

# Local Knowledge and Local Knowing

## An Anthropological Analysis of Contested "Cultural Products" in the Context of Development

Christoph Antweiler

**Abstract.** – This study shows systematically why local knowledge (often called indigenous knowledge) has a big developmental potential and why its utilization for development is ambiguous. Local knowledge consists of factual knowledge, skills, and capabilities, most of which have some empirical grounding. It is culturally situated and is best understood as a "social product." The practical application in the development context is less of a technological but a theoretical and political problem, what is shown here generally and by referring to forest-related knowledge. Local knowledge is instrumentalized and idealized by development experts as well as by their critics. But it does not necessarily present itself as a comprehensive knowledge system and activities based on local knowledge are not necessarily sustainable or socially just. The use of local knowledge for development should not be restricted to the extraction of information or applied simply as a countermodel to Western science. [*Knowledge systems, local knowledge, indigenous knowledge, scientific knowledge*]

**Christoph Antweiler**, Dr. phil. (1987), Professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Trier, Germany; 1991-92 one year field research on urbanism and decision-making on intraurban residential mobility in a multiethnic regional city in Indonesia (Ujung Pandang, South Sulawesi). – Research interests: cognition, urbanism, collective identity, theory of culture, social evolution, biocultural interaction, practising anthropology; regional interests: South Asia, especially Nepal and Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia and Malaysia.

The process of acquiring insight produces awareness of one's own way of life as something worthwhile, and the mastery of skills breeds self-esteem. Thus, knowledge is created in a combination of utilitarian and symbolic practice – not in a vacuum: A plant is considered edible or characterized as just grass or weed; it is important that I know the difference, and it may turn out convenient to *demonstrate* that I possess the knowledge.

(Siverts 1991: 308)

contexts and their economies. By analysing local knowledge as a resource for development, I look at dynamic processes of innovation, adaptation, and respectively failure thereof. While the term "traditional knowledge" implies a rather static perception of knowledge with a low level of change, the broad use of local knowledge in its entirety seems to be the adequate approach to the needs and requirements of local communities and indigenous peoples. This was put most concisely in the slogan "Putting People First" (Cernea 1991). This encompasses taking into account the local environment, participation in development measures, harnessing existing local technical solutions, local capacity and institution building, and efforts to make visible and articulate for the first time problems experienced by indigenous communities, women and other disadvantaged social groups.

The approaches most closely in line with the concept of making local knowledge available and applicable are geared to local self-reliance, decentralization of decision-making and fair access to natural resources. These involve the local population exclusively setting their own objectives, implementing the measures themselves on the basis of their own view of and approaches to solving the problems, and evaluating the results themselves. Consequently, these approaches imply for the context of the countries of the South that external (or more specifically Western or Westernised national) institutions should participate in the activities of the local actors concerned instead of vice versa.

Even though these approaches seem rather idealistic and politically perhaps not acceptable in their entirety, in many countries of the world, political decisions have been taken to empower local institutions – not only and necessarily local communities, but districts, provinces, and other administrative units. This momentum of decentralization of power and local access to natural resources should correspond with the building of local ca-

### 1 Background and Objectives

As the term is defined, local knowledge and the respective knowledge systems are rooted in local or regional culture and ecology, the respective social