

Chapter 12

Indigenous Knowledges and Knowledge Codification in the Knowledge Economy

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ABSTRACT

The production, dissemination and archivization of knowledge are important processes in contemporary knowledge economy. Questions on Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) arise when Indigenous Knowledges (IKs) are examined and evaluated on how they benefit the knowledge economy and development. These questions seem to be addressed in terms of dominant epistemological ideologies based on Eurocentric knowledge production philosophies embedded in positivism and how knowledge is codified and patented. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the process and effect of codification and on IKs. The chapter argues that while knowledge codification is necessary for IKs to be preserved and archived, it is important not to lose sight of the communal ownership of the knowledges and to protect them from exploitation and appropriation. The chapter concludes that while codification of IKs and intellectual property rights are controversial, for IKs to play their full role in socioeconomic development they cannot be left out of codification that is pervasive in today's knowledge economy and society.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge production, storage, distribution and utilization are vital for economic development. How knowledge is produced, stored and ascribed ownership are important fundamentals to knowledge codification and its place in the knowledge economy. Often, these requisites are addressed within a Eurocentric, dominant and hegemonic empirical approach which alludes that a knowledge economy prevails because of scientific/positive knowledge that is produced through testable and verifiable methodologies. Empirical/positivist approaches tend to marginalize indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in social development, and lack of codification is seen as an excuse to relegate IKS to the periphery of the knowledge economy. IKS are misclassified as non-empirical ontological bodies that exist outside the scientific

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jurisdictions of verifiable, reliable and patentable inventions and discoveries. The question of ownership and intellectual property (IP) rights is regarded as an important aspect of the knowledge economy. The overarching question is: Do patents and IP rights apply to the communally and collectively owned indigenous epistemologies? This chapter examines this question and addresses challenges that IKS face when knowledge codification is applied to indigenous epistemologies in order to be acknowledged as having a role to play in socio-economic development. The chapter discusses knowledge codification, how it relates to IKS and how patents and IP rights relate to the protection of IKS.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE

The way “knowledge” is defined is very problematic and subjective. Knowledge is perceived from the perspective of the “knower(s)”, those individuals who construct bodies of ideas that they make use of in their everyday lives. Often, knowledge is defined from a scientific approach which sees knowledge as explicit and objective. However, this author perceives knowledge as the creation of our experiences, therefore, subjective and as a social and cultural construct. It embodies ideas that we deem relevant and important to the society to which we are members of. Miller (2002) argues that knowledge results from the uniquely human capacity of attributing meanings to the messages we receive and that we create our individual versions of knowledge. The ideas and meanings generated by individuals from their specific socio-cultural, socio-political and natural environments develop into epistemologies and ontologies that help society to engage in practical ways to enhance its socio-economic livelihoods. For these ideas to be of social and practical nature, they have to be circulated and shared in social development and in advancing the knowledge economy in order to transform society. As Ancori, Bureth and Cohendet (2000) point out:

To be treated as an economic good, knowledge must be put in a form that allows it to circulate and be exchanged. The main transformation investigated by economists is the transformation of knowledge into information, i.e. the codification of knowledge. The process of codification allows them to treat knowledge-reduced-to-information according to the standard tools of economics. (pp. 255-256)

While economists Ancori et al (2000) believe that knowledge should be codified and treated to the standard tools of economics (for example, turning knowledge into an economic and marketable commodity that is based on consumerism), not all knowledge should be judged by that principle. Applying the standard tools raises the question of power. Who sets the standards and defines what is appropriate knowledge and knowledge for what purpose? In today’s knowledge economy, knowledge appears to be no longer in hierarchies as users determine what knowledge best applies to their needs. This idea resonates with Siemens (2006) who points out that knowledge has changed from categorization and hierarchies, to networks and ecologies. Instead of knowledge being defined in a linear direction, it now appears in different forms and IKS are one form that is a component of the knowledge networks.

The definition and importance of knowledge should be from the perspectives of the members of the society in which it exists. Thus, while Miller (2002) argues that information has no intrinsic meaning and the same piece of information can result in different instances of knowledge, economists such as Ancori et al (2000), argue that information can have an economic meaning and, if codified, different instances of knowledge can be treated as though they were pieces of information. This author’s understanding of both Miller (2002) and Ancori et al (2000)’s definitions of knowledge is that they agree that knowledge

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