

First international IKS and Environmental Ethics Conference

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The Department of Science and Technology-National Research Fund (DST-NRF) Centre in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) with its hub at the University of Kwazulu-Natal in partnership with the Africa Programme of the UN- University for Peace (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) the University of Rwanda (Rwanda) and Department of Science and Technology, hosted the first International Conference on Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Environmental Ethics, looking at the Implications for Peace-Building and Sustainable Development.

The conference was held at the UKZN Westville Campus on 28-30 April 2015.

Environmental Ethics

The contentious issue of discussion at the conference was interrogating the role of culture in environmental ethics.

The conference was based on the argument that while recognizing the universality of the environmental crisis, there has been a critique levelled against contemporary approaches by international institutions, researchers, academics including the UN to universalize environmental ethics and values.

There is need to break the western cultural hegemony on worldviews on environmental ethics, by making environmental ethics cultural specific and holistic in approach. Culture is an important element in inspiring and mobilizing people to participate in environmental conservation.

The conference also recognized that in spite of Africa's minimal contribution to the environmental crisis, Africa and its rich IKS tend to be marginalized in the search for sustainable solutions to the crisis.

The conference organizers succeeded in mobilising stakeholders from diverse backgrounds within and outside Africa.

Among the conference sub-themes discussed with implications on IKS and environmental ethics, were: environmental governance, peace-building, justice and human rights; climate change, food security systems and global health; rural development, sustainable livelihood and gender; education transformation, science and technological development and communication.



Delegates at the UKZN IKS Environmental Ethics Conference with learners

According to Professor Hassan Kaya, the Director of the DST-NRF Centre in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, the objectives of the conference were to create an international platform and network for interrogating and sharing views on Africa's conceptualization of the environmental crisis, especially the role of IKS in the development of environmental ethics and their policy implications on Peace-building and sustainable development; to come up with a consensus of strategies for ensuring that the outcomes of the conference find currency in the deliberations of the UN and AU on environmental ethics. It was highlighted that UKZN is the first University in South Africa and the continent to adopt an institutional IKS policy which has been endorsed by the University Council.

In his welcome address UKZN Vice-Chancellor, Dr Albert van Jaarsveld, said the international Conference was an important development for IKS as the University is looking forward to work with the Centre as a team so that it is soon realised as a Centre of Excellence.

This will be achieved through breaking new grounds and doing things differently in knowledge production. This includes attracting the international community and for the local community to be intimately involved in IKS development.

The MEC for Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs, Mr Michael Mabuyakhulu, who attended as both a panellist and

on behalf of the KZN Premier, said that the Conference is in line with the provincial government's initiative of Sukuma Sakhe which is about mobilising communities and building partnerships for sustainable livelihood including environmental preservation and protection using their own ways of knowing, attitudes and value systems. It emphasizes the significance of community level engagement. This is central to democracy and development because without community engagement there is a distortion of the relevance of the developmental agenda and the meaning of democracy.

Human Rights

It also challenges people to redefine the meaning of human rights within the context of the African value system (Ubuntu). As an ethical value, the African indigenous understanding of the environment and hence human rights is the symbiotic relationship between the humans and other forms of life, i.e. the natural environment. He emphasized the recognition

of the importance of the environment as a home and a place of work.

The environment is where people must take charge of their own lives based on their own ways of knowing, knowledge production and value systems.

The environment has therefore, to be protected and preserved because as a home it gives people a sense of location, a sense of belonging, creates a context for solidarity and identity.

Other prominent speakers at the conference included former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Venda and Board member of the DST-NRF Centre in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Professor Muxe Nkondo, who commended the University on the high level of understanding on the importance and role of IKS and culture in environmental ethics and peace-building in Africa.

Professor Palamagamba John Kabudi from the Law Faculty of the University of Dar es salaam, Tanzania, urged the conference participants to conduct more research on the

role of hunter-gatherer communities, mainly focusing on their survival skills in the natural environment using their knowledge systems, and research on the positive impact of Nguni migration on environmental ethics in the Southern, East and Central African regions.

Finally, in recognising that any initiative to develop and inspire the culture of environmental conservation through IKS must begin as early as possible, the participation of schools - rural and urban - formed a critical component of the conference. Significantly, the New Curriculum Statements demonstrate a strong drive towards recognizing and affirming the important role of IK, especially with respect to science and technology education.

Problem Solving

The transformation of education syllabi from a primarily content driven approach to one of problem solving creates further impetus for the central recognition of IKS.

This will further require that appropriate methods and methodologies for mobilising IK in various learning contexts be identified and used.

The Department of Education should take steps to begin the phased integration of IK into curricula and relevant accreditation frameworks.

The schools' involvement and undertaking to commit to IK advocacy in this conference could well be the catalyst from the ground to usher in this development.