

Chapter 36

Research Protocols and Ethical Considerations in Indigenous Knowledge Systems

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ABSTRACT

Research in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in South Africa has grown at a very high pace in a relatively short period of time. The growth thereof has presented researchers and the knowledge holders with challenges that have never faced them in the same way before. It has necessitated a review of how researchers interact with those who hold the knowledge and has required that protection mechanisms be implemented to safeguard the misuse and misappropriation of the indigenous knowledge. This Chapter outlines the focus on IKS in South Africa since 1995 and reflects on the challenges related to this focus. Specifically the Chapter looks at the challenges related to the recognition of knowledge holders, the ethical issues facing both researchers and knowledge holders, and the protocols that have been designed and used in South Africa and other places. It concludes by indicating the challenges that still remain and how these can be explored further by the research community.

INTRODUCTION

Research in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in South Africa has grown at a very high pace in a relatively short period of time. The growth thereof has presented the researchers and the knowledge holders with challenges that have never faced them in the same way before. It has necessitated a review of how researchers interact with those who hold the knowledge and has required that protection mechanisms be implemented to safeguard the misuse and misappropriation of the indigenous knowledge. This Chapter outlines the focus on IKS in South Africa since 1995 and reflects on the challenges related to this focus. Specifically the Chapter looks at the challenges related to the recognition of knowledge holders, the ethical issues facing both researchers and knowledge holders, and the protocols that have been designed and used in South Africa and other places. It discusses the importance of benefit sharing with

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indigenous and local communities and how their knowledge and rights continue to be taken away from them. It concludes by indicating the ethical challenges that still remain in IKS Research and how these can be explored further by the research community.

The Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) Program and related activities as presently understood and conceptualized in South Africa have got their foundation on the exchange of ideas between the Chairperson of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology and some members of the top management at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in 1995 (Mosimege, 2003). This discussion resulted in a decision to carry out a survey of indigenous technologies in the Provinces of Limpopo and Mpumalanga. A pilot to conduct a survey of indigenous technologies in these two provinces was subsequently commissioned to the University of The North (now called University of Limpopo) by the CSIR and was carried out later in the same year. After a workshop which was organized at the university to report back on the findings of the audit, decisions were made by stakeholders present at the workshop to roll out similar audits to other provinces in South Africa. The roll out involved an average of 40 students and four members of staff at each of the 9 universities that participated. This process is generally referred to as the national audit of indigenous technologies. The Universities involved were: University of Venda, University of Limpopo – Turfloop Campus, North West University – Mafikeng Campus, University of Pretoria – Mamelodi Campus, University of South Africa, University of The Free State – Qwaqwa Campus, University of Zululand, Walter Sisulu University, and University of Fort Hare. It is important to note that most of the university names used at the time have changed, especially after the merger of most universities in 2004. For instance, the current North West University is the result of the merger between the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education and the University of North West (known previously as the University of Bophuthatswana).

The audits were guided by the Objectives which were designed jointly by the Portfolio Committee and the CSIR and shared with all the research teams at each participating university (Mosimege, 2003). The seven provinces in which the audit was carried out are Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West, Gauteng, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, and Eastern Cape. Each participating institution was required to conduct a workshop (known as Provincial Workshops given the location of the different universities in the different provinces) in the period between 1997 and 1998 to report back on its findings. These provincial workshops culminated in the first National Workshop on IKS in September 1998 at the North West University – Mafikeng Campus. This workshop can be regarded as a history making occasion as it brought together a variety of stakeholders (possibly for the first time) with an interest in IKS under one roof to discuss matters of mutual interest. The stakeholders who met at the Mahikeng Campus of North West University included Government Officials from various departments (predominantly from the then Departments of Arts, Culture, Language, Science and Technology which was leading the initiative at the time), Science Councils (among the Science Councils present were the CSIR, the Human Sciences Research Council, the National Research Foundation, the Agricultural Research Council, the Medical Research Council, etc.) management and researchers, University management and academic staff, university students, indigenous knowledge holders and practitioners.

The objectives of the IKS audits were identified as follows:

1. Identify different indigenous technologies in the different communities in South Africa and compile a record of these.
2. Compile a national database of the technologies which could be updated at different stages when other related projects are engaged in.

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