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Organización  
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para la Educación,  
la Ciencia y la Cultura

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Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
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## Traditional Knowledge

The 'traditional knowledge' concept finds its place in such seemingly unrelated debates as natural disasters, intellectual property, heritage preservation, curriculum development, poverty eradication or biodiversity management.

**T**raditional knowledge refers to the cumulative and dynamic body of knowledge, know-how and representations possessed by peoples with long histories of interaction with their natural milieu. It is intimately tied to language, social relations, spirituality and worldview, and is generally held collectively. Too often, it is simplistically conceived as a pale reflection of mainstream

knowledge, in particular, Science. One noteworthy international benchmark is the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity whose far-reaching Article 8(j) requires State parties to "respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity".



The MAYANGNA peoples' hunting/fishing lifestyle. Bosawas Biosphere Reserve.  
(© K. Scetbon-Didi/UNESCO)

Universal education provides important tools for human development. But it may also inadvertently erode cultural diversity and disorient youth by obstructing the transmission of indigenous language and knowledge. Education must strike a balance between exogenous and endogenous knowledge, and new dynamics must be found between teachers, students and community

knowledge-holders. While knowledge sharing and free flow of information are long-standing international goals, concerns about bio-piracy and patents on traditional knowledge have enflamed debates on access and benefits sharing, as well as intellectual property rights. For local communities, in

what circumstances do risks of misappropriation outweigh benefits from sharing and enhanced transmission?

### Biodiversity governance and knowledge transmission

The Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) programme seeks to empower local communities in biodiversity governance by highlighting the central role that their knowledge, practices and worldviews play, alongside science, in sustainable development. One example is the field project with the Mayangna of Nicaragua's Bosawas Biosphere Reserve. A rigorous recording of indigenous knowledge of aquatic resources demonstrates its multiple facets and provides a first basis for

### Challenges for UNESCO

Traditional knowledge calls into question many fundamental notions. Local communities can no longer be viewed as passive receivers of development aid. They possess their own rich understandings about the natural milieu and their own interpretations about how it should be managed. When these are ignored by scientists and resource managers, efforts to conserve local ecosystems may falter and local livelihoods may be undermined.

# Traditional knowledge

## ICTs for intercultural dialogue and diversity (CI with CLT)

Globalization increasingly puts at risk cultural resources of indigenous peoples. This project aims to preserve these resources through access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and capacity building in content development. By fostering intercultural dialogue between marginalized indigenous peoples and other groups in both urban and rural settings, the use of ICTs contributes to asserting identities and fighting discrimination. This project enables indigenous stakeholders to acquire greater mastery of ICTs, thus opening new opportunities for income-generation. In 2004-05, 10 indigenous communities were trained in a-v content production and ICT use, resulting in 13 documentaries, 1 fiction, 1 video clip and 2 DVDs with A-V archives. International awareness was raised about indigenous creativity and its expression through ICTs, thus reinforcing intercultural dialogue and cultural diversity.

dialogue with State managers. LINKS also seeks to maintain the vitality of knowledge within communities by reinforcing knowledge transmission from elders to youth. To this end, new ICTs are used as vehicles for traditional knowledge, such as the interactive CD-ROM on Pacific Islander knowledge of the ocean environment: *The Canoe Is the People: Indigenous Navigation in the Pacific*.

### Intangible Cultural Heritage

One of the domains recognized in the 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* is 'knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe'. As such, UNESCO assists Member States in developing activities and programmes to safeguard such knowledge and practices, as well as languages, in particular endangered languages, as vehicles for intangible cultural heritage and traditional knowledge. "Safeguarding" measures ensure the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, and revitalization. State Parties are to ensure wide participation of the communities that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management.

### Cultural Diversity

The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) and the recent Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005) recognize traditional knowledge systems as part of humanity's cultural heritage and their

protection and promotion as an ethical imperative. The UNESCO Programme on Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogue supports the development of tools and methodologies that make traditional knowledge systems visible in media that can be understood by all cultures. The challenge is to identify spaces and processes that allow lesser or non-recognized knowledge systems to be represented with respect and cultural sensitivity to create opportunities for dialogue with all society.

### Traditional knowledge and intercultural education

Traditional forms of transmission are interlinked with the knowledge itself. While local language is a vehicle for the transmission of traditional knowledge within a linguistic community, a wider language of communication, that may be a national or official language allows for knowledge sharing with other cultural groups. Mutual consultation and dialogue between bearers of traditional knowledge and "non bearers" using both local and mainstream languages is a prerequisite for the promotion and preservation of traditional/local knowledge.

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