

P O S T C A R D

73. Local knowledge as a common good

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Vulnerable people suffer multiple inequalities which thwart their development. These inequalities are mainly sustained by unequal relations with groups that hold economic, social, political, environmental and cultural power, and which impose an exclusive way of constructing knowledge. We can speak of 'unequal knowledge', where some knowledges are considered more valid than others. Social life is approached from only one way of knowing—that and knowing-how, imposed by educational, religious and legal institutions. When other knowledges are integrated into this institutionalized way of knowing, it is in a decontextualized way, as if knowledge were a commodity that can be taken out of where it is produced and consumed.

In Latin America, the knowledges of the most vulnerable populations have traditionally been made invisible by economically and politically powerful groups. The knowledge of indigenous people, *campesinos/as* (peasants or rural people), women, and people of African descent has been devalued by being categorized as tacit knowledge which is transmitted through experience, orality, practice and imitation. In these same populations, 'unequal knowledge' is practised whereby gender, age and ethnic origin affect the value assigned to knowledge.

But more recently, efforts to challenge global problems such as climate change, chronic disease, water management and new agricultural methods have begun to prioritize the 'extraction of local knowledge' through research processes studying collective wisdom.

The work of Cooperativa Sulá Batsú in Costa Rica is based on the principle that local knowledges belong to the people who have generated them, and as such are common goods that must be safeguarded.

The problem is highly complex because knowledge is an intangible asset and very difficult to appropriate in this way. A key condition is the existence of community collectives responsible for making knowledge dynamic, safeguarding it and appropriating it, and this is the main focus of Cooperativa Sulá Batsú.

Sulá Batsú supports the horizontal exchange of common knowledge between local collectives. This exchange allows the knowledge produced by those communities throughout their history to be recognized, documented and visualized. Information and communications technologies (ICT) play a key role in this process.

The cooperative works with young people, children and women from indigenous, *campesino*, rural, border and coastal communities in Central America, using ICTs to create and retrieve the telling of local stories through images, sound and text. The documentation and recovery of this community know-how is as vital as the organizational processes themselves, which are led by groups of young people, children and women in their communities. The local knowledge now being documented is able to be recognized, re-encountered and reappropriated as a common good of the people.

This process has strengthened local groups, allowing them to limit the indiscriminate extraction of local knowledge, to negotiate the way research is carried out, to have a say in terms of intellectual property of local knowledge, and to defend local knowledge as their own treasure which belongs to their communities.

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