

The time is now to cross the boundaries between IKS and other systems of knowing



Singing the national anthem at the indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) interface hosted by Unisa's SARCHI Chair in Development Education are Prof. Catherine Odora Hoppers (Incumbent: DST/NRF South African Research Chair in Development Education), Prof. Babuuzibwa Luutu (Vice-Chancellor Designate: Marcus Garvey Pan Afrikan University, Mbale, Uganda), Naledi Pandor (Minister: Science and Technology), Prof. Rita Maré (Vice Principal Academic: Teaching and Learning, Unisa), and Dr Beverley Damonse (Acting CEO: National Research Foundation).

Unisa's DST/NRF South African Research Chair in Development Education, in collaboration with the Department of Science and Technology (DST), hosted the third national Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) Interface from 27 February to 1 March 2015 in Pretoria.

Key delegates who added their voices to the proceedings included NRF-funded researchers/scientists from science councils and 17 universities around South

Africa, indigenous knowledge holders, community members, postgraduate students, leadership of academic institutions as well as policy makers from national government.

The theme of the Interface, *'Building Excellence in Indigenous Knowledge Systems as a Science'* represented a strong turning of the tide - acknowledging IKS as a **valid scientific endeavour** – while implying that IKS too can improve in terms of knowledge development. The Interface is a great step in that direction, given its attempt to integrate science and society for the advancement of social justice and development.

Setting the tone

The tone was set in the addresses of the opening session.

Keynote speaker Honourable Naledi Pandor, Minister of Science and Technology, set a precedent by addressing the gathering in different languages – in part demonstrating the challenges ahead within the context of cultural and language diversity in South Africa. She went further by committing that the next Interface would be conducted via simultaneous interpretation facilities, which would enable community holders of knowledge to participate directly in the proceedings; and that the legislation documents being prepared would also be translated into different languages. She conceptually eased the way for the Interface by affirming that the time was now to cross whatever boundaries remained between IKS and other systems of knowing, meaning and practice.

The Minister's message was unambiguous that IKS will be valued, judged and utilised for collective advancement and dignity through collaborative efforts that:

- secure its full recognition and respect in the structures, programmes and habits of the Academy;
- transform it from a science stored in memory and transmitted orally into one that is properly documented and protected from misuse, biopiracy and other criminal activity;
- make it the main driver of the bioeconomy by, for instance, scaling up the quality, range and quantity of herbal products;
- enhance the capacity to intellectually discourse about IKS in the Academy and Interfaces through the medium of indigenous languages; and finally,
- prevent any tendencies to reduce it to a natural science by equally developing its other dimensions such as Ethical Values, Poetry, Totemics, Law and Consensual Governance through Ubuntu dialogue.

She further spoke about the need to integrate indigenous knowledge production with African commercial production potential on the basis of revitalising and strengthening communities so that the bio-economy does not end up generating social-economic inequalities and inequities, as well as cultural alienation.

Other speakers indicated in various ways that the IKS funding framework is a learning process and that the Interface 3 focus was on inclusiveness and building excellence in IKS, without losing competitiveness. Dr Beverley Damonse, Acting CEO of the National Research Foundation (NRF) stressed that "knowledge production in IKS is not a monopoly of the universities and science councils. We are expected and in fact, required to bring on board knowledge holders who are neither based at universities nor science councils to drive the knowledge project."

On the issue of whether the curriculum was supporting diverse knowledge systems, Unisa's Vice Principal Academic: Teaching and Learning, Professor Rita Maré, who represented the Vice Chancellor, remarked that much has been done, **BUT** more remains and needs to be done.

IKS as a science

Proceeding from the proposition that the consideration of IKS as a science still evokes strong mixed epistemological feelings in the Academy, Vice Chancellor of Marcus Garvey Pan Afrikan University in Uganda, Prof Babuuzibwa Luutu, emphasised the need to understand the contexts that have shaped its conceptual history from generation to degeneration and regeneration. He pointed out that while IKS is a science, it is also in part a **social movement** pursuing issues and values of indigeneity such as autonomy, self-determination, decolonization, restorative healing and justice. Furthermore, he added that “IKS constitutes an **ancestry of accumulated wisdom and experiences; a mother of cultural-spiritual institutions** and other **complex social arrangements**; and a **life force** generating renewable **energies** for cultural, economic, ecological, intellectual as well as other forms of collective **wellbeing and survival**”.

SARChI in Development Education as an Ethical Space

Participants acknowledged the importance of the countrywide mobilisation of a broad variety of actors and stakeholders – at different levels of society – for a collaboration that would give voice to the long suppressed indigenous knowledge and its holders.

The entire process was facilitated by the DST/NRF South African Research Chair in Development Education, supported by a cohort of leading transdisciplinary transformative scholars and indigenous knowledge custodians from around the world.

The SARChI Chairs were created to advance the frontiers of knowledge through focused research in identified fields or problem areas, stimulate and coordinate the work of other researchers active in identified fields or problem areas; teach/supervise post-graduate level students and post-doctoral researchers whose learning is embedded in the field of the research focus; provide a critical locus for the development of **excellence** in ideas and capacity; and promote racial and gender equity in the scientific community.

By turning a title and a status into a **space**, the SARChI Chair in Development Education at Unisa expresses a commitment to actively take up the challenge of fostering a community of thinkers within higher education, as well as strategic players in local communities – including holders of indigenous knowledge.

“South Africa needs this space, not only because its own constitution and mandates arise from it, but key tenets of challenges facing the African continent also need a **space of deep trust and serious conscientious intellectual work capable of digging into the structures and codes of practice and possibilities, and making credible propositions about the present and the future,**” said Prof Catherine Odora Hoppers, the incumbent of the SARChI Chair.

“The Chair compels us to undertake that metaphysical shift. It enables us to **develop a weave of ethics, a set of attitudes**, and an **ethics of the margins** capable of producing perspectives on subsistence and survival which are not stymied by the western obsession with hierarchisation and alienation of the ‘other’, but which are civilizational in its own way”.

“It is an **interactive space** where the university links with other stakeholders, particularly those at the margins who are the holders of other epistemologies and producers of knowledge in other systems, and together, work out protocols, terms and conditions for the integration of the different traditions of knowledge. It is **site for the nourishment of emerging leaders with transdisciplinary competence** in understanding constitutive (underlying) codes that make societal institutions and systems (including disciplines); developing a transnational outlook that is grounded in the African perspective; constructing arguments and critical reflection on identified global questions; and establishing a public space as a core social and national strategy” she continued.

The IKS Interfaces are a space for dialogue, trans-disciplinary learning, national capacity building and co-determination in knowledge production.

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