INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AS SOCIAL CAPITAL

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ABSTRACT
This paper shows how indigenous knowledge (IK) is social capital. The finding of this paper is based on two NGOs such as Proshika and Practical Action Bangladesh (PAB). Data were collected through qualitative research using a number of data collections methods. The paper argues that the present prominence of IK covers so many merits that it can be considered as social capital.

Key words: Indigenous knowledge, social capital, NGO, Bangladesh

Introduction:
In the recent years, the role of IK in a range of sectors is being talked about. But there is not enough literature to justify the argument that IK is social capital. This paper shows how indigenous knowledge (IK) can be considered as social capital. The finding of this paper is based on two NGOs such as Proshika and Practical Action Bangladesh (PAB). Data were collected through qualitative research using a number of data collections methods. The paper argues that the present prominence of IK covers so many merits that it can be considered as social capital.

Concepts: Indigenous knowledge and social capital

Indigenous knowledge
IK has been labelled differently in different regions and countries. Antweiler (1996:5) makes a list (compiled from the literature of the 1960s to 1995) of its diverse terms (and its branches) and their various connotations. Because of its diversity,
concept is regarded as a ‘bandwagon’ or ‘buzzword’ (Sejersen, 1998). I argue that though there are a lot of substitute words to mean IK, each has the same kind of core meaning. The meaning or definition differs in relation to the particular case and aspect (Boven & Morohashi, 2002). Moreover, the definition of IK is rapidly changing in contemporary societies, subject to the forces of globalisation (Sillitoe, 2005:146). This trend makes it difficult to agree on a legally and scientifically accepted definition (Correa, 2001:4).

There are many working definitions of IK, which provide different perspectives. Many authors and institutions i.e. Grenier, Johnson, Nakashima & Roue, the World Bank, the United Nations (UN), Falvier et al., Langgill, and Warren describe IK as a system or body of knowledge, which evolves from a variety of sources within a social process. For example, Johnson (1992) states that IK can be defined as ‘a body of knowledge’ built up by a group of people through generations of living in close contact with nature. Such knowledge evolves in the local environment, so that it is specifically adapted to the requirements of local people and conditions. It is also creative and experimental, constantly incorporating outside influences and inside innovations to meet new conditions. It is usually a mistake to think of IK as ‘old-fashioned’, ‘backwards’, ‘static’ or ‘unchanging’. On the other hand, some authors, such as Dutfield, Brooke, Boven & Morohashi, and IIRR describe the concept with some components in a specific framework. Others, for example Hoppers, state that IK is based on some specific group of people (called traditional/indigenous or aboriginal people). I think that the first two views are more accepted than the last one. I believe that IK has already been proved as a body of knowledge given its enormous literature and widespread application. The third view explains the concept narrowly, but I think it is also important to understand how the concept evolves. My

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1 A buzzword (also known as a fashion word or vogue word) is an idiom, often a neologism, commonly used in managerial, technical, administrative, and sometimes political environments. Buzzwords appear ubiquitously but their actual meanings often remain unclear. Buzzwords are typically intended to create the impression of knowledge for a wide audience. They tend to be non-controversial and universal. Buzzwords differ from jargon in that they have the function of impressing or of obscuring meaning, while jargon (ideally) has a well-defined technical meaning, if only to specialists. Some examples of other buzzwords are: diversity, empowerment, breakthrough, next generation, paradigm, sustainability, etc. (Public Rambling, 2008).
argument is that no definition is complete, but taken together they explain what IK means. I agree with Cheng (2003:6), who argues that IK is the knowledge that has been tested as valid in a local context, and accumulated by the local community or people. The usefulness and validity of IK varies according to time and social context.

IK covers numerous components and aspects, which make it wide and complex. It includes: agriculture and horticulture, astronomy, forestry, human health, traditional medicines and healing, knowledge of animals, fish and ecological systems, sustainable use of natural resources and the environment, traditional classification systems for living, learning systems and oral traditions, spirituality, symbols, traditional arts and culture, designs, symbols, scientific and ecological methods, crafts, music, dance, songs, stories, foods, medicines and wellness (or disease-prevention), and products (Brascoupe & Mann, 2001:3; Hoppers, 2004:3). Such knowledge systems are cumulative, representing generations of experiences, careful observations, and trial and error experiments. IK does not exist in a vacuum; it belongs to a community, and access to this knowledge is gained through contact with that community (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). No one person, authority or social group is the single repository for this knowledge, or can claim to know the entire body of knowledge. It is more widely shared locally than specialised scientific knowledge (Sillitoe, 2002). With this view Dr. Erica-Irene Daes, Chair-Rapporteur of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, explained in a 1994 report that IK is a complete knowledge system with its own concepts of epistemology, philosophy, and scientific and logical validity (Kooy & Vizina, 2006:6).

IK is locally based and recorded, for example, in the memories of the living and transmitted orally (Burgess, 1999). But it is dynamic and is ‘developed to very specific biological, ecological, climatic and socio-economic conditions’ (Ahmed, 1994:12). It is a mixture of knowledge created endogenously and acquired from outside, but then absorbed and integrated within the society by ‘trial and error’. The broad set of IK includes information of a functional and of an aesthetic character. The processes and products can be used in agriculture or industry, as well as intangibles of cultural value. IK is not static; it evolves and generates new information as a result of improvements or adaptation to changing circumstances. The context and forms of expression of IK varies significantly (Correa, 2001:4). Correa adds that some IK is codified, that is, formalised in some way (i.e. textile designs, ayurveda traditional medicine). A great part of IK, however, is non-codified or tacit, such as ‘folk’, ‘tribal’ or ‘indigenous’ medicine, which is based on traditional beliefs, norms and practices accumulated through centuries.
of experiences of trial and error. It is holistic, qualitative, and it is a cultural property rooted in a social context (Johnson, 1992). It is non-formal, dynamic and adaptive (Boven & Morohashi, 2002:12). It is traditional, which is ‘a fluid and transferring agent with no real end’ when applied to knowledge. Negotiation is a central concept.

**Social capital**

The concept ‘social capital’ was developed in the 1980s and 1990s by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), James Coleman (1988, 1990) and Robert Putnam (1993, 1995, 2000). In 1985, Pierre Bourdieu was the first sociologist to use this term in community development as a neo-Marxist model (DeFlippis 2001; Kilpatrick et al., 2001). Bourdieu (1986:248-249) says that the sources of social capital combined the actual and potential resources, concurrent to tenure of a strong network of more or less institutionalised relationships or reciprocal relationships (i.e. membership). His explanation was concurrently both economic and a set of power relations that comprised a variety of dominions and social interactions generally thought of as non-economic (DeFilippis, 2001).

The American social scientist James Coleman (Coleman, 1988) brought social capital into the mainstream. He argues:

“Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors...within the structure” (Coleman, 1988:595-5120).

Robert Putnam’s redefinition of social capital adds new dimensions. Putnam, who may be the most important author on the subject, defines:

“Social capital is features of social life-networks, norms, and trust-that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives”. The norms and reciprocal networks that make collective action possible are themselves contingent on an existing foundation of social trust and solidarity (Putnam 1993, 1995, 2000).

The most important characteristics of his definition are: i) social capital is twisted by individuals or groups of people in regions, communities, cities, countries, or continents; ii) it becomes mainly a normatively good thing and is given credit for (a) promoting good, democratic government and (b) generating and sustaining economic growth and development; iii) it can be simultaneously a ‘private good’ and a ‘public good’; iv) it refers to the norms and networks of civil society that lubricate cooperative action among both citizens and their institutions; v) network of trust and voluntary
associations are ‘win-win’ sets of relationships in which everyone involved benefits; and vi) it was based on scientific investigation (DeFlippis, 2001:784-786).

Based on existing literature, Mateju & Vitaskova (2006:493) sum-up two significantly different approaches to the conceptualisation of social capital. The most dominant stream defines social capital primarily as an attribute of societies, as an inherent characteristic of social environment based on the high degree of interpersonal and institutional trust facilitating people’s cooperation. The other stream defines social capital in terms of mutually beneficial exchanges based on social connections and informal networks allowing individuals to achieve their own particular goals. The former approach prevails in ‘Western’ countries, while the latter prevails in the study of social change in post-communist societies, where social capital drawing from interpersonal trust seems to be rather low.

The use of the concept ‘social capital’ is very wide, and it is widening across the disciplines over time; it refers to norms, ‘neighbourliness’ and networks that enable people to act collectively (Narayan & Woolcock, 2000). It includes institutions, relationships, attitudes and values that govern interactions among people and contribute to economic and social development (Grootaert & Bastelaer, 2001:4). It is called the relationships among actors (individuals, groups, and/or organisations), which create a capacity to act for mutual benefits or a common purpose (Spellerberg, 2001:9). However, the core elements of social capital are interaction, trust, cooperative ventures, agreements, norms and reputations, emotive behaviour, networks, sanctions and long-term relationships, the local commons, dispositions, belief, economic performance, conformism and contagion, and culture.

Social capital is now considered as one of the most important assets of society. It is an accumulation of social, psychological, cultural, cognitive, institutional, and related assets that increase the amount or probability of mutually beneficial cooperative behaviour. It can be formed as: structural (roles, rules, precedents, procedures, and networks) and cognitive/normative (arising from mental process and resulting ideas, culture and ideology, norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs that contribute to cooperative behaviour and mutually beneficial collective action) (Uphoff, 1999:215). Putnam (1998) makes a further distinction amongst these dimensions, highlighting a difference between informal and formal networks. Informal networks include the relationships that people have with their families, partners, friends and neighbours; whereas formal networks include relationships at work,
within community groups and churches, and with formal bodies, such as businesses and governments. Woolcock (2001) specifically classifies three types of social capital: bonds, bridges and linkage. Bonding social capital refers to relations among family members, close friends and neighbours. Bridging social capital refers to more distant friends, associates and colleagues, in general people who share similar demographic characteristics. If bridging social capital refers to the horizontal dimension, linking social capital refers to the vertical dimension. Linking social capital is defined as the capacity to leverage resources, ideas and information from formal institutions beyond the community. Carroll (2001: xii) classifies social capital into six domains: family and kinship connections, community networks, cross-sectoral linkages, institutional policy framework, socio-political (state-civil society) relations, and social norms and values.

Putnam (2000:19) notes that human capital refers to individuals, whereas social capital refers to connections among individuals and the social networks, and the norms of reciprocity that arise from them. It arises from family, schools, local communities, firms and national or sub-national administrative units and other institutions. On the other hand, Bourdieu (1986:7) argues that social capital is never completely independent, like physical and human capital, because of its homogeneity and multiple effects. Coleman (1988) suggests that, like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, but it can be depleted if it is not renewed. In addition, Putnam (2000:7) also suggests that the more people work together the more social capital is produced, and the less people work together the more community stocks of social capital are depleted. Schuller (2000:2) argues that cultural capital is more academic. It refers to the credentials and cultural assets embodied in individuals and their families. It has been used in two constructing directions: the reproduction of social hierarchy, as elite families endow their children with the cultural capital, which enables them to succeed in maintaining their élite position. It is also used to explain how to manage and use education to move from non-élite positions into élite positions.

**Methodologies**

This study used a qualitative approach. Data were collected from two communities served by two NGOs: Proshika and Practical Action Bangladesh (PAB) and focused on two core projects, the Markets and Livelihoods Program (MLP) (of PAB) and the Small Economic Enterprise Development (SEED) Program (of Proshika). One community was urban (Mirpur (1) Market for Proshika) and another rural (Mostofapur Bazar (market) for PAB). Data were obtained from members of two indigenous occupations: the goldsmiths and blacksmiths.
respectively. The other stakeholders were NGO staff members and community leaders. Different data collection methods such as participatory rural appraisal (PRA), social mapping, participant observation, in-depth study, focus group discussion (FGD) and documentation survey were used. Data collection procedure was considered as a triangulation approach, using a number of qualitative data collection methods. One of the principal reasons to use triangulation is to avoid the limitations of a single method. It also helped to increase the reliability and validity of data. Data were analyzed using a thematic approach. The study used twelve sets of research questionnaires/guidelines and data were collected from forty two respondents (community people, local leaders and NGO staff members) of two NGOs and two communities. It included one set of questionnaires from head and area/field office staff members for two NGO (total four respondents); two sets of PRA (participatory rural appraisal) and participant guidelines from two communities (total four respondents); three sets of in-depth case study questionnaires for NGO staff members (head and area office), community leaders and community people (total sixteen respondents); four sets of focus group discussion (FGD) guidelines for NGO staff members (head and area office), community leaders and community people (total eight group of respondents); and two documentation guidelines from head and area office (total four respondents).

Before starting the actual field work, primary and preliminary data (demographic and socio-economic conditions) were collected through a pilot survey. Moreover, necessary information was collected from the local government offices and administration (i.e. Union Parishad (UP), district office, Thana office (local government administrative office at municipal area), settlement office, local and district library, local old people, local poet and cultural activists.

**Findings and analysis**

One of the key questions of the research was to identify indigenous knowledge (IK) as social capital. The findings confirmed that the nature, forms, and functions of IK in Bangladesh with NGOs’ interventions have conferred distinct characteristics. Gorjestani (2005:6) argues that IK is the social capital of the poor. These skills are remaking traditions, community production, and self and national identity (Islam, 2004:279). The research found that the blacksmiths and goldsmiths considered IK as their pillar of social values, community production, social network, recycling of resources, social interaction, business goodwill, civic identity, social association and integration, knowledge creation and dissemination. As a ‘public good’, IK was exchangeable and transferable from one social setting to another (Putnam, 1994:10). It was dynamic and it had good market value, which
established the members of those communities, through social trust and ties in their individual and group confidence. The blacksmiths and goldsmiths found IK a ‘social product’, which was a ‘marketable good’ (Antweiler, 1996:1, 2 & 14). The Head of MLP (PAB) stated:

“PAB’s every initiative is based on social capital. When we get any concept among a production group it is not only information, knowledge, or work; we build up a system which brings visibility of production. For example, if one local producer wants to know how to make soup, it is possible to impart this knowledge easily via our technical group who transact this technical knowledge to him/her. Then PAB takes the initiative to offer this knowledge in the market through income generation activities.”

The diversity and dynamics of IK were understood as part of the respective cultural system. It had both a social and a practical dimension, which prepared the blacksmiths and goldsmiths for their everyday life. IK lived in their social, political, spiritual, secular and communal daily lives (Whap, 2001:23). It consisted not only of information or knowledge as a resource, but also of factual knowledge, capabilities and skills (Antweiler, 1996:15). The blacksmiths and goldsmiths acquired and applied these skills with respect to their local objectives, situations and problems. This knowledge is generated by communities in order to cope with their natural and social environment in a sustainable manner (Murdoch & Clark 1994). The research found that IK helped local empowerment and development through increasing ‘self-sufficiency’ and ‘strengthening self-determination’ (Langill, 1999) within their livelihood strategies. One goldsmith said:

“I am a worker; I do not need capital, loans or anybody’s help. I know how to make ornaments. I don’t care about anybody. I am sure, as long as people use ornaments, that I will have a job in the market.”

Again, one blacksmith said:

“I know how to make billhooks, spades, axes, and knives. If my health is good and if I live, I don’t feel that I will face trouble in collecting my food.”

So, this IK-based capital brought confidence, freedom, and independence to the blacksmiths and goldsmiths. They created a distinct type of ability, which exerted a pull on other people to reinvest
their labour. Their social capital formation was seen here as a poverty reducing strategy (Oyen, 2002:11-14). Social development, with the use of IK holds the promise of capacity building, awareness and participation (Masreque & Khan, 2000:5). IK was seen as social interaction among individuals, families, and neighbours of the local producers. It was a part of their social unit, which was regarded as a potential social resource as they traded and earned money for their livelihoods. This kind of interaction developed good will, fellowship, and sympathy. For example, IK was seen as the form of a communication spirit, which made local producers and their fellow citizens’ work with each other, rather than against each other (Uslaner, 2004:501). It also made a good social bondage among them and with other occupants and people in the community. One blacksmith said:

“That’s why we have kept our association’s name ‘Bhai Bhai (brother)’ Karmar Shamity. We think that our interests and problems are the same. We believe that we can solve many of our problems through discussing them with each other.”

They found their skills were transmitted from generation to generation. These were proven strategies that related to sustainability, holism, and respect for natural processes (Corsiglia & Snively, 2000:83). Their knowledge was considered as a kind of ‘soft social infrastructure’, generating a sense of citizenship, which increased ‘reciprocity, trust and interactive decision-making’, and fostered security in the interactions between economic actors contributing to economic innovation (Putnam, 1994:10-11) and creativity (Amin, 1997:133–134; McClenaghan, 2000:569). Here trust was the most important product. Generalised trust was a moral value that connects people to others, who might be different (Uslaner, 2004:501). IK may be seen as a theory of rational action, in which the blacksmiths and goldsmiths had control over certain resources (i.e. human, and local raw materials) and interests (i.e. working attitude, motivation, and skills) and events (i.e. time), then this social capital constituted a particular kind of resource available to them (Fuller & Emily, 2002:3).

The study accepts as true the argument that development divorced from its human and cultural context is nothing more than a growth without soul (Costa-Neto, 2000:89). Indigenous and local peoples’ traditional knowledge is an essential resource for the development process (Costa-Neto, 2000:89; Warren et al., 1995). There were found a number of good reasons for systematic exploration of the potential role of IK in development. IK’s main strength lies in the fact that it is deeply anchored in the local socio-

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economic fabric and geographical location, and therefore, enjoyed wide social acceptability. One Proshika staff member stated:

"IK is dynamic. For example, if we look at the strategy that we follow for the Coastal belt (the Southern part of Bangladesh), which is different to that from the drought prone Northern part. The strategy is based on local context and geographical location. That is its strength. This strength will be lost if it generalised."

Like social capital, indigenous practices had generally a problem-solving (down to earth) focus. These were considered as low cost, time efficient, flexible and adaptive to the local producers. In the face of the gradual disillusionment with the mainstream development and planning model (i.e. modernisation, transfer of technology, blue-print planning), this IK became a more humane, democratic and popular participatory model of development.

The research found that IK skills, formed within a socio-structure, provided the ‘social glue’ that united local people through learning, information exchange, and norms and sanctions that governed behaviour. IK worked as social capital, because the blacksmiths and goldsmiths perceived it influenced their capacity to attract and retain resources, customers, and partners. Here social capital was seen as a strategic resource, not uniformly available, mobile, or easily traded or imitated. This social capital was created with the public and private sector interactions that fostered economic and social activity (Putnam, 1993). Building on this thinking, Flora & Jan (1993) and Flora et al. (1997) have proposed elements of an ‘entrepreneurial social infrastructure’, which represents the presence of social capital in a region.

The study found that the IK of the blacksmiths and goldsmiths reinforced shared values and trust-based relationships that went beyond purely market transactions. I found these skills a ‘social art’ or ‘social talent’, which gave them a distinct identity in the community. I was very impressed to see their dealings with customers. They were mature in social education, their convincing attitude with the customers and their courtesies were important resources. The research found a number of merits of IK as social capital; it has significant market value, invested for community well-being like other capital. The research argues that, with human capital, IK gave distinct characteristics that the concept ‘social capital’ conceives. The goldsmiths and blacksmiths learned these skills through a number of scientific processes, such as observation, experiment, social connections, and practices, which shaped their
capacities. Since the relationship was a positive, reciprocal one, there was the potential for a ‘virtuous’ circle: an increase in the level of civic participation, as it was related with income and livelihoods and had lead to an increase in positive beliefs about others, lead to greater participation, and so on (Brehm & Rahn, 2004; Malecki, 1998:11). The significant element of this IK was trust, which linked with economic relations. The study found three types of trust. The first, contractual trust was seen as mutual expectation with customers. The second type, competence trust, concerned technical and managerial competence and was seen to help them to survive in global competition. And the third type, goodwill trust, referred to mutual expectations of open commitment to each other, and was seen in a willingness to do more than is formally expected, such as the sharing of information among colleagues (Sako, 1992:37-47).

Thus, we must not underestimate the significance of the fabrication of this IK, which influenced the need for different knowledge. This IK cannot ever be understood in isolation from the critical analysis of economic, social, cultural and political conditions as we saw among the blacksmiths and goldsmiths. IK is not simply about language and expression, but leveraged for material gain (Woolcock, 2001; Agrawal, 1995), through which the indigenous people such, as blacksmiths and goldsmiths, were surviving.

Conclusion

The above discussion explains clearly that IK should be considered as social capital. It is seen that the present shape and merits of IK among the indigenous occupants such as blacksmiths and goldsmiths is not inclusive. The findings presented earlier suggested that the IK in Bangladesh has some limitations in terms of its social potentiality. But it is also argued here that, considering its distinct features, IK has the characteristics of social capital.

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