

**Indigenous community-based ecotourism as Indigenous Social Entrepreneurship (ISE):
Sounds good, but what about culture-specific human-environment relationships?**

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Abstract

Indigenous community-based ecotourism (ICBE) cannot benefit from Indigenous social entrepreneurship (ISE) literature unless Indigenous human-environment relationships such as the Fijian *vanna* are recognised. This presentation applies ISE as a newly-defined subject area in business-studies literature to ICBE. ISE emphasises the role of social capital in development and may be explained as an Indigenous group's endeavours to address or create broadly defined social value through entrepreneurship. ISE implies local agency and this is reflected in the strategies many Indigenous communities develop to interact with the global economy on their own terms. This goes some way to addressing the lack of attention applied to cultural values in Indigenous entrepreneurship literature to date. One weakness I identify in the ISE literature is that it does not adequately address the complex ways many Indigenous cultures relate to their environments and how these relationships influence examples of ISE (such as ICBE). The Boumā National Heritage Park, Fiji, is presented as an example of an ICBE enterprise. The Indigenous Boumā community living within the Park understands their relationship with their natural, social, and cosmological environment as holistic, relational, and interconnected. The presenter suggests that a high failure rate of ISEs as ICBEs in the Pacific may be attributed to 'outsider' stakeholders' lack of attention to Indigenous human-environment relationships and associated cultural values constituting these

entrepreneurial endeavours. Conversely, Indigenous communities that create new ICBE initiatives by embedding these enterprises into pre-existing eco-social relationships have a higher chance of meeting local needs.

Keywords: Indigenous social entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, indigenous entrepreneurship, indigenous worldview, Fiji.

Introduction

There has been a high failure rate of ecotourism projects recorded and particularly community-based ones. This presentation aims to provide some recommendations that may go some way to addressing these disappointing outcomes. To do this I first want to present indigenous social entrepreneurship (or ISE) as a fairly newly-defined subject area and one that relates to community-based ecotourism. Then I would like to identify something I feel is a weakness in the ISE literature. That is, its lack of attention to culturally contingent human-environment relationships. To illustrate this point, I will present an aspect of indigenous community-based ecotourism as an example of ISE from my doctoral fieldwork in the Bouma National Heritage Park, Fiji. The overarching argument here is that a failure to recognize not only social but ecological embeddedness in Indigenous community-based ecotourism may well contribute to lack of sustainability.

So what is indigenous social entrepreneurship or ISE?

ISE originated in business studies literature and the term has been taken up and variously applied in the social sciences albeit in a limited way. In 2007, Leo Paul Dana and Robert Anderson published a rather chunky edited book entitled 'International Handbook of Research on Indigenous

Entrepreneurship'. In this book, ISE is defined as 'an indigenous group's endeavours to address or create broadly defined social value through entrepreneurship' (Anderson, Dana, & Dana, 2006). The book emphasises the central role of local agency and social capital in ISE. It has also opened up opportunities for researchers and writers to present indigenous economies and non-indigenous entrepreneurship as anything but 'hopelessly incompatible'. Rather, these seemingly incongruous worldviews are presented as amalgamable and their points of convergence are treated as spaces of cultural negotiation and hope for a brighter future.

The spectrum

But before I go into ISE in too much detail, I am going to sidetrack briefly to locate this new subject area at the intersection of two other bodies of literature: social entrepreneurship and indigenous entrepreneurship. Indigenous social entrepreneurship sits at various points on the spectrum between social entrepreneurship and indigenous entrepreneurship and as both of these include the word 'entrepreneurship', that seems to be a good place to start.

Non-Indigenous Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship as it may be understood in a non-indigenous context has been variously defined. However, I have decided to borrow from McClelland (1961) and in doing so I take a bold step by defining it as including the following for the purpose of this presentation: Achieved rather than ascribed status; anti-traditionalism; belief that all citizens are born equal; and self-orientation rather than collectivism (McClelland, 1961). Now some of you may read this (including those who work live and work in PNG) and think, 'My Indigenous community defines their entrepreneurial activities in this way too' (and fair enough). So while many indigenous groups identify their collectivity as a

large part of what differentiates their activities from non-indigenous entrepreneurship, I feel there is a more meaningful and inclusive way to distinguish Indigenous from non-indigenous entrepreneurship.

Indigenous Entrepreneurship

That is, that Indigenous entrepreneurship may be distinguished from other forms of entrepreneurship by the fact that they are only managed by indigenous peoples who share a common worldview. For those who have maintained links with their communities and their value systems, that common worldview is most likely to involve a social attachment to ancestral territories (Anderson, Honig & Peredo, 2006, p. 59). But what about the other end of the spectrum: social entrepreneurship?

Social Entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship may be broadly defined as ‘organisations combining resources toward the delivery of goods and services that provide social improvements and change’ (Anderson, Honig, & Peredo, 2006, p. 62). From this definition, we can see that this can be either an indigenous or non-indigenous enterprise. Some local examples of social entrepreneurship can be found on the New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship website.

So what is the difference between social entrepreneurship and *indigenous* social entrepreneurship? Indigenous social entrepreneurship is indigenous-run enterprise based on culturally-specific indigenous values and worldviews. Indigenous social entrepreneurship emphasizes the creativity, innovation and risk taking of entrepreneurship, while prioritizing the social over economic benefits. But of course, not all indigenous entrepreneurship is social entrepreneurship. An enterprise might

be managed by an indigenous individual or group who prioritize economic benefits over the social or cultural.

ISE and ‘social embeddedness’

In *Towards a Theory of Indigenous Entrepreneurship*, Ana Maria Peredo and her co-authors (2004) emphasise the notion of ‘social embeddedness’ in ISE. They define ISE as

‘[a] **community** acting corporately as both entrepreneur and enterprise in pursuit of the common good...to create and operate a new enterprise **embedded in its existing social structure.**’

This highlights a need to consider if any knowledge and values introduced by a new entrepreneurial endeavour is appropriate or meaningful in relation to the values, knowledge systems, social structures and protocols that already exist in a community. Maiava and King’s ‘indigenous development’ based on Cowen and Shenton’s ‘immanent development’ helps to clarify this point:

Instead of being governed by economic growth, [they say] it is motivated by the “moral” or “cultural economy”, both socially and environmentally. Its origin is from

within the indigenous culture, motivated by that culture and directed by cultural criteria' (Maiava & King, 2007, p. 85)¹.

I want to be clear how I feel about this quote here because as you will see in a moment, while I found that the Bouma community was not *governed* by economic growth it was certainly motivated by it. The community's first priority, however, was social wellbeing and respect for pre-existing cultural values and identity. But the main point I want to make here is the quote's reference to the environment and it is this that I want to expand on here.

ISE and social 'embeddedness': Leaving the environment out

It was Granovetter who, in 1985 first used the phrase 'social embeddedness' to explain how sociality drives and informs economic activity (Granovetter, 1985). Later Cahn (2008) stated that '[economic activity] is dependent on non-economic institutions and activities including culture, social networks, politics, and religion' (p. 1). I want to expand on the previous reference to environment in Maiava and King's definition of 'indigenous environment': While ISE literature is based on the notion of social embeddedness, I put it to you that economic activities are not just socially embedded. In indigenous contexts, at least, they are also 'ecologically embedded'.

It is at this juncture that I would like to present the Waitabu Marine Reserve and Camp Site as an example of ISE and why I feel that the ecological embeddedness of indigenous enterprise deserves more of our attention. The Waitabu project is one of four indigenous community-based projects

¹ Schönhuth (2002) refers to studies of development that are created and used at the local level as 'studying down' (p. 154).

within the Bouma National Heritage Park in Taveuni Fiji. The people of Waitabu and the broader Bouma area understand their world as based on the *vanua* concept.

Indigenous Worldviews

Vanua, like *whenua*, *vanuatu*, and *fonua* are some Pacific concepts that encompass ‘worldview, ethos, cosmos, all living and non-living things together as one’ (Helu-Thaman, 1997, p. 14). This indigenous worldview integrates ecological elements with the cosmological and the social and therefore, the economic as do most others. My main point here is that the Bouma people consider humans *in* nature rather than set against and apart from the ‘*more* natural’ landscape. Linkages between humans and non-humans (including the natural and cosmological landscape) are forged - in part - through totemism.

Totemism in the Waitabu Marine Reserve

Totems can reinvigorate *vanua* integrity when their distribution is conducted strategically. The Waitabu community members were very careful in the distribution of their totem fish² when I observed its ritual harvest in 2004. The sub-clan (*yavusa*) ensured the *Vunisā* (Head Chief) received the first of the harvest, and then that everyone in the tribe received their share. In its gathering and careful distribution, there was a palpable sense of love of, and respect for, community and reverence for the totem. From my perspective, in the current climate of uncertainty as to the integrity of the Boumā tribe, the harvest could not have come at a better time. The harvest appeared to reinvigorate a sense of unity between the various sub-clans that made up the Boumā tribe in the Park. It also

² Out of respect for Naisaqai and their totem fish, I will not record its name here.

seemed to bolster hope for their future as at that time social cohesion had begun to ‘unravel’³. Many Waitabu villagers interpreted the abundance of their harvest in 2004 as directly related to the Waitabu Marine Reserve. The implication was that the Indigenous community-based ecotourism project was ‘right’ and ‘just’. Therefore, the majority of the community felt reassured by their ancestors (via their totems) and their Christian God that they were doing the right thing in continuing to manage the project as they had been. Ultimately, their abundant harvest was a symbol of *sautu* (or peace and prosperity).

However, the impact of ICBE was not always positive and symbols manifest themselves in other ways. If tourism in Boumā was carried out outside *vanua* laws and protocols, the communities constituting Boumā would receive punishment from their ancestors and/or their Christian God. Punishment may be manifested as crop diseases, reduced fish stocks and illness among others.

I propose a number of strengths and weaknesses in the ISE literature in the light of this case study.

ISE’s Strengths and Weaknesses

ISE literature is valuable because it goes some way to addressing the lack of attention to socio-cultural values in entrepreneurship literature to date including social and cultural capital. In addition, in the event that indigenous communities choose to engage with the local economy, the literature emphasises that indigenous peoples define and carry out development ‘on their own terms’.

³ This was largely due to historical and micropolitical conflict.

However, much of the work in this area misrepresents indigenous socio-ecological relationships as dichotomous. In other words, they continue to set humans against complex environments rather than treating humans as part of them. As a result, ISE literature does not adequately address the complex ways many indigenous cultures relate to their environments and how these relationships influence examples of ISE (such as Waitabu's Indigenous Community-Based Ecotourism initiative). David Weaver (1998) notes for example that 'there is a danger of implying that indigenous peoples can 'save' their environment and make money [e.g. CBE] if they convert to a standard of rationality that sees nature as 'other'.

So, some recommendations.

Recommendations

Indigenous communities that create new ISE initiatives by socially embedding these enterprises into pre-existing eco-social relationships may have a higher chance of meeting local needs. So my first recommendation is that development practitioners and other social scientists need to develop a heightened awareness and a deeper understanding of these human-environment relationships.

My second recommendation is that social scientists working in any cultural context should be aware of there an emerging body of literature under the umbrella of 'new ecologies' (Biersack, 1999). These new ecologies treat human-environment relationships as holistic, connective, and relational rather than as disconnected and dichotomous. I feel these new ecologies provide a more useful lens

through which consultants, policy makers and researchers may better understand ISE (Farrelly, 2010).

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