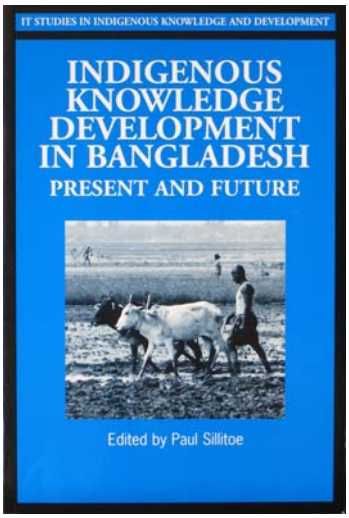
LEARNING FROM PRACTITONERS OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN DEVELOPMENT.

Since its establishment in the mid 1990s, BARCIK has strived to see development agencies in Bangladesh give indigenous knowledge (IK) the attention that it deserves. It does so on the premise that to overlook, or worse to dismiss, what local people know and do -- the heritage of generations of experience of living on the floodplains of Bengal, the world's largest delta – is not only mistaken but also detrimental to the aims of development, which are to promote progress or positive change in people's lives.

As noted in the blurb on the rear of the book *Indigenous knowledge development in Bangladesh: present and future*, which emerged from the conference 'The State of Indigenous Knowledge in Bangladesh' -- organised to mark the launch of BARCIK -- that sought to layout the then current challenges and future of IK work in Bangladesh (as a sort of map to guide its take-off):

"Development has failed to deliver on many of its promises to nations such as Bangladesh. Even worse, it stands accused sometimes of making matters worse, particularly for the poorest of the poor. The policies imposed from above by international agencies and central governments have been sadly at variance with the needs and aspirations of ordinary people. . . . . Indigenous knowledge in development is one of the new approaches being pioneered. It is emerging within the context of increasingly popular participatory approaches. It works from below, at the 'grassroots'. It aims to make local voices heard more effectively. If development is to continue to involve outside mediated interventions, in the belief that foreigners have knowledge and resources that can assist in relieving the degrading poverty endured by millions, the policymakers, scientists and bureaucrats need better to appreciate the indigenous view and practices both before and while intervening locally".



BARCIK's inaugural conference.

In the intervening two decades BARCIK has undertaken many IK focussed projects, putting this approach to development into practice across Bangladesh where previously unknown. It is particularly strong in the area of natural resources management, livelihood changes and agro-biodiversity. It aims to promote practices that support sustainable agriculture and local biodiversity; for instance, innovating on local composting methods and encouraging use of

organic fertiliser materials, and improving on biological approaches to pest control. Its projects include assisting poor farmers to breed new varieties of rice, crossing both local cultivars and high yielding varieties (HYV) with local ones to produce strains better suited to local farmer perceptions of their needs and environmental constraints, including new deep water and drought tolerant varieties, and saline tolerant ones. BARCIK seeks to inform policymakers about grassroots issues, particularly through its dissemination activities (workshops, media campaigns, exchange visits, posters, leaflets, photo features, newsletters, publications and website), and involves itself in advocacy of poor people's rights, notably their rights of access to natural resources, including water bodies, and rights to seeds, and need for gender awareness regarding such issues. In keeping with contemporary concerns about climate change, which is likely to have serious implications for Bangladesh on current predictions (notably with respect to rising sea levels inundating low lying land), BARCIK has a programme considering local mitigation and adaptation strategies, on the assumption that rural populations are going to have to depend heavily on their own resources, skill and experience in coping with the risks. It seeks to promote awareness of these local assets and augment associated local disaster management capabilities (e. g. through training courses).


BARCIK activities: discussing participatory rice breeding and inspecting new seeds.

Placing local people at the centre of its activities, BARCIK is a genuine exponent of participatory development. It is a leading organization in Bangladesh in action research featuring genuine empowerment initiatives. For instance, it facilitates the creation of farmer-led networks to promote the exchange of knowledge and practices between communities and so contributes to mutual solving of problems by drawing on local resources. It seeks further to initiate joint ventures between farmers and scientists in addressing problems, assisting outside partners to learn from and focus on locally identified concerns. BARCIK maintains eight resource centres around the country (in addition to its Dhaka head office) with materials to inform local communities about environmental issues such as biodiversity and forest conservation, and contemporary climate change concerns and low carbon development etc. The NGO has carried its education mission into schools, encouraging students to identify community problems and discuss ways to tackle these, so fostering a sense of responsibility and social action among young persons, whereas formal education tends to detach them from their local communities. This has led to it setting up seven education centres to facilitate school enrolment from marginal communities. Through its education programme BARCIK also runs various training courses; these include courses in Community Led Research

Methods and Environmental Impact Assessment, in addition to practical workshops on crop breeding, poultry rearing and honey production.

In the course of these activities BARCIK staff have accumulated a wealth of practical experience of indigenous knowledge focussed development. We thought that it would be valuable to have them share their experiences, discuss problems encountered and how they think further research might facilitate their valuable work. To this end we arranged the conference "A Review of how Intellectual and Methodological Debates about Indigenous Knowledge have Informed Indigenous Knowledge Work in Bangladesh" to explore these questions. It was in the spirit of BARCIK's founding conference, which the blurb from the resulting volume put as follows: "While the aims of indigenous knowledge research are straightforward, achieving them presents us with some of the largest challenges in development currently. It is an exciting time. The work has only recently started in earnest and a great deal remains to be accomplished." After a presentation on BARCIK's work, as outlined above, including an informative film about its achievements, and a keynote talk, we had a roundtable discussion at which practitioners were encouraged to discuss their work, and particularly to discuss the problems that they encountered and which they thought further academic research might help tackle, if not overcome.

BARCIK's recent conference & roundtable discussions.

The topics discussed that BARCIK staff thought merit further academic research to take the indigenous knowledge in development agenda forwards include:

We need to combat image of IK work. Sometimes those working in IK field find themselves accused by government officials and others of wanting to keep farmers in a backward state, not being forward looking and embracing scientific and market driven change. It is difficult for IK advocates to compete with the establishment, government and multinational companies, subject to wealthy powerful vested interests, supporting scientific technological interventions. There is associated criticism that IK work does nothing to help feed the growing population, which demands increasing food production, notably through adoption of hybrid crop varieties. The IK focus on conventional farming strategies they argue cannot meet Government fixed targets for food production.

There is the issue of targeting development assistance better. It is the poor and vulnerable farmers, those who need development support, who appreciate the importance of IK and who, with appropriate assistance from NGOs such as BARCIK, may build on it. Rich farmers show little interest. "IK belongs to the people, whereas introduced knowledge promoted by

multinationals does not". A related issue is persuading funding agencies to permit greater flexibility in IK informed projects because of the need to allow for genuine participation, which milestone tracked and evaluated projects do not allow.

Managing to operate with local power structures, which vary from one region to another across Bangladesh, presents problems for IK work with the more powerful wealthy families pushing for introduced technology and market based reforms that are in their interests. There is the problem of coping with an increasingly divided rural community where the more wealthy farmers are keen on market involvement with HYV crops, inorganic fertilisers, chemical biocides and deep tube well irrigation – having the resources to absorb any losses with poor seasons that literally break smaller farmers – while such techno-market dependency is not in the interests of poorer households. For instance, poorer farmers who depend on *borga* (share cropping) arrangements are subject to pressure as tenants, landowners threatening that arrangements may not continue the following year if they engage with IK ideas and cultivate local varieties, failing to respond to market cropping demands and prioritizing yields.

Lessening the dependency of poor farmers and others on unpredictable markets is a major problem, for leaving them at the mercy of volatile market forces limits scope for empowerment, which is a major aim of contemporary development. It is leading, for instance, to transfer of land from poor to rich farmers, as the former get into heavy debt with market exposure, which is what IK research is trying to reverse by reducing dependence on capricious markets that can ruin poorer farmers. In consolidating their hold on the land, wealthier families are establishing agro-based businesses dependent on heavy use of imported inputs and eschewing any relevance to IK, undercutting prices in local markets and further jeopardising small farmers' livelihoods. Increasing numbers of families are displaced and move into urban slum areas where rural IK is of limited relevance.

Multinational companies play a critical role in gradually eroding IK, promoting the idea of earning more money through increased production, so increasing farmers' dependence on them and reducing their control over their livelihoods. They promote their products with offers of gifts such as televisions to those who use large amounts of their inputs, which IK work cannot compete against, even though the promoted technology may prove environmentally disastrous in the long term (for instance, people across the floodplains report alarming environmental pollution and declines in soil fertility with use of inorganic fertilizers and biocides). They also use emotive local idioms and cultural symbols, after "HSBC world's local bank adverts" to market their products. How to combat this perversion of IK?

The large NGOs, such as CARE and World Vision, also promote market integration – with development assistance -- by facilitating access to introduced technology, providing free or cheap input support (supplied by marketing companies), and further tempt people by supplying credit to purchase hybrid seeds and pesticides (e.g. in Netrokona region). Again BARCIK cannot compete, as unable to provide any monetary assistance to local communities, only share ideas and knowledge. This further reduces appeal of building on and experimenting with IK, which we need to address.

There are problems of disruption of IK through growing restrictions on access to natural resources. For instance, increasing the profitability of open access resources, such as water bodies through stocking with introduced varieties of fish, encourages the more powerful sections of the community to restrict access. Often these resources are important to poorer

families' livelihoods. The associated culture of introduced fish species such as pangash and telapia, notably in large ponds by wealthier families, has led to the crowding out of local fish varieties and rapid decline in fish diversity, important to IK dependent poor fishing communities.

Regarding natural resources, there are the increasing problems associated with the massive engineering projects on the floodplain, to erect flood defences, which have made some IK redundant by changing the environment dramatically. Smaller scale local developments contribute further, such as the growing numbers of brick fields supplying the burgeoning construction industry, which leave large areas barren, stripping away the topsoil to excavate clayey subsoil. The predicted problems of climate change, and already evident associated environmental changes, add to these concerns (such as increased cold periods, erratic storms and floods etc.) and prompt the question whether, and to what extent, IK and local practices can cope and adapt with these changes. These are questions that demand urgent research to assist communities in adapting to them.

It is hoped that those interested in indigenous knowledge in development research will find these pointers based on the experience of practitioners in the field useful in formulating future projects to take this valuable work forwards.

BARCIK staff outside Manikganj local office and reviewing crop production table.