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“Self-determination and indigenous research: capacity building on our own terms”

Contribution by

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This presentation focuses on the role of indigenous research in self-determination, as expressed in Article 3 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The discussion on capacity building relates to the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for the development or use of indigenous resources, in this case indigenous human resources, as expressed in Article 32.

Background

This presentation is based on my experiences from 17 years as indigenous Sami researcher (including my research for a doctoral degree, done in the frame of indigenous methodologies), as well as on my work as a director of the Nordic Sami Institute (in Guovdageaidnu/ Kautokeino, Norway) during the last years of its existence. The NSI was an indigenous Sami research institution since 1974; it was co-organized with the Sámi University College in 2005, where I continued as a research director for the whole institution. I am grateful to my colleagues from the Sámi University College, WINHEC (World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium), and Gáldu (Resource Center for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), who have shared with me their views on research and self-determination for this presentation.

This presentation is within Theme 3, proposed for discussions. Theme 3 is about factors that enable or obstruct indigenous peoples' participation in development processes. I intend to highlight capacity building efforts that provide the necessary conditions for development activities. Furthermore, I argue that there is a need for qualified indigenous human resources in order to succeed in development processes which are conducted on the terms of indigenous peoples. There is also a need for negotiations about research protocols and parameters.

Although I have never been politically involved, I believe that indigenous research in general, as well as my research work in particular, have political impact. I consider indigenous research as a means of the empowerment of indigenous peoples through production of knowledge and capacity building. By empowering capacity building I mean the development of indigenous human resources on our own terms and for our own purposes. These purposes are to continue as indigenous peoples with our own distinctive culture, languages, traditional knowledge, philosophies, and world views.

Indigenous research and Research on, about and with indigenous peoples

Reading the text of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and other documents related to the Declaration itself and the process of its implementation, I have discovered that indigenous research is not clearly emphasized as a means of self-

determination. Indeed, research as such is not mentioned in the Declaration. I do not intend to analyze the reasons for this. Indigenous peoples have learnt that research has been one of the most powerful tools of colonization of our peoples and our territories.

I think that in this context it is very important to differentiate between the concept of “indigenous research” and “research on, with and about indigenous peoples”. By Indigenous research I mean research done by scholars who develop indigenous theorizing, identify and use indigenous concepts, and build their projects on an indigenous research paradigms. Over the past few decades indigenous scholars have brought to the academic world their indigenous perspectives on research. These perspectives were clearly described by Lester Irabinna Rigney, an Australian researcher from the Narungga Nation, who believes that indigenous peoples’ interests, knowledge and experiences must be at the centre of methodologies, in the construction of knowledge about indigenous peoples (Rigney 1999, 119; and in indigenous methodologies in general, see Porsanger 2004 a). This research paradigm is different from “research on, about and with indigenous people”, conducted by outsider researchers on their terms and for their own purposes or those of their institutions, regardless of how respectful and collaborative this kind of research might have been from the point of view of outsider researchers themselves.

In my view, indigenous research must produce new knowledge which our societies require and need for their development processes. The Western concept of development has been imposed on indigenous peoples and connected with modernization, industrialization, use of new technologies etc. On indigenous terms, development is related – among other things – to the strengthening of our societies, the use of our languages on different levels, including research and education, the incorporation of our traditional knowledge into resource management in order to secure sustainable use of natural resources, and the reproduction and further development of indigenous knowledge systems transmitted from generation to generation. Development is connected to continuity, which is one of the characteristics of traditional knowledge. The use of the Sami concept of *árbediehtu* instead of “traditional knowledge” (*árbediehtu* is the North Sami term containing two interrelated parts: *diehtu* ‘knowledge’ and *árbi* ‘heritage, inheritance’) clarifies knowledge as both the information and the process, emphasizes different ways to gain, achieve or acquire knowledge. The concept indicates indissoluble ties between the past, the present and the future, which is validated by *árbi*, “heritage; inheritance”. The introduced Sami concept can be useful and

applicable for academic discussions, regardless of local (indigenous or non-indigenous) contexts of tradition or traditional knowledge. (For more information about Sami traditional knowledge, see *Árbediehtu Pilot Project* 2009.)

During the last centuries and even over the last few decades, indigenous peoples have been pretty much *re-active*. By re-active I mean struggling and arguing against the views, explanations, and interpretations of our culture, identity, knowledge, philosophy, etc. presented by outsiders. The time of being re-active is seemingly over now. Indigenous peoples have trained their own academics who are not – in many cases – re-active any longer, not complaining, not arguing, but suggesting and testing new solutions. They are pro-active. In my opinion, it is a start of a new epoch of indigenous capacity building – borrowing Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s expressions – on our own terms and for our own purposes.

Decolonizing research methodologies

Some ten years ago scholarly discussions about decolonizing research were initiated. The most well known book, a must-read called “Decolonizing of Methodologies” by a Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has influenced the whole understanding of research paradigms in an indigenous context. This book also had a great impact on my own research, which has resulted in a proposal of indigenous Sami methodology for the study of Sami indigenous religion (Porsanger 2007). According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the process of decolonization is “about centering our concepts and worldviews and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes” (Smith 1999, 39). As I have argued elsewhere (Porsanger 2004, 106–107), “our purposes” are those of indigenous peoples, and “our own perspectives” are the indigenous approaches that allow indigenous scholars:

- to decolonize theories,
- to elaborate indigenous methodologies
- to use indigenous epistemologies (theories of knowledge)
- to make visible what is special and necessary, what is meaningful and logical in respect to indigenous peoples’ own understanding of themselves and the world.

This whole process allows indigenous research to break free from the frames of Western theories of knowledge, which are in most cases very different from indigenous ones and are, indeed, suited to Western academic thought. Western theories of knowledge are in

most cases foreign to indigenous ways of thinking (Porsanger 2004). What is needed in indigenous research is to put into words, to describe and analyze: what is really different, and why it is so. Theorizing about our own knowledge will give us arguments in discussions about research which disempowers indigenous people.

Self-determination and power relations in research on indigenous issues

If indigenous people do want to decide about their present and future (right to self-determination), they need access to their own knowledge. All indigenous peoples know from their philosophies as well as from their experiences of colonization that knowledge is power. Research processes nowadays show very clearly that colonization is not over in the field of research. Indigenous scholars have challenged the hegemony of research done by outsider scholars. Challenging this hegemony, indigenous researchers have – in many cases – changed power relations. However, indigenous academy is small, indigenous theorizing is young and requires knowledge of both “traditional academic” and indigenous academic thinking (so-called “both-ways” knowledge) in order to be argumentatively strong and to speak “the language of theory”, which is understandable by the traditional academy. At present, power relations in the academy are still in favor of traditional Western researchers. What can be done in order to change the imbalanced power relations? My answer is indigenous capacity building.

I am quite sure that many indigenous scholars will recognize themselves in the following picture: when entering academic discussions, they must explain their belonging to an indigenous peoples, they have to argue that they are not subjective, they have to refer to the most well-known facts about their indigenous peoples in order to contextualize their research. For indigenous peoples themselves such generalized information is worth almost nothing, because we have our internal diversity and our own criteria for describing the peculiarities of our cultures. This knowledge is advanced and requires quite detailed explanations and the use of indigenous concepts and arguments. Such information is too advanced to be background information to contextualize a research project. In the academic view, this information will often be labeled as subjective. Of course, most of the outsider anthropologists will certainly argue that they know our culture in detail and understand our internal diversity, there is nothing new or too advanced for them in our explanations. However, I want to claim that we, indigenous researchers, must be – once again – pro-

active in such discussions. There is no need to continue arguing and defending the peculiarities of our knowledge. There is a need for the production of new knowledge which is based on new approaches, concepts that derive from our own cultures, and theorizing on the basis of these concepts. Such research will be capable to compete with the traditional academic research. Even more, such indigenous research will give a fresh breath and will indeed enrich the academy. But this requires the development of our own theorizing, which in turn is possible if and when we achieve intellectual independence.

Many of my colleagues as well as myself have experienced that indigenous researchers in a way do not belong to the same clan as “researchers” in general. We are always labeled as “indigenous”. In many cases this implies that this kind of research is different from a “normative”, traditional research which is claimed by the academy as being neutral and objective; besides, it is important to mention that traditional research is also institutionalized. An appellative “indigenous” emphasizes that our research is different, and in many cases it is considered as dubious by the academy: naïve, illogical, subjective. That’s why we must always defend our research practices and outcomes. Undoubtedly, both outsider researchers and indigenous ones are supposed to think critically about their processes, their relationships, and the quality and richness of their data and analysis. However, academic power relations often give privilege to and provide funding for outsider researchers, even if she or he is lacking important skills.

If we ask a Western researcher, who is doing her or his research on, for instance, Sami culture, whether she or he commands the Sami language, most probably we will get the following answer: “I’m sorry, I don’t speak Sami, but my research can be complemented in the future by some other scholars in the field who do command the language.” What is unfair, and what shows imbalance in power relations, is that it is very easy for the academy to accept such apologies and to give funding for such research projects. I can not imagine any indigenous scholar apologizing for not having basic academic skills and getting funding for her or his academic research project.

The situation is even more complicated when we take natural science as example. Once a Norwegian ornithologist who was investigating a special kind of birds in a certain area was confronted by a traditional Sami man who asked if the ornithologist knew what the weather was like during the spring time of the year of investigation. The researcher could not

answer this question, and furthermore he did not even consider it as related to his research issue at all. However, according to traditional Sami knowledge, the quality of spring weather has a great influence on the behavior of birds in the area (most of birds come in spring to the Arctic area from the South).

These two examples show that indigenous knowledge is not a prerequisite of “traditional” academic research but rather complementary knowledge. Indigenous knowledge can be an exotic addition to the “real” and objective research. Scholars involved in this “objective” research gain the authoritative status in their research field despite of the lack of important skills. From the point of view of traditional knowledge, there are some basic skills which a researcher must possess. However, this knowledge is not included in any academic curricula nor in any requirements for the conduct of research. Researchers can apologize for the lack of knowledge which is basic for indigenous understanding, or they can simply ignore the fact that they do not possess important knowledge. In my opinion, this situation must be changed.

It has been difficult for the academy to accept that indigenous ways of thinking, understanding, and approaching knowledge can belong to anything the academy is prepared to recognize as theory (Cook-Lynn 1997, 21). The voices of some indigenous researchers bringing indigenous views into academic debates have often been reduced by the academy “to some ‘nativist’ discourse, dismissed by colleagues in the academy as naïve, contradictory and illogical” (Smith 1999, 14). This is an accurate observation of what I myself, for example, and many of my indigenous colleagues have experienced in Western university systems (see also Kuokkanen 2007). The academy has often denied that there is any theoretical value in indigenous approaches. This is precisely because what is allowed to count as theory has been thoroughly premised on Western models of knowledge and epistemology (Porsanger 2004, 112).

My point is that basic skills in indigenous knowledge must be required in research projects and included in the educational curriculum. Of course, this sets new standards and requirements for research. These standards, protocols and requirements are not – according to my knowledge – articulated in any country where indigenous peoples live. There are some attempts to regulate research on indigenous issues in Aotearoa and Australia, especially regarding research ethics. But my suggestion is to establish and gain acceptance

for indigenous parameters and protocols for research. As long as research is conducted according to the established “traditional” academic practices, we – indigenous researchers – will continue to legitimize imbalanced power relations and we will continue to be re-active. The establishment of new required standards for research will give better possibilities for indigenous peoples to achieve self-determination.

To develop parameters and requirements for research on indigenous issues

Protocols can contain important requirements for scholars on indigenous issues. This concerns outsider researchers and indigenous researchers alike. It is worth mentioning that there is a need for reflexive analysis of a great array of issues related to indigenous so-called insider research. But this issue must remain outside this presentation.

There are at least four core issues to the development of research protocols which must be negotiated: Respect, Reciprocity, Reliability, and Relevance. These four R:s can be filled with content in the following way (based on my own suggestions and fundamental questions about research processes expressed by Linda T Smith (1999, 10)):

Respect:

- What is a minimum requirement for participation in indigenous research?
- How can paternalism be avoided?
- What is the difference between respect and tolerance in indigenous research?
- How will the research outcomes be disseminated?

Reciprocity:

- What negotiation processes are required for a research project, starting from initiation of research, through research conduct to the dissemination of research outcomes?
- Who will carry out research? Who will write it up?
- Who is responsible for research outcomes (any impact)?
- What is the role of indigenous community/communities?

Reliability:

- What is required for negotiation about research paradigms and processes?
- What are the factual requirements to a researcher’s skills (language etc.)?
- Who owns a research project? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it?
- Objectivity of research: both for the indigenous and academic worlds?

Relevance:

- Whose research is this? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope?
- What data can and must be used?

These are just some questions which arise when thinking about possible protocols. The establishment of generally accepted protocols might sound like mission impossible, but I believe that this feeling of impossibility is rooted in our minds and our education. Every single scholar with academic skills – both indigenous and non-indigenous – have received her or his education through the existing educational system, which is not based on indigenous theorizing nor on the use of indigenous knowledge, which is still complementary in the academic institutions. Many scholars, who do realize the limitations of classic academic education, get their strength from either their own indigenous knowledge or they start learning about this knowledge, which is still considered as alternative and not required in the academy. Indigenous research protocols might be pretty well generally the same all around the indigenous world, if we admit the importance of the regulation of research. The establishment of protocols is not mission impossible. It just requires *re-socializing* (as expressed by Ande Somby, a Sami law scholar), i.e. coming to know our limitations and understand our place in our own society on our own terms, not to show our belonging to others, nor to defend our understandings, but to gain strength and intellectual independence.

In the period from 2003 to 2004, I was involved in the development of the Master program in Indigenous studies at the northernmost university of Norway, the University of Tromsø. On the basis of my lectures on indigenous representations and self-representations I have published an essay on indigenous methodologies (Porsanger 2004). In this essay I argue that indigenous methodologies should be designed:

- to ensure that the intellectual property rights of indigenous peoples will be observed
- to protect indigenous knowledge from misinterpretation and misuse
- to demystify knowledge about indigenous peoples
- to tell indigenous peoples' stories in their voices
- to give credit to the true owners of indigenous knowledge
- to communicate the results of research back to the owners of this knowledge, in order to support them in their desire to be subjects rather than objects of research, to decide about their present and future, and to determine their place in the world.

Following these methodological issues, indigenous research will strengthen indigenous peoples' identity, which will in turn support indigenous peoples' efforts to be independent: not only legally, politically or economically, but first and foremost intellectually.

Indigenous capacity building

Indigenous academics have been active in capacity building for their own peoples. In Sápmi, the first indigenous Sami professors started working in the 1960s. But already in the beginning of the 20th century there was one particularly well known Sami who wrote the first description of Sami life and understanding of the surrounding world and reality in the Sami language, expressing Sami understandings and explanations. This was Johan Turi in 1910. Despite the fact that he didn't have any academic education, he should be considered as the first Sami professor in traditional knowledge. Probably sometime in the future Sami academy will express its gratitude to this extraordinary Sami man and award him an honorary position as a Sami professor, postmortem. Respect and gratitude are also parts of our capacity building.

In different parts of the indigenous world research methodologies based on particular indigenous cultures and concepts have been developed. One can for instance mention Kaupapa Maori methodology, the Yupiaq concept *tangruarluku* 'to see with the mind's eye', the Inuit term *Qaujimajatuqangit* for traditional ecological knowledge (Arnakak 2002), the Mi'kmaq concepts *telinuisimk*, *telilnuo'lti'k* and *tlinuita'sim* suggested as being more comprehensive for an understanding of indigenous knowledge, because they cover connections of diverse indigenous manifestations as part of a particular ecological order (Battiste & Henderson 2005, 35) and so on. Indigenous research, flourishing during the last few decades around the world, has shown that development and modernity is not found just outside indigenous peoples. Development and modernity do not mean that indigenous peoples must learn from the outside world in order to survive, to adjust to the modern world. Quite the opposite, results of indigenous research have shown that indigenous knowledge can be used in many modern ways. Indigenous research outcomes can open new perspectives and offer new methodological solutions, which can be usable, applicable, and very modern for "Western" (non-indigenous) academic research. But most of all, indigenous research will serve indigenous peoples in their desire to determine and develop priorities and strategies for their development.

Indigenous research conducted on our own terms, educational programs based on indigenous knowledge, the establishment of general research protocols can be parts of systematic capacity building for indigenous peoples. Capacity building will enable

indigenous peoples' participation in development processes and will provide the necessary conditions for development activities.

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