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Book chapter

**Forging a university-aided indigenous community education:
village elders and social development in a secondary city of
Cameroon**

Che, C.

UNIVERSITIES, SOCIETY AND DEVELOPMENT:

African Perspectives of
University Community Engagement
in Secondary Cities

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Universities, Society and Development: African Perspectives of University Community Engagement in Secondary Cities

Published by African Sun Media under the SUN PReSS imprint

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First edition 2022

ISBN 978-1-991201-84-3

ISBN 978-1-991201-85-0 (e-book)

<https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991201850>

Set in Muli Light 10/13.5

Cover design, typesetting and production by African Sun Media

SUN PReSS is an imprint of African Sun Media. Scholarly, professional and reference works are published under this imprint in print and electronic formats.

This publication can be ordered from:

orders@africansunmedia.co.za

Takealot: bit.ly/2monsfl

Google Books: bit.ly/2k1Uilm

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CHAPTER FIVE

Forging a university-aided indigenous community education: Village elders and social development in a secondary city of Cameroon

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Introduction and main propositions

Nation building in sub-Saharan Africa requires a rethink of social development. A possible approach is balancing the role of traditional and modern institutions within a framework of interconnectedness. Interconnectedness highlights the potential of creating synergies of knowledge based on the capacity of different community sectors, such as higher education, traditional elders and state institutions, to foster meaningful social development outcomes (Fonchingong, 2016). Through these interconnections, suitable channels of communication enable the voices of diverse communities to be captured. Such an approach provides insights into existing local knowledge systems for social development (Mbah, 2016). Village elders engender social resilience and are pivotal assets in community development transactions. Indigenous people have a knowledge base that can be pivotal in aiding social developmental drives (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017; Fonchingong, 2016; Mbah & Fonchingong, 2019). This knowledge can be viewed as indigenous and home-grown

knowledge (Breidlid, 2009; Mbah, 2019). Indigeneity has been advanced as a pathway to empowerment for 'marginalised' communities (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2015; Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017; Ndahinda, 2011).

Given its narrow context of being associated with remote localities, some proponents of scientific interventions and modern structures have shown little appreciation for the insight inherent in indigenous knowledge and earlier theorists perceived this as an obstacle to development (Agrawal, 1995; Awuah-Nyamekye, 2015). However, for many people, indigenous knowledge represents and reflects the ways they have come to understand themselves and their environment and how they relate with a wide range of resources and organise themselves to enrich their life and environment (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2015; Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017; Mbah, 2014). Many of the local interventions and relevance of indigenous knowledge and practices have a bearing on local governance, architecture biodiversity, climate change, agriculture, conservation, food security, medicine and conflict prevention amongst others, these can be construed as the fabrics of social development.

Informed by Barnett's (2011) engaged university curriculum and Boyer's (2016) scholarship of engagement, this paper unpicks the role and instrumentality of the university and local community stakeholders in contemporary social development. The conceptual ideas of asset-based approaches, indigenous knowledge, social capital and its connections to poverty alleviation (Eversole, McNeish & Cimadamore, 2005) all equally underpin this paper. Although scientific knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems are essential in addressing the social needs of a locality in a complementary manner, the latter could be said to be robustly different from the former. The differences between the two can be understood in relation to substantive, methodological, epistemological and contextual grounds.

From a substantive and methodological point of view, it is argued that indigenous knowledge engages with the livelihood of ordinary people in each geographical region; this knowledge is made up of non-technical insight, non-complex theories, and is close and broadly holistic (Agrawal, 1995; Awuah-Nyamekye, 2015). Briggs (2013) clarifies three broad themes associated with indigenous knowledge. Firstly, as a knowledge system associated with a specific geographical locality and by this assertion there are different types of indigenous knowledge, defined by a geographical region and its inhabitants. This is particularly relevant to this paper which focuses on a rural municipality in Cameroon and its environs. Secondly, the concept of indigenous knowledge has been considered useful in co-production of hybrid forms of learning through integration with scientific knowledge to address local community needs. This form of integration is premised on natives showing appreciation and conformity to knowledge which is relevant to their context (Bird-Naytowhow, et al., 2017). Thirdly, indigenous knowledge has been considered essential within the current

discourses of neoliberalism as a vital resource to meeting sustainable development (Auwah-Nyamekye, 2015; Breidlid, 2009). The World Bank underscores the need to mainstream indigenous knowledge into approaches and processes aimed towards poverty reduction in developing, and remote regions of the world. Given the relevance of this knowledge system, it is worthwhile to explore its benefits within the framework of social development, while taking into consideration the ecological mission of the engaged university (Barnett, 2010) in fostering engaged curriculum of social change, in partnerships with local stakeholders such as traditional elders.

Conceptual grounding: indigenous knowledge, community engagement, social justice and inequality

Whilst universities have a great scholarly mission of learning and teaching to energise the community (Barnett, 2010), little is known about the role elders play in enhancing community engagement and addressing issues of social justice and inequality. Lather (1998) and Missingham (2007; 2017) have argued that a critical pedagogy is needed to engage with community development principles, one of which is asset-based community development. The fundamental concern with such an approach is the need to promote a community development pedagogy within higher education that takes cognizance of a dialogic relationship between communality stakeholders and higher education actors (Ife & Tesoreiro, 2006; Kenny, 2006). Alongside the outward facing ethos of the university in addressing burning social and development concerns, the viability of elder traditions in furthering this mission cannot be underestimated. Finding spaces for openness and accountability with indigenous knowledge utilisation is crucial for community engagement. We advance the proposition that village elders provide a cutting edge in repositioning social development as they occupy important indigenous spaces and hold vital knowledge on how the community operates (Fonchingong, 2016). The integration of indigenous knowledge and institutions is proclaimed as vital for sustainable use of land, natural resources management, with positive outcomes on the natural ecology and ecosystem. Universities can tap into the social and cultural repositories of communities by enabling ways of curating knowledge (Kangalawe et al., 2014; Mbah & Fonchingong, 2019; World Bank, 1998). In transitional economies, current debates around social justice and development have underscored the importance of harnessing indigenous knowledge (ECA, 2013; Kangalawe et al., 2014), and building on available forms of social capital - vital networks in community regeneration through an asset-based approach (Burnell, 2013; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Ling & Dale, 2014; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003).

Indigenous knowledge, social capital and a restrained usage of community assets represents possibilities for enabling the world's rural poor to re-fashion social welfare and development, in line with contextual realities. Proponents of asset-

based community development have advanced the relevance of separating the dynamics between communities and their natural resources (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; McLean, 2014). We aim to advance a conceptual cooperative framework that considers the partnership between higher education institutions and communities, championed by village elders. As Ernest Boyer (1996; 2016) notes 'the academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic and moral problems', and must affirm its historic commitment to what Boyer calls the scholarship of engagement. This requires meaningful outreach, co-production and engagement strategies with local communities.

Aligned to Boyer's (2016) proposition is the notion of a scholarship of engagement and integration at two levels: (1) connecting the university's rich resources to the most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems, thereby providing a platform for action; and (2) creating a climate in which academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and creatively. This model according to Boyer (2016) broadens the universe of human discourse and enriches the quality of life for all. We take a step further to Boyer's (2016) scholarship of engagement by making the case for co-creation, forged through an enabling environment in which universities can partner with communities formally and informally, utilising their arsenal of indigenous resources, and know-how to resolve pressing social problems, thereby lowering inequality.

Contextual background

This research is focused primarily on Cameroon, one of the fifty-five sovereign states that make up the African Union. The site of this research was the municipality of Buea which is a secondary city situated in the Southwest Region - one of two English-speaking regions of Cameroon (Mbah, 2016). Created on 29 June 1977, the Buea Rural Council is a highly complex community caught between a blend of urban, semi-urban, rural and traditional settings. The municipality is made up of more than eighty villages spread across a surface area of 870 square kilometres with a total estimated population of above 200,000 inhabitants (Mbah, 2014). The principal ethnic group in the municipality is Bakweri with most of these groups residing in the villages. The urban but cosmopolitan setting within the municipality is the town of Buea. Buea is a small town located at the foot of Mount Cameroon, which is the highest mountain in West and Central Africa. Historically, it was the capital of German Kamerun during their colonial rule. It later became capital of Southern Cameroon under British colonial rule, the capital of the Federated State of West Cameroon, and now regional capital of the Southwest Region. Most of the inhabitants rely on agriculture (especially small scale farming) as a source of livelihood. English and French are two official languages used for general interaction while 'pidgin' is the lingua franca. In addition to the municipality of Buea which forms the bounded system we investigated, we also explored the state-owned university within it called the University of Buea,

created following the university reforms of 1993, and aimed at addressing issues of accessibility, diversity, quality, market needs, capacity building and national development (Njeuma et al., 1999). Despite the economic, management and infrastructural drawbacks that have plagued the University of Buea, it is fondly referred to as 'the place to be'. The university strives to pursue its academic mission of providing opportunities for quality education through teaching, research in response to market forces (UB, 2020). To strengthen its ties with other universities and be part of the global academic community, the university is a member of the Association of Commonwealth Universities and the Association of African Universities.

Methodological considerations

The research that underpins this chapter was nested within a qualitative study. We made a deliberate choice to adopt a qualitative approach in an attempt to give our participants, who are ordinary people of a residential community, an opportunity to have their voices heard. Employing conventional quantitative methods to the study would have impeded the intention to uncover opinions and ideas of the participants. Drawing on Holliday (2007), it can be maintained that qualitative research is predominantly concerned with the narratives of participants, texts and meaning construction. It often generates interesting insights through the open-ended nature of the enquiry process.

In-depth interviews were held in July 2016, with follow-up interviews in August 2019. A total of twenty-seven in-depth interviews were carried out with university and local stakeholders and the following questions were addressed: What indigenous strategies are deployed by local community stakeholders for social development? Are there challenges in indigenous strategies towards social development and how can the university's capacity and research spaces be tapped to guarantee sustainability?

Prior to start of data collection, institutional ethical approval was granted, and relevant protocols were observed. Consent was obtained from each participant who opted to be interviewed. Anonymity of participants was also guaranteed, and they had the right to withdraw from the enquiry process at any time.

The findings resulting from a comprehensive data analysis suggest that social change is inevitable. Interventions driven by university stakeholders and local partners were scrutinised with emphasis on embedding indigenous knowledge in developmental drives, service learning and social research agendas. This can be facilitated through a framework of trust, recognition and social accountability for the knowledge capacities of indigenous people. This paper constitutes an extended version of an earlier article published in *Sustainability Journal* in 2019 (Mbah & Fonchingong, 2019). Illustrated by means of extracts from field data derived from the in-depth

interviews, we stretch the argument made in that article further by exploring how universities can co-create indigenous knowledge with local community leaders to address social justice and inequality.

Essentially, the aim of this paper is twofold. First, to identify how universities grapple with the challenges of embedding indigenous knowledge. Second, to engage with how universities can aid relevant drivers, partnering with village elders and communities in addressing social justice and inequality. This research makes a robust argument for universities to partner with local communities and community elders to safeguard indigenous knowledge systems and indigenous knowledge practices. Building on Boyer's (2016) notion of the scholarship of engagement, it argues for the importance of both the documentation and stimulation of indigenous know how including in governance, biodiversity, food security, agriculture, pharmacopeia and traditional medicine, conservation, ethics, language, and language practices, language-based indigenous knowledge, local cultural practices, and the need for co-creating and co-delivering curricula.

Findings and discussion

Outside the broader public and societal import of universities, the insights into the research data represented below mirror considerations of social justice and inequality and how communities feel a sense of a 'lost voice'. Most communities feel left out in most university driven research that could be impactful in enhancing the wellbeing of community members. Within emerging themes discussed, participants proffered reflections on the process of harnessing indigenous knowledge as a catalyst for social change and development, spearheaded by village elders. Excerpts of participants' narratives have been used with the context of thick description, to provide an in-depth insight into the data.

Indigenous knowledge as catalyst for social change

Indigenous knowledge revolves around promoting the self-reliance and resilience of communities in resolving problems. A local councillor (X) summed up the place of indigenous knowledge:

we may want that we should preserve certain secret areas - can be a certain forest, an area which use to be a water shed - we can put an injunction for no one to go there and no one will get there. If people are having a conflict over land and it is difficult for the village council to solve, we can take up the matter and investigate properly so that when we want to resolve it, we do without people being agree. It shouldn't be a matter of I defeat you and there I am victorious - we solve the matter but the two of you remain members of the same community - so we owe that obligation.

So, the indigenous knowledge application goes with the preservation of certain customs which are made to enhance the village. For instance, the use of traditional medicine. And this is in the hands of the traditional council. I am always quick to say that if I was a Phyto chemist, one day I will verify what are the properties in the herbs consumed medicinally - so we should see where we can tap that indigenous knowledge to be able to help the world and not just our local community, Also peace, there are indigenous strategies of keeping peace as I said before. I learnt a lot that if the world was open and everybody knew every other thing, sometimes the world would have been in continuous warfare. Our role is to preserve not only artefacts as they don't speak, Afuacom does not speak as we were told it spoke in America.

From the above quote, we can deduce communities are structured with certain aspects like plants and the ecosystem are considered sacrosanct. The preservation of indigenous knowledge is pivotal in binding these communities together. This necessitates community-driven initiatives to understand, document, and project these valuable assets.

Building a scholarship of engagement as proposed by Boyer (1996, 2016) entails speeding up partnerships with communities to harness and share what they have got. Findings show that indigenous knowledge can build symbiotic relationships that are crucial in alleviating social problems within the community (Mbah & Fonchingong, 2019).

Worthy of note from the interviews are the challenges linked to preserving indigenous practices as a result of rapid modernisation and expansion within rural areas on the fringes of urban areas. One participant (C) observed:

what we can be proud of today, in those days my people were gifted and they loved wrestling - Bokwai was so prominent in wrestling and up to today the practice is still going on but we had some other people who were doing it with some types of beliefs that if he throws you down, part of your body will be broken. When it comes to wrestling, Bokwai is noted amongst the villages.

Apart from rearing animals, what brought the Bakweri man money was the tapping of wine but today the palms are all being fell. You cannot have one or two tappers in this village while there were too many before. The land too which was reserved for farming is going away, people are building houses and development is coming nearer and nearer and my fear is that tomorrow we will not have anywhere to farm.

Mostly Bokwai is a village which is planted in the middle of the Bakweri villages. So, the expansion of the village is difficult. We have shortage of land; the stranger population too is growing and it's dangerous in that indigenes may no longer have land to build even though we are happy the village is getting bigger in terms of the diversity of the population.

The role of sporting activities and their relevance in cultural entertainment and conferment of status is inferred from this quote. Partaking in social activities is a glue that fosters community cohesion. However, other employment related activities such as palm wine extraction have been impacted by limited availability of land due to urbanisation, leaving most villagers unable to secure farmlands.

As noted by participant C above, natural wine tapping, and other farming activities are crucial in regenerating the local community. Utilising indigenous products for production and transformation of the rural economy is vital for promoting social development. Livelihoods are impacted when the right rural development policies are put in place to regenerate the peasant economy (Scoones, 2009).

Another participant (F) made strong links between indigenous knowledge and culture rooted in practices that promote social justice and development:

We have, you know, a culture that has not been explored and the peoples' culture is an embodiment of wisdom and this manifest itself in their oral tradition. You have oral tales, you have words of wisdom, you have what is called proverbs. Chinua Achebe said proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten and there is no elder who will make a statement without necessarily making use of proverbs. Their language is wrapped, embellished with proverbial aesthetic – so it is very important and you see the handicap may just be that, like I said, it has not been explored the way we are supposed to do it.

What is borne out of the above quote is the importance of documenting language practices, and proverbs which are embellished with wisdom promoting indigenous knowledge and practices. These proverbs are rooted in cultural metaphor and language that speaks to the experiences, attributes, good as well bad outcomes for the community. Therefore, preserving and transmitting these messages can build community cohesion as they carry a powerful message based on concrete community events.

Indigenous knowledge is conceptualised as practices that help communities to protect endangered species and conserve the natural flora and fauna. Participant (K) summed this up when they said:

we are looking at deforestation or conservation and particularly conservation. All these birds that we talk for example that we are conserving endangered species. In the northwest for example, they have these chiefs and others who use red feathers. Those red feathers are not just from any bird, so it is of the interest to conserve that bird. A title may be in the southwest anybody can put on something – that feather is gotten from a specific bird, so those birds need to be conserved for these guys to get those and how do they conserve it? So those are aspects that are essentials. So, when we say these are real species and we need to conserve – we need to know how locals were doing it before.

The key point in the above quote relates to the importance of conserving biodiversity for cultural purposes. The flora and fauna do not only enhance community livelihoods but are used as symbols of community power and recognition for those who have contributed to the development of the community.

Utilising indigenous knowledge remains a catalyst for social change and a good source to meeting sustainable development needs of local communities (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2015; Breidlid, 2009).

Universities and community engagement

Emerging from the data is the challenge for universities to re-calibrate their mission by seeking out opportunities to co-create research with communities as a means of problem solving. Central to the mission of universities is to actively involve communities, particularly village elders and traditional authorities in mainstreaming indigenous knowledge and approaches. Participant (X) noted:

I think that it is very evident but the unfortunate thing is that there are different levels of preservation of these traditional knowledge – some have kept these knowledge for many years and it is the source of pride for people who say, well I come from an area where this and that is done. Some have lost – yes, modernity is also a very good thing but have affected the traditional settings like some of us being trained at universities. Myself as an example, I will say a perfect African should blend this knowledge and sometimes our indigenous knowledge should get on a world scale, not at the piecemeal level – but at some systematic level where it is also the source of ethics, social life, politics, medicine – not alternative medicine but part of it. For now, it is still seen as bush medicine or something we can learn a little bit from without taking it very seriously.

The above quote makes a good argument for documenting indigenous knowledge systematically. For communities to develop, a good starting point is to show understanding of its past successes and failures in order to carve out a way forward. Whilst modernity and westernisation continue to play a part, it is vitally important for communities to draw upon their repositories of indigenous aspects – culture, language and biodiversity to foster their development.

Another participant (J) noted the role of universities in helping communities to document aspects of indigenous knowledge and traditions that have been successfully handed down to other generations:

it is important our indigenous practices should not be dying down. It will help to archive or keep records of our indigenous practices for future generation. If they can recruit lecturers to teach Bakweri language which is dying out fast that would be good. There is also a group translating the English Bible to Bakweri and that is good.

This above quote conveys a point about the relevance of indigenous language as a medium of communication. Language is a critical aspect of indigenous practices, and an important reason why its preservation and dissemination cannot be minimised.

To complement the absence of documented material, another participant (F) noted:

... the major handicap is that they don't have any written document. The traditional rulers (chiefs/Fons) have a way of administration, they have their way how people are being administer even though they don't have laid down rules – but those rules exist just by their knowledge, they know that this is this, you have hierarchy, you have the Fon, you have the sub chiefs and others ...

It can be premised from the quotes above that indigenous knowledge rooted in cultural practices, language, ecosystem and biodiversity complement the social development initiatives of the community.

Missingham (2017) argues that an agenda for social justice and collective action informs the goals of critical pedagogy, and this is useful in re-calibrating the importance of social, relational, and organisational assets, pulled together to achieve individual and collective learning for social change.

Village elders and social development

Our research findings underline the centrality of village elders and other traditional institutions in problem solving. The ultimate challenge for universities is to make themselves relevant to the amelioration of social problems, removing barriers to social justice and inequality by working closely with communities. Participant X captured the instrumentality of village elders and positive outcomes on community and social development at micro-levels when they said:

With respect to indigenous knowledge, I would like to say, people run the villages according to indigenous knowledge. Besides that, they can, so, well let us also have a village council. A village council is not this other part, but daily when a person has a problem, he is going to the traditional part, he is not going to the council which is made of quarter heads and elected officials who may be collecting tax, though tax is not being collected nowadays. But who is a tax collector in those days so who may for instance want to manage or mobilise people to run around? The indigenous knowledge is to our own side where it is about indigenous rules of government indigenous religious practices and although people see only the religious practices and mystify them. Even issues with respect to running family matters etc, it is expected that it is people of the traditional side – either meeting in the villages or towns will investigate people's problems.

What is inferred from the above quote is a vivid illustration of the dimensions of indigenous knowledge which revolves around traditional authority and rules of governance, religion, family, and community cohesion.

Notably, there are different layers of traditional authority and governance that universities can tap into to address problem-based challenges, crucial in addressing social justice (Kenny, 2006). Another participant (B) differentiated between of the role local council and traditional authority thus:

A local council is a village people. These are people who can run regular issues like settling small cases – they can judge a matter that cannot be judged at the local level. If they want people to go and do communal work, they are the ones who can do all of that as well as collecting funds – we are not involved in that but if it is to take a decision about asking government to give a school, we can take such decision. If people are encroaching into the land of a neighbouring village and attracting a conflict with our own community, we can sit and decide – that is the work of a traditional council. Then there is a village council, there is a quarter council and there is another inner smaller group which is the Fon's own council. So, these councils adjudicate over traditional matters and dispense indigenous knowledge.

Village elders are the repository of wisdom and there are symbols such as folktales, myths, legends, proverbs and traditional drums that are deployed when needed. Participant F noted:

... students now have the tasks of identifying elements of orality like proverbs, legends, myths, wellerism, oral tales, dance, songs... you see, even drums. Drums in Africa are powerful symbols of communication. When they play, let's say an elderly person will tell you that it is a signal that there is war. If it's just for entertainment, an elderly person will tell you that. So, drums have a language on its own that can only be decoded by the elderly. That is also education – somebody can write a paper on just the symbolism of drum.

Overall, it emerged from the findings that there are rigid traditional structures and community layers of governance with village elders tasked with undertaking specific village duties. The quote below talks about the different roles or 'offices' that different persons occupy in the social organisation of the community. These duties could range from ensuring the security of the village, to preserving its cultural artefacts and symbols as captured in the words of participant G below:

you have the Fon, the sub chiefs. You also have the elders, those they call the Tarsheys. The Tarnwaron – those guys with red feathers, those with the porcupine – those are the elders. They have a responsibility; there are some from the Nfu house – is like the military wing – the warriors. These are those if there is a tribal war, they sound the drum – they have their own house where they hold weekly meetings. You also have the Kwifon where the Fon is crowned. They have the authority to discipline the Fon.

Informal indigenous forms of education have meaningful outcomes on members of the community. Engaging with local communities to promote these forms of informal cultural knowledge transmission is crucial to social justice and tackling inequality as a participant L noted:

I think a lot of plant medicine is informed by indigenous knowledge and they share information on how to deal with malaria, high fever, colds with indigenous herbs. So, they usually present these things at their meetings – this is local information of the herbs they have in their locality and how they can be used for prevention and treatment. They also have their traditional way of conserving daily activities likes Cassava grinding to turn it into water fufu, garri.

Village elders are very pivotal in driving through social justice and addressing diverse forms of inequality through utilisation of indigenous know-how. Their resourcefulness in social development is anchored on indigenous governance mechanisms that provide social equilibrium within communities. Such community assets are vital for social development drives (Fonchingong, 2016; Taylor, 2008; Westerman, 2009), and crucial in fostering social justice and tackling inequality (Kenny, 2006). Education pioneered by universities is critical for social change and social justice (Crowther, Galloway & Martin, 2005).

Co-production and co-creation strategies

Working with universities on burning social development concerns, issues like climate change and agricultural production, are some of the problem-based challenges that universities can resolve in partnership with communities and village elders. As participant F observed:

I think universities and communities can work together because you know the population is also growing and the land is limited. You go to my village and you can see people crying they don't have maize. I grew up in my village and understand that we use to eat corn fufu from 1st to 31st but now the people are crying which means there is a problem. The soil has been exhausted and secondly they don't have good storage, the beans are bad, so if they can have that relationship with the university, that would be good and would boost production, preservation of the crops and so on ...

The message being conveyed in the above quote is the importance of food security. Overuse of land has created scarcity and the way out is for universities to work with communities to find creative solutions such as food storage.

The symbiotic relationship between universities and communities and the need for heads of communities (Fons) to embrace social change were echoed in the findings. Participant I noted:

... though traditional structures are very rigid and resist change, but I think that if, let's say they successfully convince some of the Fons that change is necessary and so on, I think that whilst the indigenous people would benefit from the university, the university will also benefit from the people because the people have wisdom, culture and a way of life you can write a book on and you can explore that area in terms of research. So, I think there is a symbiotic relationship between the traditional society and the university ...

In terms of linkages between universities and communities, it is relevant to go beyond mere documentation of indigenous knowledge by considering capacity building. Participant G echoed this:

... the first linkage is to document the knowledge. Indigenous knowledge may not be used again based on practice but on information left behind which was documented. After documentation, you can now address their need for capacity building. We need to document the knowledge as it is so that we can get back to it sometime. So, the linkages could just be trying to document their knowledge, understanding how local communities' function ...

In order to build on indigenous knowledge and practices, universities are challenged to collaborate with communities through engagement in problem-based learning and research. This approach aligns with Boyer's (1996, 2016) conceptual framing of a scholarship of engagement, a perspective which warrants universities playing a vigorous role in the quest for solutions to intractable social and development concerns. As gatekeepers, village elders hold cultural power. Utilising these assets and indigenous mechanisms may be usefully channelled at the service of the community, which in turn can enable compliance (Fonchingong, 2016).

Conclusion and policy recommendations

The main evidence presented in this research relates to participants wanting a relationship with the university to: (1) document various dimensions of their indigenous knowledges and practices, such as their language, amongst others. (2) the 'location' of that knowledge and practice (reposited in the knowledge and practices of elders, of indigenous community/social structures and organisations, and transmitted through them; as well as (3) the request for the university to also share its knowledge on aspects such as food security and storage and (4) the actual dimensions of those indigenous knowledges and practices linked to social development, local governance; local social organisation; cultural practices; and language which is intrinsically connected to the everyday life of the community.

This research has flagged the challenge for universities in the South to build partnerships that can enable indigenous knowledge and practices to be safeguarded. The underlying rationale was to explore how universities can forge an indigenous community education policy. The instrumentality of village elders and other forms of informal education that are utilised to maintain social justice and address inequality are central to the process of problem-based interaction. Findings of the research indicate how communities conceptualise indigenous knowledge and point to complex layers of village authority and governance structures that are struggling to grapple with indigenous knowledge, whilst simultaneously contending with the task of promoting social development as a glue that binds communities together.

Boyer's (2016) scholarship of engagement is employed to consider how university-community engagement/engaged scholarship as a concept can help conceptualise a community education practice that is socially just and supports social development, as well as the documentation, preservation and transmission of indigenous knowledge. Underpinned by Boyer's (ibid) scholarship of engagement, the challenge is how universities in countries in the South, such as Cameroon, can help local communities document available forms of indigenous knowledge such as medicinal plants, herbs, and natural fauna (birds) that are increasingly endangered as a result of modernisation and social change. Whilst universities can rethink their civic and social agenda, a possibility is to consider a conceptual framework for cooperative higher education through project-based learning and investigations co-created with local communities. A community education policy that amalgamates the contribution of elders, informed by an outreach programme designed by universities in collaboration with local communities will generate streams of engagement. This requires a measured approach, including impact, frameworks and practices that engage local communities to address intractable social problems.

Co-creation and co-delivery of carefully designed curricula on plant botany, conservation techniques and other ecological approaches that have meaningful outcomes on livelihoods within communities cannot be delayed. Community engagement strategies and joint pedagogical approaches may enable universities to build a curriculum that responds to the changing demands and needs of the community.

Communities are keen to share their expertise with universities on various aspects of indigenous knowledge. Flora and fauna, specifically herbal pharmacopeia, plant botany, and disease treatment using traditionally tested practices that have been handed down the generations were identified as areas of interest. Through co-designed placement learning and other forms of service learning, universities could better engage local communities in the delivery of specialist modules on social change, social justice

and inequality. Local communities will benefit from synergies with universities and other stakeholders in the training and re-skilling of social development practitioners, needed to engineer social development in local communities.

At the heart of this paper is the proposition that universities are instrumental in documenting and galvanising the indigenous know-how of communities. Village elders and community leaders who oversee the process of social change and development are important stakeholders in social development. Universities' scholarly activities should be directed towards evaluating and supporting the activities of communities, as these touch on livelihoods from the ground-up. The partnership between universities and local communities is vital for social development in developing economies where social justice and surging inequality remain fundamental challenges.

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