

Learning from creative people: Scouting and Documentation of Grassroots Innovations and Traditional Knowledge¹

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Asia and Pacific region is inhabited by some of the most ancient cultures, which are trying to blend traditional values with modern markets, institutions and technologies. In this process of modernisation, the process of economic growth in the early phase, tends to leave out the disadvantaged regions, people and sectors from the ambit of development. To make the growth process more inclusive, every country in the region is looking for participative ways. While the design of specific institutions needed to achieve inclusive growth may vary from country to country, the need to learn from people exists everywhere. By building upon the creativity, innovation and outstanding traditional knowledge, each country would be able to include the voices of such people who do not adjust with or adapt to a problem for too long. Instead, they try to find a solution, no matter how sub-optimal.

Why is it that while searching for literature on creativity of common people and their ability to solve problem, we find such a large gap? Literature on traditional knowledge is primarily focussed on ethno botany, i.e., knowledge of plants and their uses with much less coverage of other sources of survival, such as minerals, metals, woods, construction, fabrication, small machines, transport, energy, food processing, etc.

There is no doubt that there is a tremendous richness in the local knowledge systems which remain to be adequately tapped. The purpose of this workshop is to identify some of these sources of strength through various methods that are easy to use and can be improved during the process of implementation. Therefore, despite all the variability in culture, institutions and technologies, the approach of Honey Bee Network would be able to deliver results. In a separate initiative, Society for Research and Initiatives for Sustainable Technologies and Institutions (SRISTI, www.sristi.org) tried to demonstrate this capability of Honey Bee Network (www.sristi.org) approach by creating online incubation platform for mentoring, monitoring and maturing grassroots innovations from India, China and Brazil to provide social technological alternative for employment and livelihood support.

Why to document grassroots innovations and TK:

- a. To learn from creative people about local solutions so that other people struggling with similar problems could try these solutions if available in open source.

¹ Paper presented at the GLOBAL GIAN: Building Global Value Chain around Green Grassroots Innovations and Traditional Knowledge, Tianjin - China, May 31-June 2, 2007

- b. To encourage not only lateral learning but also knowledge networking among creative people and TK holders so that they can collectively improve the efficiency and effectiveness of existing solutions.
- c. To empower local communities and individual innovators to solve problems that have remained unaddressed through sectoral or spatial knowledge networks focussed on such problems solving.
- d. To link modern science and traditional knowledge as well as grassroots innovations to produce sustainable products and services with minimum ecological footprint.
- e. To create a culture of innovations so that rather than waiting for government or other outsiders to solve local technological problems, people at grassroots level feel emboldened to try their own solutions.
- f. To help policy makers in taking the process of scouting and documentation to its logical conclusion by adding value, protecting the intellectual property right wherever feasible and necessary, providing risk capital or venture fund and create knowledge based enterprises.

The study of scouting and documentation processes is essentially a study of learning systems. There are examples of such innovations having taken place over thousands of years in the region. Honey Bee Network is trying to overcome the tradition of anonymity, lack of acknowledgement and in many cases the reciprocity and benefit sharing. Much before Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) or TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) came into being, Honey Bee Network had articulated and asserted the need for protecting the intellectual property rights of creative individuals and communities around the world. While a formal system agreed upon internationally has still not come about, the national initiatives have started emerging. Creation of National Innovation Foundation (NIF, www.nifindia.org) in February 2000 with the help of Department of Science and Technology, Government of India was one such initiative. Many more initiatives of this kind are called for in the world including Asian and Pacific region.

How to understand grassroots innovations and traditional knowledge:

Knowledge, innovation and practices are produced by people in the course of exploring new habitats, new materials, new needs and new institutional conditions. When a new pest attacks a traditional crop, the limits of the traditional knowledge system may come to fore. Either conventional pest control systems work for the new pest or they don't. If they don't, search for a new solution begins. It is in such search, that the seeds of new discoveries are sown.

Not all traditional knowledge is collective or even passed on from one generation to another. I have argued that traditional ways of knowing are as important as traditional

knowledge itself. Excessive focus on community based knowledge systems has unfortunately led to the neglect of individual initiatives and innovations. One has to balance the both. Within traditional knowledge, thus there can be innovations. Some of these innovations are triggered by introduction of new species voluntarily or involuntarily (such as the weeds which enter a system with imported grains, food or other merchandise). These are also triggered by introduction of new materials or even methods. History is full of examples where one country invents new methods, materials or uses and another country converts them into products and services for strategic or mass consumption. Chinese inventions of paper, gunpowder, printing and silk revolutionized the world. Yet, the mass consumption technologies of printing or making paper or for that matter, using gunpowder (discovered accidentally about 100 – 87 B.C. when sulphur saltpetre and charcoal were mixed together) were discovered elsewhere. The need for learning across the world cannot be over emphasized. Within traditional knowledge, there are issues linked with individual, community or public domain. Both resources and knowledge can be governed by such property right regimes. The interface across three domains generates contestation (Gupta and Sinha, 2004) which requires innovations in institutions and cultural norms.