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**Abstract**

Transnational environmental NGOs (ENGOS) have played a leading role in furthering the cause of local knowledge of biodiversity, and indeed of most environmental issues, in national and international arenas. But it is impossible to present this as a unified drive, because the generic term “NGO” is now virtually meaningless. Focusing on the international roles and the internal workings of ENGOS, this article sets out to show how there have been three main blocs of actors since 1990: the epistemic community striving to safeguard cultural and biological diversity, the globalized nature reserves sector and the transnational advocacy networks. The fact that the local knowledge issue has entered international arenas through debate on the global environmental crisis is the key to understanding such knowledge. Furthermore, that understanding of “local” knowledge hinges on insight into the thinking behind the actions and the political stance of each of those three blocs of actors. Examining the interconnection between the international and the national – in this case, Mexican – contexts reveals how local knowledge has become an important issue-area, with significant political implications.

Keywords :

### **Biographical note**

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**Local knowledge in the hands of transnational NGO networks:  
a Mexican viewpoint \***

**David Dumoulin**

Environmental NGOs (ENGOS) have played a major role in promoting the inclusion and advancement of local knowledge – and, indeed, environmental issues as whole – in international negotiations, not least through the discussions surrounding the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). This NGO nebula, however, should no longer be regarded as a coherent body of actors championing the same cause in international arenas. On the contrary, the past twenty years have seen a significant degree of diversification in the way in which they participate in a political world order and environmental field that have themselves undergone deep-rooted change. Nowadays, it seems that each ENGO must be analysed according to its position within a transnational network rather than as an individual actor. This article begins with the example of the correlation between international arenas and the national arenas of Mexico in order to recall how their roles have changed. The decision to do so is based on the belief that it is in exploring that correlation, rather than just the international debate, that one can best measure how much progress has actually been made in regard to the issue of local knowledge. The concept of sustainable development, which serves as a common focus for transnational environmental protection networks, is ambiguous and provides little more than a starting-point for the discussions. The issues involved in that concept have rapidly given rise to contradictory positions, with divergent political opinions on solutions to the global environmental crisis. The upshot is that the various ENGO networks are not all pursuing the same ends. Within this already fragmented context, the reappearance of the issue of local knowledge is furthermore linked to the mobilization of indigenous peoples and the debate on financial remuneration for intellectual property rights. Understandably, while some scientists may well defend such knowledge for its own sake, the advancement of the issue in international arenas has also provided a good many opportunities for its exploitation. Drawing on the transnational political approach, together with field surveys carried out in Mexico and at the NGOs' international headquarters, this article describes how the transnational networks handle local knowledge when they enter the international fray.

As a subject circulating in international arenas, “local knowledge” should preferably be defined from a constructivist point of view. Ultimately, most of the current thinking about

local knowledge comes from actors with an international understanding of the problems; actors translating localized knowledge into the “global” discourse of science.<sup>1</sup> What is therefore described as “local knowledge” does not constitute the whole culture of the populations studied, but corresponds to a range of spotlighted fragments. The fact that those fragments have been given prominence over the past decade by individuals with their own particular focus of interest – their concern about the “global” environmental crisis – perpetuates the long-standing campaign of a certain form of applied anthropology. Cultural features are classified as being either fit to continue as they are, or else in need of modernization. The ambiguity is that “local” knowledge ultimately exists only in relation to “global” knowledge, and insofar as its rationale and usefulness are confirmed through critical thinking about development within the context of the pursuit of solutions to the global environmental crisis and its counterpart issue-area: the cultural impacts of globalization (Agrawal, 2002).

It would undoubtedly be wrong to say that such knowledge exists only by virtue of international debate, and that it does not match any form of reality. What we are dealing with here amounts to no more than the design and political trajectory of a label, rather than its corresponding content. Studying the validation of “local knowledge”, however, compels one to consider how each of the actors present, each with its own agenda, contributes to the forging of the social representations to which such knowledge refers. Environmentalists primarily set out to criticize our development models and/or to conserve – or better manage – fragile and highly “biodiverse” ecosystems. Anthropologists and theorists, meanwhile, may broach the subject with a view to questioning scientific epistemology, taking a stand in an anthropological debate on the existence of human universals or even supporting the struggles of indigenous peoples. All of the actors in the international arenas, each through the lens of their own interests (including the indigenous leaders, states, international cooperation agencies and biotechnology companies<sup>2</sup>), have contributed to the emergence of an accepted definition of “local knowledge”. The following pages deal with just a fraction of the complex interplay between *scientists, states, businesses, indigenous movements and NGOs*, namely, the ENGOS’ role in endorsing the knowledge of *indigenous* populations in regard to biodiversity. Nor do the various transnational networks in which those ENGOS take part have the same role in the official endorsement process. In order to distinguish one such network from the next, emphasis will be placed on their role in the interrelationship between the national (in this case Mexican) and international levels. They have also been classified on the

basis of analysis of their internal workings, the social backgrounds of their members and their funding sources, so as to work out their overall political position. The aim here is not to put forward a comprehensive and static classification of NGOs, as has often been attempted in the past, but rather to show that those NGOs should be understood through the positions they occupy within a particular type of transnational network. However, setting aside the possibility of hybrid rationales, studying the NGOs' transnational chains of interdependence and the cultural background of their members will help to bring out a number of structural trends. The resulting range of profiles will give us an insight into the various roles that ENGOs have played in the process of endorsing biodiversity-related local knowledge. Each stage of that process will be seen to have been dominated by a particular type of ENGO, with its own particular way of presenting the issue.

During the first stage, in the 1970s and 1980s, the local knowledge issue initially attracted a great deal of attention, especially in Mexico, where the debate at the time reflected the spread of a form of Third-World nationalism and the pursuit of ecodevelopment strategies to counter an imported rural development model that had had particularly destructive consequences in tropical areas (Toledo *et al.*, 1985; Leff, 1993). So the bulk of the nascent environmental movement in Mexico was characterized by ethnobotanical research and the proposals it yielded for rural development. It may be premature, perhaps, to refer to the organizations supporting these projects as ENGOs, but it is interesting to note the interdependence between a particular way of presenting the protection of local knowledge and the institutional structure of the protectors. The fact is that the initial phase of reasserting the value of local knowledge for the benefit of national development was dominated by the almost wholly state-funded, semi-public research centres, whose academic executives were close to the political elites. At the international level, the debate at the time centred on the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), while the international agricultural research centres were championing the concepts of "the heritage of humanity" and "farmers' rights".

At the beginning of the 1990s, the local knowledge issue returned to the fore within a context of growing internationalization. The proliferation of ENGOs at national and international levels played an important part in justifying a new, global-oriented approach to nature conservation, through the concept of "biodiversity". At the same time, the questioning of the nationalist model and the rise of the indigenous rights movements, especially in Latin America, tended to "ethnicize" the rhetoric and to shift the thinking from the role of

traditional knowledge and small farmers to the safeguarding of cultural diversity and the role of indigenous populations. There then emerged three ways of presenting the protection of what came to be known by the somewhat more restrictive title of “indigenous knowledge”: first, that of an “epistemic community” of ethnobiological experts; second, that of a “globalized sector of nature reserve management”; and finally, that of the “transnational advocacy networks”, the political environmentalists prevailing over the final stage of the endorsement process in Mexico. Using that country as a case study, we can underscore how the international agenda has influenced national agendas.

### **Activist-experts promoting cultural and biological diversity**

Within this ENGO-like nebula of actors is a small group active in international arenas, exerting influence at a primarily intellectual level, and a number of whose key members are based in Mexico. In addition to its overall role in endorsing the status of biodiversity-related indigenous knowledge, this group has generally reformulated the issue in terms of the protection of the world’s cultural and biological diversity. It is not so much an NGO as what Hass (1992) and others have called an “epistemic community”,<sup>3</sup> i.e. a relatively small number of individuals, primarily scientists and “experts”, who share a particular view of the “realities” and agree on the need to take certain measures. Their main interest lies in imposing a view of the issues and how to resolve them on the decision-makers. This concept is well suited to the group of experts reformulating the indigenous knowledge issue, showing that the safeguarding of cultural diversity is intrinsically bound up with the safeguarding of biodiversity; that both should be placed at top of the global agenda; and that the indigenous movements are the “natural” partners of the actors striving for biodiversity conservation. The epistemic community plays a crucial role, not only in creating a cognitive framework but also in disseminating information. It has propagated a series of symbols and tools that facilitate such dissemination<sup>4</sup>: a map showing the overlapping of areas inhabited by indigenous peoples and featuring the most substantial biodiversity; worldwide surveys that are useful for preparing country-specific tables showing the correlation between the number of languages spoken and the number of endemic species at global level; and scientific explanations for the existence of “biocultural diversity” (Maffi, 2000) on the fringes of industrialized areas. All of these graphic and measurable elements, these leitmotifs, enhanced by means of well-orchestrated communication strategies, have played a key part in reformulating the issue of

local knowledge through their overall aim of safeguarding the world's cultural and biological diversity.

So who are the members of this small, internationally active group? It can be said to revolve around the action of a handful of experts in the field of ethnobiology and other related disciplines, especially the International Society of Ethnobiology (ISE), together with the leaders of the Amazon Alliance, the Forest People Programme, the World Rainforest Movement and Cultural Survival. They share information and validation principles that stem from their similar academic backgrounds, and have common values (enhancement of cultural and biological diversity for the future of humankind) and political aims (to influence international organizations and national policy-making). In the 1980s, a number of researchers were already backing this agenda, but there was no link between research, political activity and political windows of opportunity at global level. The epistemic community can be said to have entered the political arena in 1988 with the International Congress of Ethnobiology held in Belém (Brazil), which led to the setting up of the ISE and a charter of standards of practice in ethnobiology, enshrined in the Belém Declaration (stressing the “inextricable link between cultural and biological diversity”), and the alliance of international indigenous movement leaders expressed in the Declaration of Kari-Oca.<sup>5</sup>

An illustration of the epistemic community's agenda, alliances and range of actions can be seen in the background of one of its leading protagonists, Darell Posey. In his role as an intermediary between the scientists and the activist campaigns, which he first took up when carrying out research on the Kayapó people in Brazil, he has mobilized his contacts within the North American ethnobiological community (academic legitimacy) and triumphed in his battles against the World Bank's mega-projects in the Amazon (earning him approved status in the eyes of indigenous leaders and giving him knowledge of the world of international organizations). His career path in this domain has covered ten years of intense activity under the auspices of the ISE, which he founded and headed and whose biennial congresses serve to sustain the delicate balance between the scientific arena and the advancement of indigenous leaders. He acts on the strength of academic positions held simultaneously in different countries and has taken part in a good many projects, in the setting up of institutions and in working meetings in Latin America, Europe, Indonesia and China. His contacts have enabled him to support media coverage of the declarations of indigenous peoples in different regions.



His widely circulated publications continue to be the major benchmarks on the theme of promoting biodiversity-related local knowledge (Posey and Dutfield, 1997; Posey, 1999).

Darell Posey's outstanding influence stems, perhaps, from his personal relationship with each member of the geographically scattered "epistemic community", and from his inside knowledge of other spheres subjected to increasingly intense lobbying action. Indeed, the main achievement of this small group of academic activists has been to have its agenda adopted by other internationally influential actors, first and foremost through an alliance with indigenous leaders whose voices are commanding ever – increasing attention.<sup>6</sup> With the issue of biodiversity-related indigenous knowledge now established on the international agenda, states and all of the actors working for the conservation of natural resources have been, with varying degrees of reluctance, compelled to address it. After the discussions on the Convention on Biodiversity at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, all intergovernmental organizations were obliged to include this item in their activities.

The epistemic community's Mexican members may not have done much of the lobbying in international arenas, but they do remain in regular contact with the group working in that area of activity. Like the latter, they have acted as intermediaries between the scientific and political arenas through a number of organizations and research projects that could be classed as "ENGOs". Several individuals were already involved in the above-mentioned "spotlighting" stage of the 1970s and 1980s, but their stance has shifted. Changes in the national and international political contexts have given fresh impetus to the project, leading to the recycling of the gradually accrued critical mass of ideas. This has led to a shift from a Marxist-leaning, nationalistic form of ethnobiology to a global outlook geared to defending indigenous rights and safeguarding biodiversity.

On a par with their role at international level, not all of the Mexican ethnobotanical community has been participating in the epistemic community's action to safeguard cultural and biological diversity. That action may be seen as having four key features.

– In the 1990s, Mexican ethnobotany was no longer held together as a discipline by large-scale federating projects but by a reticular (sporadic) communication structure. Its early promise had given way to a degree of disappointment with respect to the discipline's role and methods, and it found itself somewhat marginalized in the scientific fields of ecology and

biology. Traditional knowledge, figuring less directly in official pronouncements, became one of a number of minor components of rural development projects, even if some Mexican ethnobotanists were attracting fresh attention at international level (Martinez Alvaro, 1994).

– A few experts or academics emerging from the previous phase can be regarded as active members of the epistemic community at national level, although intercommunication between them remains sporadic. They are taking advantage of the influence afforded by their professional position, their published work (books and journal articles) and their role as advisers to the Government and to international donors. They have set out to prove the existence in Mexico of an “indigenous environmental movement” acting in the defence of “biocultural diversity”, although the movement’s leaders would not describe it in quite those terms (Leff, 1998; Toledo, 1991).

– The movement known in Mexico as “social environmentalism” is far larger than the group of ethnobotanists. It is even represented by the Minister of the Environment (1994-2000) and acts as a sort of second circle conducive to the new way of presenting the case for the safeguarding of indigenous knowledge. The members of that movement, however, accept the epistemic community’s agenda only for strategic purposes, as they have recognized how effective it is as a “political banner” in the country’s political wrangling over the choice of rural development model (Toledo, 2000). Other than that, they continue to focus on efforts to find productive alternatives and methods for a sustainable development model, and on combating poverty. Safeguarding cultural or biological diversity *per se* therefore remains of secondary importance.

– The relative weakness of alliances between the environmentalist and indigenous movements at national level is a significant obstacle to getting the biodiversity-related indigenous knowledge issue on to the national agenda. This situation is largely attributable to the Zapatista movement that emerged from the 1994 uprising, and which occupies a central position in this regard compared to other indigenous movements in Latin America. The fact is that it has huge influence over the indigenous policy debate, yet does not go so far as to link it to environmental concerns or to forge alliances with the environmentalist actors.

The epistemic community experts, then, are defending a similar agenda with a similar range of actions as their counterparts in international arenas, only with their own personal

understanding of the issues and within a markedly less favourable context. A study of the projects of international donors (UNDP, UNEP, World Bank) and public agencies (National Institute of Indigenous Peoples [INI], the new environment ministry [SEMARNAP]) shows how the epistemic community's language and arguments have gradually come into common usage within a context of the growing importance of the biodiversity issue and the "ethnicization" of the debate. Institutional projects (run by INI and UNDP) have made it possible to produce previously unavailable information and then to circulate it among the experts. Examples of such "evidence" in support of arguments include the cartographic relationship at national level between highly biodiverse areas, nature reserves and high-density indigenous population areas; studies of environmental degradation and economic alternatives for those indigenous areas; and documentary analysis of each of the country's indigenous populations' knowledge and management of natural resources (Lara, 1995; Lara and Bravo, 1997). The cartographic data constitute undoubtedly the most persuasive argument, and the most readily communicable to international organizations and the public at large.

From 1995, the dissemination effort focused on academic institutions and social organizations, with seminars on "indigenous people and biodiversity", working meetings and conferences on "eco-indigenous issues" as well as forums, workshops and the publication of handbooks for rural organizations and villagers. Held back by the indigenous movement's lack of interest at national level, the new programme for the protection of cultural and biological diversity has nonetheless been taken up by three sectors featuring a host of regional and national organizations that emerged from the first stage of the 1980s: the programme for the promotion of traditional medicines, which became more substantial over the ensuing 15 years, the indigenous organic coffee producers' movement, and the community forestry movement. At state level, the new environment ministry and the museums sector – more or less the only ones concerned with this issue – have set up a number of small-scale projects to support biodiversity-related indigenous knowledge.

Ultimately, these actors are first and foremost networked individuals, but their action is generally likened to that of the ENGOs because they often happen to be members of the latter and they create similar organizations: scientific associations, research and outreach centres and so on. This group of ethnobiology-related experts provides an effective account of – and fresh arguments for – the safeguarding of indigenous knowledge about the natural

environment, carries out a significant degree of dissemination work and facilitates contact among various actors. Beyond safeguarding indigenous rights and biodiversity and underscoring the intrinsic link that binds the two, however, the way its agenda translates into practical policy-making can vary according to national contexts or the nature of the actors promoting it. Asking pharmaceutical companies to pay indigenous peoples for their contribution to their research does not amount to a defence of those peoples' territorial autonomy; nor, indeed, is it a demand for an overall transformation of the economic system that is destroying the cultural and natural environment.

### **Little influence within the globalized conservation sector**

The highest-profile ENGOs are those involved in the conservation of biodiversity and the creation of nature reserves in the 1990s, and whose members are often known as "conservationists". They were compelled to take into account the issue of biodiversity-related indigenous knowledge, but only paid it lip service, strictly in the interests of their primary objective. They have only sought to advance the indigenous knowledge issue as a means of justifying nature reserve policy at international level. As far as their local branches are concerned, it has sometimes been a matter of facilitating the "participatory policies" that have been attempted in many nature reserves.

These ENGOs are involved in what I will here call "globalized sectoral policy-making". This amounts to a vertically organized system of actors, with a so-called "global" decision-making centre (IGO or international arena) and national and "local" intermediaries. Its style of action is mainly one of project management; and its approach to endorsement is more technical than political, featuring a tendency to specialize in a single issue via sector-specific action. It includes "conventional" nature conservation NGOs whose internal workings and funding sources are akin to those found in the world of transnational corporations. By dint of their financing and their members' career paths and informal networks, these ENGOs figure in a vertical system extending from international arenas and offices to projects at local level. Most of the public agency and IGO office staff working in the management of nature reserves may be regarded as belonging to this globalized sector in that they share the same concerns and professional networks. In Latin America, the sector depends on the World Bank's GEF office, USAID, members of the World Conservation Union (IUCN), a number of North American public agencies and three ENGOs that dominate the world conservation market: The Nature

Conservancy (TNC), Conservation International and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). The sector's integration is illustrated by cross-financing, the WWF/World Bank contract, the WWF/IUCN contracts, the existence of the Biodiversity Support Group – made up of the WWF, TNC and the World Resources Institute (WRI) – a host of joint projects, etc. Its vertical integration is especially clear to see in the training provided by organizations of the North for nature reserve staff in the countries of the South, as well as in the despatching of expert missions and the dissemination of management methods from international offices, and the largely international funding of nature reserve systems in the countries of the South.

The actors making up the “globalized nature reserve sector” have been timorously inching their way towards the issue of biodiversity-related indigenous knowledge after a long period of programmes that were repressive or at best indifferent towards local populations (Colchester, 1994; Kempf, 1993; Stevens, 1997). The first signs of this change could be seen at the 1982 World Congress on Protected Areas in Bali, but the issue was not clearly addressed before the 1992 Congress in Caracas. There are three parts to it: the building of the link between conservation and development, based on the World Conservation Strategy of 1980 and subsequently that of 1990; the local experience of the park managers beginning to attach importance to relations with ethnic minorities; and above all the gradual promotion of the participatory conservation paradigm in each of the sector's constituent organizations. The indigenous knowledge issue made it on to the agenda as a result of lobbying on the part of the epistemic community and the indigenous organizations, followed by the sector's first internal surveys. An illustration of the process may be seen in the adoption by the WWF and UICN of specific resolutions in 1996, and then the setting up of small monitoring units in each organization. It was in Latin America that this link emerged ever more clearly in the early 1990s, when almost 80 per cent of parks were shown to be inhabited by indigenous peoples (Amends and Amends, 1992).

The sector had trouble adapting to the enormous variety of indigenous peoples in the world, owing to the global nature of its *modi operandi* and outlook, and the fact that its funding agencies were relatively unaware of local realities and chose to use a standard image of “the Indian” at world level. Commitments to supporting indigenous peoples partly remained symbolic, and the declared partnership varied greatly in practice from one area of intervention to the next within a single organization and between different organizations (some large NGOs like TNC were making very little progress on that score). With the organizations' true

focus of interest still confined to biodiversity conservation, members of the sector knew little about the issue of indigenous knowledge and were not sure how to deal with it. Conflicts of interest with indigenous populations continued to arise in the protected areas, and criticism within the sector grew, drawing attention to the “romantic” dimension of the policies promoting indigenous knowledge.

In Mexico, the few large national NGOs and public agencies involved in managing protected areas were working closely with the national and regional offices of international NGOs and funding agencies. On account of their distinctive trajectory on coming into contact with the globalized sector, and their training first of all in zoology and then as biodiversity conservation professionals, most were clearly distinct from the above-mentioned Mexican social environmentalist movement. The setting up of a bona fide Ministry of the Environment in 1994, together with the opportunity to invest large amounts of GEF funding in the protected areas and renewed interest on the part of the globalized sector’s actors, gave them a new role within the work context of constructing a soundly-based nature reserve system. In Mexico, as at the international level, that sector’s ENGOs alternated between two standpoints. The dominant trend was one of local knowledge not being taken into account in the actual deployment of their projects. The other was the use of an image of “the Indian” which did not tally with Mexican reality, in view of the fact that it had been produced in the international arenas where such “indigenous populations” were very unevenly represented.

Some of the sector’s organizations have addressed the issue only rhetorically. Among the protected area professionals, some have been working in cooperation with the indigenous and farming communities that have inhabited those areas for a very long time. They have often been known to blend conventional conservation projects with sustainable development projects. But despite the host of “participatory conservation” methods practised in Mexico, those methods have generally remained superficial and have not taken local knowledge into account, save in a number of small-scale ecotourism projects with an add-on “cultural” component. Managers know little about this issue, which has been landed on them by the international offices, and they are not sure how to respond to it.

The World Bank-managed GEF programmes for nature reserves are typical of the way in which the “environmentalist Indian” image produced in the international arenas has been applied. Initially (1996-1999), Mexican partners arranged to work out how to interpret GEF

and World Bank guidelines (OP 4.20) on the “indigenous peoples” component of conservation projects, and the requirement to mount projects specifically geared to those populations. Next, after the initial phase had been assessed, with the relationship between biodiversity conservation and indigenous peoples having shifted to the centre of the international agenda, the World Bank issued tougher requirements on this point. There followed a lengthy period of acute crisis between World Bank officials, who were demanding special projects for the reserves located in what were classed as “indigenous” areas (municipalities where at least 30 per cent of inhabitants spoke an indigenous language), and the Mexican protected area agency officials who could not clearly distinguish between the indigenous populations and the others inhabiting multiethnic areas where every community had much the same patterns of production and organization. In spite of the “ethnicized” thinking prevailing in Mexico since 1994, the Mexican officials, who were especially ill-prepared for these sorts of projects, merely saw the populations they were dealing with as poor and marginalized rural people. In their eyes, the World Bank’s demands were typical of the kind of coercion exerted by a shortsighted “global” bureaucracy.

One sign of the superficial, and above all rhetorical, nature of the role played by the sector’s ENGOs in the granting of legitimate status to indigenous knowledge is that for several years those ENGOs – both in Mexico and at the level of international offices – had clearly distanced themselves from taking a general stance on indigenous issues or from including indigenous-population-specific components in their programmes on the grounds that their funding agencies were paying them for a more specific and pressing task: conserving biodiversity. Since their focus has not been on the “sustainable management” of natural resources, it has not been difficult for those actors to declare that there is in fact no exact coincidence today between indigenous areas, thriving “traditional knowledge” and biodiversity conservation.

### **Repoliticization of the issues through transnational advocacy networks**

Finally, there is a third type of ENGO involved in the justification of biodiversity-related indigenous knowledge: network-based organizations that mount campaigns aimed at criticizing and changing the dominant world order in the name of eco-activism. Indigenous knowledge is given prominence in its own right and as the heritage of humankind, but it is above all brandished in efforts to defend the position of marginalized rural populations and to combat the intellectual hegemony of neoliberalism. These actors have returned in force to the

public arena on the back of the issue of bioprospecting in indigenous areas and the defence of intellectual property rights.

The authors who have highlighted how these multinational advocacy networks operate (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Brysk, 2000) show them to be organized in a horizontal, reticular structure with support at local, national and international levels.<sup>7</sup> Their favoured mode of action tends towards mobilization and lobbying rather than management. Their endorsement work is more political than technical, and they tend to seek to reformulate the issues involved in various sectoral policies. Their goal is to stand up for certain populations and to alter the content of existing international cooperation programmes. Although this model does indeed match that of the networks defending indigenous rights, we wish to emphasize here the actors whose goal is to defend farmers' rights and to politicize ecology: organizations such as Genetic Resources Action International (GRAIN), Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI), Third World Network, *Vecinos Mundiales* and even Greenpeace nowadays play a major role in environmental discussions.

The thinking of these networks is close to the original formulation of the local knowledge issue and to the attempt to assert the category of human heritage and farmers' rights in the 1970s and 1980s. Their influence waned in the early 1990s when the theme was taken up by the global ecology arenas, and the CBD sanctioned the principle of state sovereignty while at the same time turning the focus to "gene pools". After the Earth Summit in Rio, however, they gradually regained a role through stressing the agricultural dimension of biodiversity and the participation of every traditional farming community in the safeguarding of cultural diversity (Alcorn, 1994). While their resources may be limited in comparison to those of the large conservation-oriented NGOs, these networks have played an active part in the CBD Conferences of the Parties, especially in discussions on Article 8(j) concerning local knowledge. In many countries of the South, their campaigns have helped place the safeguarding of biodiversity-related local knowledge on the national agenda and to prompt the discussion of law-making initiatives on the subject. Their campaigns rely heavily on information circulating on highly active, mainly Internet-based networks.

Media coverage of the bioprospecting issue has significantly raised the profile of these advocacy networks, whose views on traditional knowledge are not really new. Alongside the ENGOs involved in the nature reserves sector and the experts from ethnobotany-related



disciplines, there is a whole host of organizations and Government officials at work in Mexico to set up sustainable development projects in rural areas underpinned by a good many links with the international agencies most likely to fund them. There are organizations in such fields as agroecology, environmental education and community forestry that are supportive of the enhancement of indigenous knowledge for the purposes of natural resource management, even if the subject does not occupy a central place in their discourse. Those organizations, whose members are highly aware of both indigenous and biodiversity-related issues, have thus provided the transnational advocacy networks with fertile ground in which to sow the seeds of their new politicization campaign in defence of the intellectual property rights of indigenous peoples.

The first Week for Biological and Cultural Diversity staged in 2001 in San Cristóbal de las Casas in the state of Chiapas and the follow-up event in 2002, for instance, have served as opportunities to rally and unite the organizations working on local sustainable development projects, some of the members of the epistemic community examined earlier and actors belonging to the transnational environmental advocacy networks. Several years after the example set by an Amazonian country such as Colombia, the issue of protecting indigenous populations and paying them for their participation in pharmaceutical research have at last burst into the public arena in Mexico. The issue's strong comeback is due to the national branches of the transnational advocacy networks, when they finally managed to find local and national allies, the most able and energetic of them being the Chiapas-based traditional doctors' organization, COMPICH, together with a number of academics and journalists.

Previously, Mexico had a long-standing tradition of bioprospecting, and researchers from other countries were willing to let Mexican public institutions have only a few samples at the very most. By 2000, the context was dramatically different, and it was through inflammatory criticism of two international and highly institutionalized bioprospecting projects that the advocacy networks revived the local knowledge issue.<sup>8</sup> Their action matched a general upsurge in criticism levelled at all North-South exchanges as a whole, and led to acute politicization of the debate on indigenous knowledge. The advocacy networks clearly used the protection of biodiversity-related indigenous knowledge in order to take part in the wave of political mobilization, as much in the specific context of Chiapas and Mexico – marked by the presence of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and the regional elections – as in the wider context of the *Puebla Panama* plan launched by President Fox's new liberal

Government. In addition to exposing the national agenda as off-course and the backwardness of the country's legal framework, that campaign has revealed the fundamental point that the return of the local knowledge issue has come about through indigenous activism and social environmentalism in general. It has served as the banner under which new arenas and new political alliances have emerged in Mexico.

## **Conclusions**

The drive to give official endorsement to local knowledge about the natural environment has often been regarded as a challenge confined to scientific arenas. The epistemological debate has quickly turned political because there have actually been two approaches to the endorsement process, with two different sets of consequences: some tending to present bodies of local knowledge as “ethnoscience” validated by rationalistic Western thinking; while others argue, more radically, that they correspond to another view of “reality” seen through other divisions than the split between culture and environment. In the latter case, the “legitimacy” of the knowledge hinges on the institutionalization of a multiculturalist project that is taken seriously. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the fresh interest aroused by local knowledge has extended beyond the confines of scientific arenas, spreading into a largely transnational public arena. That resonance has been made possible by a new thinking in Western societies in regard to science, technology and cultural diversity (Leach and Fairhead, 2002). But it is interesting to take a closer look at the specific role of the social actors who have brought the issue into the political arenas. Focusing on NGOs restricts analysis to only a part of the interactions that have enabled local knowledge to gain fresh legitimate status. The entire process has been profoundly marked by the action of the indigenous movements, as well as by the more ambiguous role of the pharmaceutical companies and States in their negotiations within the framework of the CBD and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). Nevertheless, NGOs really have been crucial to the debate. On the one hand, the indigenous knowledge issue would never have managed to attract such widespread interest had it not been for the awareness of the worldwide environmental crisis and the will to find ways of curbing the erosion of biodiversity that the NGOs have played a major role in fostering. On the other hand, and more directly, the groups emerging from that broad-based “environmentalist movement” have contributed widely to the issue's increasing prominence in international and – as shown in the case of Mexico – national arenas.

The cognitive context has changed since the emergence of the term “NGO”. At times, this vague title no longer seems to serve any other purpose than to act as a reverse image, used to anathematize a group of ill-identified actors or a type of political mediation validated by the “Washington Consensus”.<sup>9</sup> While it may have sufficed in the mid-1980s as a means of designating actors of a “non-governmental” nature, which was generally taken to mean an opposition to the state, that is no longer the case, given the changes that political systems have undergone since that time, not least the interweaving of national and international and private and public actors. NGOs are now included in every branch of public action, which is why the categories used in this article tend to refer to such action. The “epistemic community” category serves to underscore the permeability between scientific and political arenas, whereas the opposition between the globalized nature reserve sector and the transnational advocacy networks reflects the very widespread opposition between policies and politics. Naturally, when reserve sector managers, for example, are trying to remain apolitical, there is nothing to prevent the official benchmark environmental policy from being confirmed. The above three categories also help draw attention to the rapid internationalization of the chains of interdependence in which the actors in question are held. By studying those chains and the individual backgrounds of the organizations’ members, we can distinguish several broad ENGO profiles. But reference to the three categories must be flexible, because the profiles will change in the light of stands taken and alliances forged in order to meet new challenges. So the need to adopt a position on the issue of biodiversity-related indigenous knowledge is a reliable indicator for assessing the relevance of those profiles. This challenge tends to bring out the key thrusts guiding the various environmental organizations and, hence, their scope in terms of alliances.

Rhetorical appeals may therefore be made to local knowledge, and it can be enlisted under a good many banners: to foster worldwide dialogue among different forms of knowledge and thinking on “post-development”; to support the claims of indigenous peoples; or to further efforts to “market” knowledge and to carry out biotechnological research. In spite of such dispersal – due to the manifold actors that have seized upon the issue on the international stage – it is perhaps surprising to see the new importance being given to cultural and biological diversity in so many arenas. It may be supposed that it is due to the desire of the people of the North to safeguard memory and the heritage, with the idea of “heritage” now close to being identified with that of diversity. That desire to preserve the natural heritage and

to support “indigenous peoples” is largely compensatory. It is no longer shaped by the underlying omnipresent image of the “Noble Savage”,<sup>10</sup> as in the modernity of the past, but by an aesthetic of fully flourishing diversity.

*Translated from French*

## Notes

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1. This “global” aspect remains an ideal, and giving actors “global” status continuous to motivate them. For a discussion on the political dimension of the international validation of “local knowledge”, see issue 173 of the *International Social Science Journal* (September 2002).

2. The indigenous leaders are trying to defend their position in the teeth of their States and the transnational corporations; to gain legal recognition for their lands or even, according to a wider-ranging concept, “territory”; and to hasten the advent of development projects that are better attuned to their needs. The big development funding agencies are rather more concerned about combating poverty – which is beginning to be linked to the vicious circle of “environmental degradation/cultural degradation” – and addressing the demands of “civil society”. The private-sector biotechnology companies, for their part, are keen to discover how to use a stable legal framework to silence those criticizing the plunder of resources, and to continue exploiting the biological resources of marginalized areas and the kind of knowledge that will speed up their search for active ingredients.

3. This concept is especially well suited to environmental and other highly uncertain domains, and has been reused a great deal in international relations since it was first clarified and popularized by Hass (1992, p.3): “An epistemic community is a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area. Although an epistemic community may consist of professionals from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds, they have (1) a shared set of normative and principled beliefs... (2) shared causal belief... (3) shared notions of validity... (4) a common policy enterprise” .

4. For more on the circulation of these tools, see the latest studies by Darell Posey (cited below), Luisa Maffi (of the *Tierra Lingua* organization), Victor Manuel Toledo (and his journal, *Etnoecologica*), MacChapin (formerly of Cultural Survival and now the director of Native Lands) and Janis Alcorn (formerly of WRI/WWF).

5. The community of ethnobiology professionals is not wholly involved in this political enterprise, but it has managed to contribute to the process without going through the ISE, working from national centres with their own traditions and the competing *Association internationale de botanique*.

6. This alliance has its origin primarily in the wave of tropical forest conservation projects and the indigenous leaders' conquest of international arenas, not least through Article 8(j) of the CBD and the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The two actors pioneering this rapprochement with the ENGOs have been the Coordinating Body for the Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA) and the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (Far North)

7. This concept draws on the work of the transnationalist school, especially that of Keck and Sikkink (1998: p.9), who offer the following definition: "Networks are forms of organization characterized by voluntary, reciprocal, and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange." The four characteristic tactics are: generation and dramatization of information; symbolic politics; moral blackmail; legal action and the call for accountability in accordance with signed agreements. Epistemic communities are based more on "causal beliefs", and the transnational defence networks on shared values. Keck and Sikkink go on to say (p.18): "The recent coupling of indigenous rights and environmental issues is a good example of a strategic venue shift by indigenous activists, who found the environmental arena more receptive to their claims than human rights venues had been." The approach has been used with positive heuristic influence on the human rights defence networks, the radical environmental movements and, more recently, indigenous activism.

8. "Diversa" with *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico*, and The Maya International Cooperative Biodiversity Group (Maya ICBG) with *El Colegio de la Frontera Sur* (ECOSUR) in Chiapas. More light is shed on the latter project in the article by Brent Berlin and Elois Ann Berlin in this issue.

9. Various reasons can be given for this development: growing awareness of issues of representation, disappointment in the face of professionalization and/or misappropriation of funds; the context of the state's return to a position of importance in opposition to the privatization of government functions via the NGOs; and, finally, progress in the thinking of the grass-roots populations themselves and many cooperation agencies on the pursuit of genuine "empowerment" to be achieved by the direct transfer of responsibilities (and funds) from NGOs to their beneficiaries.

10. Research is increasingly showing that places once believed to be literally “intact” – untouched by human beings – are actually not so, while Odum’s ecological “climax” concept, underpinning the idea of keeping “wilderness” in equilibrium, is very seriously contested by the ecology of secondary successions and comparisons between human and natural disturbances. Meanwhile, the opposition between “wild” and “civilized” is becoming less and less meaningful in thinking about otherness.

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