

(with the support of Grameen Caldas and the Catholic University of Manizales) in the region, with over 540 participants.

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Spotlight Issues IV.7.6

The Indigenous Intercultural University network – a place for dialogue on knowledge

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The Indigenous Intercultural University (IIU) is a collectively constructed regional academic initiative that promotes and accompanies the social transformation that is being led by the Fund for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean (Indigenous Fund) by offering specific postgraduate formation and promoting epistemic pluralism in academic spheres.

The IIU Network consists of more than 20 academic centres that offer eight different postgraduate courses to indigenous leaders and professionals from the whole Latin American continent. Since its start in 2005, more than 500 men and women from more than 85 indigenous peoples have graduated. One aspect of the innovative IIU approach is the Cátedra Indígena Itinerante (CII, the Itinerant Indigenous Faculty), which is an integral part of postgraduate courses aimed at the dissemination, exchange and collective and systematic building of indigenous knowledge and wisdom, in which debate, shared learning and active participation are promoted among students.

BACKGROUND

As part of their processes of modernization and democratic consolidation, many Latin American countries have passed laws recognizing indigenous peoples as an integral part of their multicultural societies. Indigenous organizations realize that, in order to improve their participation in the government, economy and society, they need more people with professional training. At present, they

do not have enough qualified specialists with leadership skills who are capable of working successfully in the political arena and, above all, ensuring effective coordination between the State and society.

However, existing education systems have not yet met the demand for training for indigenous people in either quantitative or qualitative terms. Indigenous people do not have the same opportunities to pursue higher education, and there are few universities offering degrees and programmes focused on subjects that are important to them. The problem, in terms of quality, is that current university education systems focus on subjects and methodologies that do not respond to the interests of indigenous peoples or value the contributions they make.

Extensive discussions have taken place within this context. Indigenous people consider that higher education in and for their communities must be structured around the transmission of integrated systems of holistic knowledge and draw on the wellsprings of indigenous spirituality. They believe that higher education should not only be realistic and pragmatic, but also reflect the spiritual richness of indigenous cosmogonies and philosophies, which are inexhaustible sources of wisdom and harmonious balance between the people and the land in their communities. These concerns stem from criticism levelled by indigenous people at formal education at all levels. They feel that it has contributed to the loss of their peoples' identity, offers knowledge and skills that they cannot apply

and results in a loss of respect for their way of life, including their leaders, culture and ancestral wisdom. There are also demands for full indigenous participation in the formal state education system, which has not yet been achieved. Consequently, the dialogue between indigenous and academic knowledge is not yet satisfactory.

In this respect, one of the challenges facing higher education programmes for indigenous people is the recording, application, protection and transfer of knowledge that exists and is commonly used in their communities. The knowledge of each indigenous people is unique, traditional and local. It covers all aspects of community life, including their relation with the natural environment.

THE IIU NETWORK

In 2005, to respond this challenge and to address the 30 years of demands of the continental indigenous organizations, the Indigenous Fund called for the formation of the regional IIU Network. Its aim is to contribute to the formation of qualified indigenous professionals with leadership capacity, so they can take on coordination, participation and decision-making tasks from an inter-cultural perspective, and exercise positive influence over the political, economic and social organization of their respective societies.

To respond the demand for academic formation with identity and from an indigenous perspective, the CII was created as an integral part of postgraduate courses aimed at the dissemination, exchange and collective and

systematic building of indigenous knowledge and wisdom, in which debate, shared learning and active participation are promoted among students. Developed by indigenous specialists and wise men and women, the purpose of the CII is to offer a conceptual and political framework to help each postgraduate programme develop its themes by integrating the perspective of indigenous experience and knowledge.

In 2007, the IIU launched several blended postgraduate programmes, incorporating the CII as part of the study programme and getting several virtual platforms up and running at the universities responsible for each programme. These platforms make it possible to carry out the virtual activities that form part of the blended mode of learning that characterizes this education project, since part of the course is carried out face to face (with the CII) and part is completed by distance learning. The virtual learning component is based on a methodology called 'collaborative learning'. From this perspective, knowledge is built with the participation and contribution of all involved; the teacher is not seen as the owner of the information, but rather as the facilitator of the learning process.

Since its outset, the IIU has been able to provide relevant, quality programmes that respond to the expectations and demands of indigenous peoples. The current offer includes the following courses:

- Inter-cultural Bilingual Education
- Inter-cultural Health
- Indigenous Rights
- Governance, Indigenous Peoples, Human Rights and International Cooperation
- Development with Identity for Communitarian Well Being–Good Living

- Linguistic and Cultural Revitalization
- Good Governance and Public Administration with Indigenous Perspective
- Indigenous Women's Leadership.

To finance the studies, the Indigenous Fund established a special scholarship programme that had, up to 2012, enabled the successful participation of more than 500 men and women.

Another important cornerstone is the recovery and production of knowledge in order to promote an integrated development and an affirmation of the identity of the region's indigenous peoples and ethnic groups, generating knowledge and information arising from research studies and the systematization of the traditional wisdom of indigenous cultures, and from inter-cultural relations. The research focuses on actions to bring about social transformation, under the Well Being–Good Living paradigm. The IIU also promotes the publication of educational materials and specialized texts.

IIU'S OUTCOMES

The students, who are mostly indigenous people (just under 15% of the participants being non-indigenous), come from 20 different countries, mainly in Latin America and the Caribbean. Many (52%) of the 500 students who graduated between February 2007, when the first postgraduate course on inter-cultural bilingual education started, and 2012 now hold positions of responsibility in the government of their country or in other institutions where they are able to influence the definition, formulation and implementation of public policies concerning the rights of indigenous peoples.

IMPACTS ON IIU'S PARTNERS

It can be said that the main impact of the integral IIU approach is that it helps to broaden traditional academic models of university education by offering a different option based on the experiences, practices, struggles and history of indigenous peoples. Another specific impact of this process lies in encouraging students to engage in reflective analysis, with a view to decolonizing university and academic knowledge by incorporating approaches based on spirituality, citizenship, gender equality and inter-culturality.

The CII leads through personal changes in terms of *individual* identity and the reassertion of *collective* identity. Students confirm that their self-esteem improves through a recognition and appreciation of the cultural, economic, environmental and spiritual elements of their cultures.

The contacts and exchanges among leaders and local actors from different countries are contributing to building knowledge with different ideological, political, social, cultural and spiritual contexts.

LESSONS LEARNT

Higher education for indigenous peoples should be made by indigenous peoples responding to their own spirituality and epistemology. An alternative higher education needs alternative institutional structures. One of the challenges facing higher education programmes for indigenous people is the recording, application, protection and transfer of knowledge that exists and is commonly used in their communities.

For more information, contact formacion@fondoindigena.org, or go to www.fondoindigena.org.

IV.7.7

Networks on community–university engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean

América Solidaria

SECRETARIAT: Chile.

WEBSITE: <http://www.americasolidaria.org> (accessed 17 May 2013).

MEMBERS: n/a.

América Solidaria's mission is to build networks that cooperate among the American nations to strengthen local projects with volunteer professionals, with the goal of enhancing the quality of life of the poorest and most excluded people in the continent (text taken from <http://www.americasolidaria.org/home/quienes-somos-2/#gen> [accessed 17 May 2013]).