



The Role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Promoting Social Development of Communities in Zimbabwe: A Case of Masvingo Urban District Ward 1

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the role of indigenous knowledge systems in promoting the social development of communities in Zimbabwe as many of the social development initiatives in Zimbabwean do not sufficiently harness indigenous knowledge systems in their processes. In Masvingo Urban, poverty manifests through social problems such as a high school dropout rate (Annual Education Statistics Profile Masvingo Province, 2017) and poor health delivery system. The study sought to establish the role of indigenous knowledge systems in promoting the social development of communities in Zimbabwe. The participatory development approach was used in this study. Using Masvingo Urban District Ward 1 as the study setting, the study applied a mixed methods approach, marrying qualitative and quantitative tools for investigation and analysis of data. For qualitative data, 8 key informants were purposively selected for in-depth interviews, while 8 more participants from the community were purposively selected for focus group discussions. The key informants were selected from 8 categories deemed to have expert knowledge for the subject under study. This enabled generation of hypothesis, and then validation was done quantitatively with 296 participants drawn from a population of approximately 1275 households from Ward 1 of Masvingo Urban District (ZimStat, 2022). Major findings indicated that the concept of IKSs is found to be ill-defined and insufficient within communities, thus failing to convincingly incorporate the same. The study established that when IKSs are ignored, there is unwillingness and withdrawal by locals from active participation in developmental initiatives. The study, therefore, recommends that the definition of IKSs needs not be limited to prior, perceived to be archaic knowledge, but to present and continuously refined indigenous beliefs, values and expectations which transcend into the confidence and willingness of local people to contribute to community development. This paper also recommends that there is need to educate communities and explore IKSs that are development-oriented in Zimbabwe. To achieve sustainable development in Zimbabwe, the study further recommends a collaborative inclusion of local persons, beliefs, and methodologies, consensually refining them to harness a developmental attitude and locally-birthered energy that fuels participation and dedication to development.

Key Terms: Indigenous Knowledge, Local empowerment, Modernity and Social Development



INTRODUCTION

IKSs refer to the complex set of knowledge, skills and technologies existing and developed around specific conditions of populations and communities indigenous to a particular geographic area (Baskin, 2022). IKSs provide firm, holistic and cultural approaches that promote social equity and support economic development. Ignoring indigenous knowledge while relying on foreign technologies and development ideologies yields temporary gains and/or solutions to problems, without fostering sustainability. In this discussion, the paper explores the role of IKSs in social development and how they can be integrated into modern approaches for more holistic and inclusive approach to development. It is from such a paradigmatic persuasion that Zimbabwean development initiatives should be indigenized and positioned to confront the main challenges that haunt the region (Mupedziswa, 1992). IKSs are examined in relation to development in Zimbabwe, focusing on how they may help inform, define, motivate, and sustain development.

RESEARCH AIM

The aim of this research is to explore the role of indigenous knowledge systems in the social development of communities in Zimbabwe.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Globalization has led most African social development initiatives to devalue the role of indigenous knowledge systems in fostering sustainability (Goolam, 2013). In Zimbabwe, despite the valuable knowledge

that indigenous communities have in health and other areas of social development, their perspectives are overlooked because of rapid changes occurring as a result of imported economic, cultural, and political development models. Maunganidze (2016) observed that most of the IKSs in Zimbabwe's rural areas have ceased functioning as a guide for addressing challenges associated with people's livelihoods, particularly in health. This has subsequently resulted in a disconnection between development initiatives and the cultural practices of local communities. Economic meltdown and high school dropouts are examples of social development problems that affect Masvingo as a province (Annual Education Statistics Profile Masvingo Province, 2017). These are not excluded in the ripple effects of neglecting IKSs in social development. Thus, the intention of this study is to establish the role of IKSs in promoting social development of communities in Zimbabwe.

Importance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Social Development

IKSs include home-grown beliefs, values and expectations which transcend into the confidence and willingness of local people to contribute to community development (Mapara, 2009). Factors that stifle development in Africa are situational and, hence, require African remedies to foster development. Such factors include the rise of pandemics, corruption, poor government policies, unemployment, insufficient infrastructure, and poor public project supervision. These factors require a robust attention to African-centered methodologies

for development to quickly take place. Western views, such as the assumption that development can only come through modernization and industrialization, consider promotion of African indigenous knowledge inadequate in providing a clear definition and conceptualization of their own. Chavunduka (1995) argued that the Western worldview of knowledge has since its introduction in Africa and other non-Western societies lacked an understanding of the holistic nature and approach of non-Western ways of knowing and knowledge production.

Indigenous knowledge is important in two distinct ways, namely, the contribution of indigenous knowledge to local empowerment and development, as well as increasing the self-sufficiency and strength self-determination (Keane, Khupe & Seehawer, 2017). Utilizing IKSs, for instance, in research and management plans, gives it legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of both local people and outside scientists. Secondly, indigenous people can provide valuable input about the local environment and how to effectively manage its natural resources. IKSs can provide communities with sustainable and locally-adapted solutions for resource management and other economic activities, such as traditional farming (Mujere, Chanza, Muromo, Guurwa, Kutseza & Mutiringindi, 2023).

Under-utilised Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Oral Traditions

Oral traditions (OTs) are under-utilized in the development of Africa and hence leading to perpetuation of high poverty

rates (Ibanga, 2021). Modern theoretical perspectives to development discourage the use of traditional knowledge toward development but, rather, recommend new and advanced technologies of development (De Maeijer, Van Hout, Weggeman & Post, 2016). OTs, whether communicated as historical narratives or mythical stories, constitute a form of traditional knowledge that can teach, carry, and reinforce other knowledges. Among indigenous groups, oral traditions serve as the collective memories of ethnic, tribal, and kinship groups, a formal ‘corpus’ relating to the whole society (Oguamanam, 2023). Through oral tradition, development methodologies are being shared, thereby crossing generations. Although oral traditions may be characterized as fragile or malleable, these traditions are not simple hearsay or personal reminiscence; they are community memories, regularly recounted and periodically verified by knowledgeable elders. Experiences are, therefore, likely to be shared through oral traditions and presumed challenges may as well be shared. It is against this background that development initiatives such as policy formulation should involve various generations, including the elderly, to quicken transmission of IKSs into development.

Ecological-Based Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge is profoundly rooted in the land and the environment that comprises knowledge about the natural world (Green, 2012). This knowledge is often undervalued in mainstream societies which prioritise ‘modernised’ knowledge (Mol, Spaargaren & Sonnenfel 2013). By incorporating ecological-based knowledge

into sustainable development practices, communities can promote more environmentally-friendly, sustainable, and culturally-appropriate approaches to resource management. Traditional ecological knowledges emerged from environmental understandings shaped over time by incremental learning (including trial and error and experimentation), and they cross-cut the scientific disciplines of biology, botany, geography, and cosmology (Berkes, 2013). Through valuing ecological-based knowledge, communities may as well preserve previous ways of life.

Keeper of Oral Tradition

Developmental initiatives in developing countries have limited involvement of knowledge keepers and, rather, utilize technocrats as agents of development (Vansina, 1985). The need to involve knowledge keepers in development is premised on the view that traditional understandings are common knowledge, shared by all members of a tribal community, ethnic group, kin network, or family. Many of these are learned through phenomenological experiences and everyday activities. More specialized types of information are preserved by gatekeepers such as tribal leaders and ritual practitioners. Keepers of oral traditions are often carefully trained to link parts of traditional narratives to specific events and locales, and cultural coherence is ensured by regular repetition. Gatekeepers are necessary in development, as specialized protected knowledges are entrusted only to selected members of a group (Smith, 2012). Although traditional elders as part of knowledge keepers are

afforded considerable respect in their home communities, they have not yet gained the same degree of status afforded those with intellectual property rights.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by the participatory development approach (Huesca, 2008). The approach emphasizes the importance of involving local communities in the development initiatives. This framework recognizes that local communities have significant knowledge that fosters sustainable development of communities in Zimbabwe. This helped the researchers to ensure that the study is informed by the perspectives of those who have knowledge in the area under study. The theory holds that incorporating indigenous knowledge systems in social development entails engaging local communities in decision-making processes and empowering them to take ownership of development initiatives (Huesca, 2008). This also helped in ensuring that the research findings are relevant and useful to communities. The theory also avers that negating indigenous knowledge in development initiatives results in unsustainable development outcomes. This approach can help to build trust, promote social cohesion, foster collaboration, and lead to more sustainable outcomes for individuals and communities. This is because the approach basically emphasizes on the need to recognize and value the local communities, which can help to build a sense of ownership and empowerment among members.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do indigenous knowledge systems contribute to social development of communities?
2. To what extent are certain indigenous knowledge systems currently underutilized in promoting social development of communities?
3. What are the most effective initiatives for incorporating indigenous knowledge systems in the social development of community?

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in Ward 1 of Masvingo Urban District, a ward with a population of approximately 1275 households (ZimStat, 2022) which constituted the target population for the study. A mixed method approach was used, which combined qualitative and quantitative methods in the study. This approach was useful to the study as it provides a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research topic by combining the strength of both qualitative and quantitative research (Enos et al., 2014).

Due to the large population size, the researcher used a raosof calculator to determine the sample size. The research tolerated 5% margin of error, with a 95% confidence level and got a sample size of 296 household participants. Simple random sampling was further used to select 296 household participants from a total 1275 households. A list of 296 random numbers was generated between 1 and 1275. All

households that corresponded with the given numbers constituted the sampling size. This enabled every household in the target population to have an equal chance of being selected for the study (Thomas, 2020).

For qualitative data, 8 key informants were purposively selected for in-depth interviews, while 8 more participants from the community were purposively selected for focus group discussions. The key informants were selected from 8 categories deemed to have expert knowledge for the subject under study. These were traditional leaders, indigenous healers, indigenous famers, indigenous artists, indigenous educators, Masvingo City Council, Department of Social Development, and the Ministry of Tertiary Education. These were selected because they are the key stakeholders involved in civil, infrastructural, business, and social development in the nation. Local people selected were of different age-groups, including elder people (65+), the middle-aged, youth and children, to ensure the research was not biased or affected by the generation gap.

Data obtained from the qualitative research were analyzed thematically and then the emanating themes were utilized to formulate a Likert scale quantitative questionnaire. The researcher treated the qualitative findings as hypotheses that needed to be tested quantitatively. A total of 296 people were randomly selected from Ward 1 of Masvingo Urban District. These were given questionnaires that were completed electronically and a response rate of 96% was obtained. The questionnaires were created and delivered through Kobo

Collect, an online research and data gathering platform. Gathered data were then downloaded in excel formats and analyzed using Microsoft excel.

This study was guided by the ethical principles which included informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and minimizing harm to participants. Participants were, therefore, provided with a clear explanation of the study purpose, risks, and benefits of their involvement. To maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms so as to protect their identity.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This ensuing section gives presentation and analysis of data. Data obtained from the qualitative research were analyzed thematically and then the emanating themes were utilized to formulate a Likert scale quantitative questionnaire.

Understanding Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The study found that that majority of participants understand indigenous knowledge systems as traditional knowledge and practices that have been developed by communities over generations through their experiences and interactions with the natural environment. Findings from the traditional leaders revealed that such knowledge is often passed down orally or through practical demonstration and is deeply rooted in local culture, beliefs, and values. The study, however, gathered that indigenous knowledge systems mainly encompass prior perceived knowledge passed on from

generation to generation and pays less attention to the current and emanating traditions.

The study further established that to redefine the concept of indigenous knowledge systems, the definition should be broadened to encompass any knowledge and practices that are developed and maintained by communities, including those that have emerged in recent times. This can include knowledge and practices related to modern technologies, social systems, and cultural expressions that are unique to a particular community or group.

Mr. G, a key informant, had this to say,

The concept indigenous knowledge systems should be redefined, and the concept should also recognize the dynamic nature of indigenous knowledge systems, which continue to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances and contexts.

Adding on, Mr. C.G. indicated that,

The redefined concept should acknowledge the role of indigenous peoples in shaping their own knowledge systems and the importance of respecting and preserving these systems as part of cultural heritage.

Importance of Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge Systems in the Social Development of Communities

Preservation of Cultural Heritage

The study established that observing IKSs in social development enhances preservation of cultural heritage. All participants indicated that Indigenous Knowledge Systems are rooted in local cultures and traditions and, thus, incorporating them in social development initiatives helps to preserve and promote cultural heritage, which is essential for maintaining social cohesion and identity.

Mr. Joe (pseudonym) had this to say,

My brother, what I can say is that all development initiatives require consultation of local people who know cultural identities to be observed within communities. In the case of Masvingo we do not tolerate any development that undermines the role of Great Zimbabwe as a National Heritage Site.

Sustainable Development

It was also gathered that Indigenous Knowledge Systems are often based on sustainable practices that have been developed over generations. Participants revealed that incorporating them in social development initiatives can promote environmentally-sustainable practices and help to ensure the long-term viability of development initiatives. Traditional leaders in this study indicated that through incorporation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in social development programs,

such as education programs, fosters continuity.

Local Ownership and Participation

Study findings suggest that incorporating Indigenous Knowledge Systems in social development initiatives of Zimbabwe can help to promote local ownership and participation. Key informants indicated that by involving local communities in decision-making processes and utilizing their knowledge and expertise, development initiatives are more likely to be successful and sustainable. The study established that as people participate in planning for their social development, they will be considered valued and, hence, own up the plan. The findings go along with Berkes (2013), who asserted that indigenous people could provide valuable input about the local environment and how to effectively manage its natural resources.

Mr Josh (pseudonym) had this to say,

Generally, community participation in social development results in the sense of ownership.

Mr. Philips (pseudonym) suggested that,

Communities should be engaged meaningfully for sustainability to take place and not to involve us as passive participants.

Addressing Local Needs and Priorities

Participants also indicated that the value of IKSs is centered on addressing local needs and priorities. It was gathered that Indigenous Knowledge Systems are often developed in response to local needs and priorities. From the study, incorporating IKSs

in empowering the girl child, for example, was considered as being vital in promoting social well-being and equity. The study also found that problems which are rooted in Zimbabwe would require locally-birthered care service.

Under-utilized Indigenous Knowledge

Local Resources

The study revealed that local resources are being underutilized in the social development of Zimbabwe. Data from key informants and other in-depth interview participants suggest that most developmental projects done in the nation do not involve local knowledge at planning level, suggesting that indigenous knowledge is largely ignored, if not considered irrelevant. 82% of respondents to the quantitative questionnaires agreed (50% agree, 32% strongly agree) with this position. On being asked whether there was any special knowledge available, key informants were of the view that communities have many people who have expert knowledge that can be useful for development. In this regard, the study gathered that technocrats for development should not only include people with modern technology but also involve those with traditional knowledge. Community respondents suggested that people with traditional knowledge are an under-utilized resource as they are not meaningfully engaged in issues relating to development, with some of the key informants blaming the same for sabotaging developmental agendas. The findings coincide with Smith (2012), who postulated that indigenous knowledge-keepers and traditional elders are afforded considerable

respect in the development of their home communities, but they have not yet gained the same degree of status afforded to scientific knowledge-keepers.



Community Involvement

The study gathered that the majority of participants is of the view that development in their community is not investing in popular participation. 68% of participants was of the view that citizens' participation should always be considered for meaningful development to be accepted or adopted effectively, failure of which results in resistance from locals. One participant from the focus group pointed out that the New Curriculum under the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education is one of such projects that are noble but sidelined local involvement. Participants who supported externally-designed projects argued that the inclusion and consultation processes could delay implementation, but adopting already tried and tested methodologies quickens development. However, "such projects fail in prioritization

of our needs, although good according to whatever international standards, they do not address our needs”, responded one participant in the focus group.

African Remedies to Diseases

African remedies to diseases are overlooked, although this research established that a number of these remedies are still very effective. 62% of participants strongly believe that the rise in mortality rate in Zimbabwe is resulting from abandonment of heritage-based medicinal plans. An example cited is the COVID-19 mortality. 73% of participants from this study agreed that local remedies to COVID-19, such as Zumbani, were very effective in comparison to pharmaceutical drugs. The same number (73%) said they preferred local remedies to COVID-19 vaccines. Participants from the focus groups did not see removal of African methods in health promotion as development but, rather, a neo-colonial method of sidelining Africa’s Indigenous Local Knowledge Systems. More success rates are claimed to have been known against complex illnesses like cancer using *guchu* (traditional treatment method) as compared to modern methods like chemotherapy.

Some of the participants blamed colonialism and the Christian religion for the abandonment of Indigenous Knowledge Systems as uncivilized and demonic.

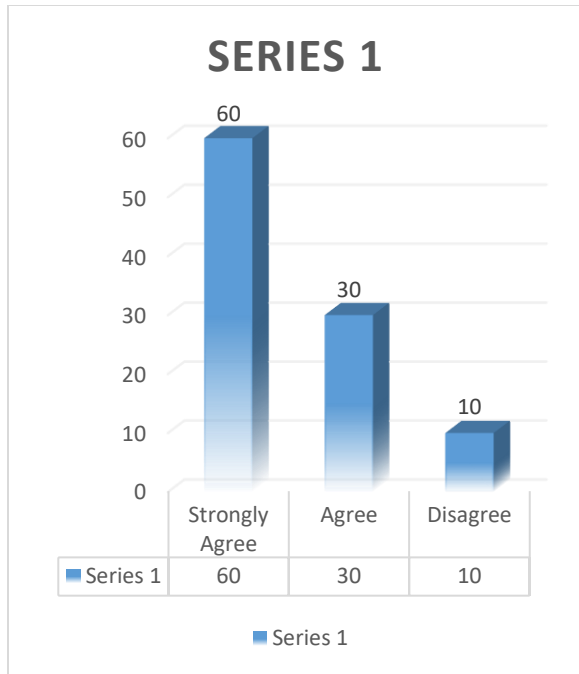
One participant said,

Since they labelled Africans as living in the Dark Continent void of any knowledge, they just installed a mentality that we think whatever

birthed in Africa is not worthy or approved, all development should be borrowed from developed countries.

Local Tradition

The side-lining and downplaying of indigenous knowledge are deeply embedded in the neglecting of local tradition. Respondents were of the view that sustainable development should always take a transpersonal perspective. This implies considering also traditions of local people in programming. 60% of the respondents strongly agreed that social development initiatives in Zimbabwe ignore local traditions in planning while 30% agreed and only 10% disagreed. Considering this view, such development initiatives were considered not sustainable. The findings coincide with (Berkes, 2012), who postulated that traditional aboriginal knowledge is among under-utilized resources in social development. Both studies identified the importance of incorporating local practitioners in infusing traditional approaches to development.



Initiatives That May Promote Sufficient Use of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in the Social Development of Communities in Zimbabwe

Documentation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The study established that to promote sufficient use of IKSs, there is a need to recognize and document the indigenous knowledge systems of local communities in Zimbabwe. This will involve identifying the knowledge, skills, and practices that are unique to each community and documenting them in a way that is accessible and understandable. This has been considered as necessary for referencing and future use.

Mr. Joe had this to say,

I suggest that all the IKS in our communities should be well-recognized and documented. A list of

these IKS such as heritage sites must be compiled.

Integration of Local Knowledge Development Planning

The integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems into development planning is crucial to ensure that development initiatives are culturally relevant and sustainable. Participants observed that it is critical to involve local communities in identifying their needs and priorities and incorporating their knowledge and practices into development plans. The study also found that communities needed to enhance the skills and knowledge of local communities in areas such as agriculture, health, and natural resource management. This will involve providing training and support to local communities to enable them to better utilize their indigenous knowledge systems.

Funding and Support for Initiatives

The study also established that funding and support for initiatives that incorporate indigenous knowledge systems into social development programs are crucial to promote sustainable development outcomes that are consistent with local culture and traditions. This was suggested to involve working with government agencies, NGOs, and other stakeholders to secure funding and support for these initiatives. The study further established that academic research on heritage should be encouraged to proffer insights on further identification of IKSs that are critical for social development and how these could be incorporated.

Promotion of Cultural Awareness

The majority of participants indicated that promotion of cultural awareness is essential to ensure that indigenous knowledge systems are valued and respected in Zimbabwe. This includes raising awareness among policymakers, development practitioners, and the public, about the importance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in promoting sustainable development outcomes. The study further established that awareness of all social development initiatives should encompass beneficiaries such as ambassadors in the teaching process.

DISCUSSION

Study findings suggest that IKSs in social development enhance preservation of cultural heritage. It was further established that as local initiatives are incorporated in development initiatives, people develop a sense of ownership, thereby ensuring its sustainability. These findings correspond with Keane, Khupe and Seehawer (2017), whose opinion is that indigenous people can provide valuable input about the local environment and cooperate effectively in managing its natural resources. The value of IKSs in this regard is centered on respecting and embracing local talents. The study, thus, recommended that communities should be meaningfully engaged in matters involving them and not to be considered only as passive participants. Study findings were also that incorporating Indigenous Knowledge Systems in social development initiatives of Zimbabwe can help to promote local ownership and participation. This research study further established that for a

community development strategy to be accepted, it should include beneficiaries as key stakeholders. Indigenous people can provide valuable input about the local environment and how to effectively manage its natural resources (Berkes & Ross, 2013). Study findings were also that the value of IKSs is centered on addressing local needs and priorities. Through incorporating IKSs in social development initiatives, local needs and priorities will be addressed. The findings corroborate Mupedziswa (1992), who supports the view that African development initiatives should be indigenized and positioned to confront the main challenges that haunt the region.

The study identified several locally-birthered systems that are overlooked in the social development of Zimbabwe. It, therefore, found that the underdevelopment of Zimbabwe and other African countries could be resulting from undermining IKSs. Smith (2012) postulated that indigenous knowledge-keepers and traditional elders are not afforded considerable respect in the development of their home communities, but they have not yet gained the same degree of status afforded to scientific knowledge-keepers. Findings of this study indicated that input from traditional elders was overlooked in community development planning. Downplaying of indigenous knowledge was viewed as based on deeply neglecting local tradition. The present study established that infusing traditional approaches to development is a vital cog for attaining sustainability. The study, therefore, recommended consultation of local people with traditional knowledge on how they perceive development initiatives planned for.

Involving communities in prioritizing their needs was regarded as the stepping stone in developing communities. The study unearthed that community participation is needed to enhance the skills and knowledge required for development in areas such as agriculture, health, and natural resource management. These findings coincide with the participatory development approach (Huesca, 2008). The approach emphasizes the importance of involving local communities from the project inception. This framework recognizes that local communities are critical in fostering sustainable development in Zimbabwean communities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study found that development in Africa undermines the role of IKS in fostering sustainability. It was gathered that failure to adequately incorporate IKSs in development has resulted in the underdevelopment of African countries. The study also found that development that de-values indigenous knowledge results in conflict of interests and will not gain local support. The research, therefore, redefined the concept of IKSs and highlighted the benefits of learning from the IKSs. Recommendations given included initiating development with a human face where local values and participation should always be considered. It was further recommended that development should not solely rely on one knowledge system but take advantage of the strength, innovativeness, and creativity of both borrowed and local knowledge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study exposed some of the limitations in the current approaches to development. As informed by the study's findings, the following recommendations are made:

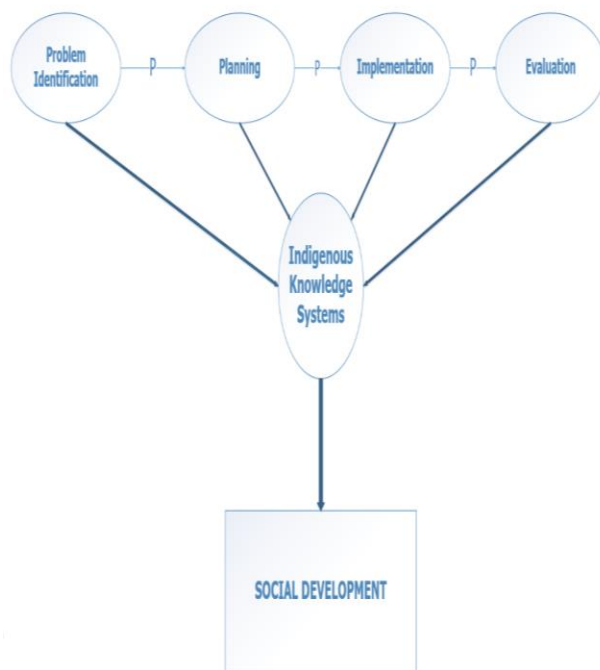
- It is necessary to educate communities on the value of incorporating IKSs in developing third world countries.
- There is a need for documentation and maintenance of available IKSs in communities to ensure their sustainability.
- Local people as participants should be meaningfully engaged in development trajectories that concern them.
- Communities need to be motivated so that they become confident enough when participating in social development.

Proposed Model

From the findings of this study, the research proposed the Social Development Networking Model as a tool for enhancing sustainability of social development initiatives in Zimbabwe. This model posits that for sustainable development to take place, all processes should always incorporate indigenous knowledge systems. As outlined in this model, problem identification should be informed by local people through local knowledge. This should lead to collaborative planning for the development of possible interventions. Moreover, the participation of locals should

be at equal stakeholder level, where their knowledge, ideas and perceptions are valued as key inputs in the process of development. The model also emphasizes on the need for popular participation in social development process. Failure to meaningfully incorporate Indigenous Knowledge Systems in the development trajectory results in projects' immature death. The model also holds that development processes that incorporate IKSs have higher chances of continuity than those undermining IKS. Figure 1 below is the proposed model:

Social Development Networking Model



Key

P – Popular Participation

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