



Panel Discussion

What is the role of traditional knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems in development?

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Issues for the debate

In agriculture, the market led innovations have frequently generated processes and products that affect the environment and put sustainable development at risk. The Green Revolution in India shows some good examples of this tendency. At the same time, such innovations have left aside the traditional knowledge that allowed the existence of agriculture close to the local markets and based on technologies that protected nature and avoided overexploitation.

Many ideas on development and modernization concentrated their explanations (regarding development) on the predominant role of industrialization, forgetting that the economies that should move forward from underdevelopment had large agricultural sectors based on traditional technologies that needed to be incorporated into this structural change. The industries impulse subordinated important agricultural branches, thus generating agroindustrial chains guided by a technological incorporation that knew not of the processes of production and transformation of knowledge specific to traditional agriculture. Those scopes left aside the creation of learning capacities and knowledge based interactions.

If it is accepted that knowledge is incorporated into the economic activity, as in agriculture based sectors, through the constitution of innovation systems (v. gr. Nigerian cocoa system), then the necessity will arise to think about: what types of knowledge improve agricultural productivity as well as a sustainable development; how technologies based on traditional and indigenous knowledge are generated and adopted; transformation and completion through procedures and techniques that emerge from scientific research and technologic development; which are the productive and environmental benefits of integrating knowledge of different kinds and from different sources; what ways of distributing profits are equitable when the owners of different types of knowledge exchange, and mutually learn; what economical and ethical responsibilities do governments, organizations and people have if transactions take place between individuals or social groups with unequal power of negotiation.

The difficulties regarding the characterization of traditional knowledge, as well as the necessity to comprehend its role on production and innovation, seriously question the dominant paradigm within the field of intellectual property. The protection that must be given to this knowledge, originated in different types of communities, compels for the reformulation of the rights and rules that incorporate them.

The facts reviewed here, which are discussed in the contributions of this panel, justify a debate centered on the role of traditional and indigenous knowledge that transcends its contribution to cultural patrimony and to the identity of the communities, locating it as a new capability for sustainable development.