In answering this question, we delve further to explore the role Indigenous knowledge holders and their knowledge systems can play. This is essential as in more recent times, governing bodies such as the United Nations have highlighted the need to include and protect indigenous peoples and their cultures in interventions aimed at benefitting them (Kaya, 2014; Magni 2017;). It can be argued that one cannot expect lasting results from community-based research

projects intended to contribute towards sustainable development of a region without recognising, respecting, and sustaining the particular views, practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, know-how, and other forms of intangible cultural heritage held by the people of that locality. Drawing on Freire (1970), such a mission towards local communities or regions without due attention to their knowledge-base can constitute cultural invasion irrespective of good intentions.

This presentation will therefore draw on a qualitative study completed between the months of February – October 2019, involving a selection of academics, university administrators and local people in Zambia and The Gambia to advance insights into the intersection between community-based research, Indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable development in Africa. It will do so via a theoretical perspective of the ecological university. A cross-case analysis of the datasets depicted Incongruity, Juxtaposition, and Complementarity of Knowledges for Sustainable Development.

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