



Assessment of possible Intellectual Property Protection  
options of Traditional Knowledge System in Ethiopia  
*Special Reference in Herbal Medicine for Livestock*

**African Technology Policy Studies Network**  
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# **Assessment of possible Intellectual Property Protection options of Traditional Knowledge System in Ethiopia**

*Special Reference in Herbal Medicine for Livestock*

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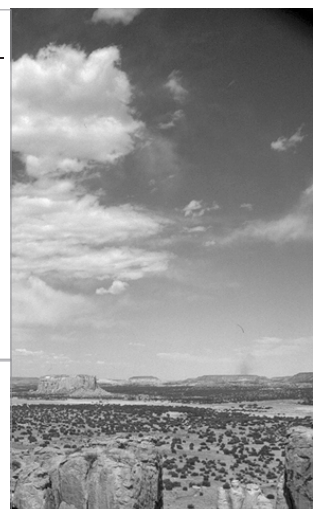
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# Acknowledgements

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# 1. Introduction

This research was initiated to exploit traditional knowledge on traditional herbal medicine with special reference to livestock. Healing with Ethiopian traditional medicine is not only concerned with curing of diseases but also with the protection and promotion of human physical, spiritual, social, mental and material wellbeing.

Medicinal plants and knowledge of their use provide a vital contribution to human and livestock healthcare needs throughout the country. There are a number of traditional medicinal practices that reflect the diversity of Ethiopian cultures. The protection and exploitation of community knowledge in a country with a rich biodiversity and cultural expressions such as Ethiopia is not only of great importance to the knowledge-owner communities and the country, but also a global concern where knowledge transfer for the good of the human race has been a contemporary agenda.

Knowledge categories in Ethiopia are believed to exist in most instances interdependently. This fact may imply a common scenario for drafting a basic law for all traditional knowledge systems. However, a holistic study on all knowledge systems is improbable. It may be impossible to get the maximum out of a survey on all knowledge categories in one package. Even if there may be a possible option for the study of all the knowledge categories in one package, the study would be too broad to discover specific realities.

This study is on selected categories of knowledge and associated knowledge systems with the reference to herbal medicine for livestock. The most pressing questions that this work tried to answer are as follows:

- What really holds the knowledge?
- Who are the sources of the knowledge?
- Who is entitled to use and access the knowledge?
- Which types of illnesses are treated?
- What are the sources of the natural materials used for the preparation of herbal medicine?

## 2. Key Concerns

The study was carried out in a few selected areas in Ethiopia. Traditional healers in the study areas were found to be rich in their indigenous knowledge on the use of medicinal plants to manage various human and animal diseases. Traditional knowledge has originated, developed and is being practiced by traditional knowledge holders. This knowledge is transferred with own mechanism which is restrictive and family based.

A majority of the local healers collect medicinal plants alone and in great secrecy and no one is allowed to see except some family members during this activity. The study confirmed that 79.5% of the knowledge was acquired from their father or uncle. 87.2% reported that they acquired the whole knowledge from their mentors and further, that 84.6% of the respondents didn't improve the acquired knowledge. The survey revealed that 92.3% of the respondents confirmed that their knowledge is well known by individuals in their community but not the whole community. This indicated that such traditional knowledge is held by a limited class or members within the community who pass such skills and knowledge mainly to their kin.

The results further showed that Herbalists believe that restoration of the medicinal plants to their natural habitat is important since the curing ability is believed to be more effective when they are collected from their natural habitats rather than plants collected from areas where they have been taken. It was also found that, all healers have their own specialization. This generation is specialized on gene and mental development. This knowledge has never been disclosed to anybody, not even the generation at risk. This also revealed that 64.10 % of the respondents were not willing to share their knowledge with the researchers.

In summary, the research revealed the following points:

- Customary systems have their own rule based systems governing access to and use of traditional knowledge.
- Special traditional knowledge is held by a certain group within the community.
- Traditional Medicinal knowledge has been passed from generation to generation without improving the original knowledge. Moreover, some specific knowledge is lost in between generations.
- Documentation of medicinal uses of plants is becoming urgent.
- Traditional healers protect their knowledge through secrets.
- Results from the study areas revealed that customary law is still being practiced.
- The spiritual aspect of traditional medicine cannot be separated from the physiological uses of plants.
- Traditional knowledge is held by specific community members and not by the whole community.
- There is knowledge specialization between healers. Most healers are known to be best at some specific areas of medication.
- Plants used in preparation of the medicines are not well known. This hindered the protection of biodiversity in regard to these plants.
- One's whole knowledge is disclosed to his/her family members but the rest of the community would only know the most common knowledge.
- No one, even within the owner's family, can practice the knowledge without the owner's



permission.

- Knowledge is transferred orally. This leads to knowledge being lost in the process from generation to generation.
- Traditional medicine is prepared by harvesting the roots.
- Restoration of the medicinal plants to their natural habitat is important to their curing ability.

### 3. Conclusion and Policy Options

This study concludes that:

- The traditional healers' knowledge should be protected through appropriate sui generis intellectual property right protection using customary law and international agreements need to be put in place.
- Systematic cultivation of medicinal plants should be introduced in order to conserve biodiversity and protect threatened species.
- An urgent need to formulate an array of incentive measures to ensure that members of the younger generations would desire to learn, value, adapt and apply the traditional knowledge.
- The government should create an environment where the traditional healers can communicate with researchers and reveal secret medicinal cures and their beliefs of treatment.
- Traditional medicinal policy, regulations and working guidelines must be approved.
- The government must resolve the differences and disagreements between the traditional herbalists and modern medical practitioners.
- Promote the incorporation of conservation science in school curricula, with particular reference to Medicinal Plants issues.
- Promote the understanding/appreciation of traditional knowledge on Medicinal Plants and their applications as an important part of Ethiopia's cultural heritage.
- Creating and strengthening awareness on the traditional health system which includes acknowledging the usefulness and need for conservation of the plants on which the traditional system depends on.
- Establishing a system of incentives and awards to recognize outstanding achievement in health care and development, whether by an individual or by a group.
- Organizing and strengthening the traditional healers association at local community, regional and countrywide level.
- Ensuring that the policy, which sets priorities and programs for research, includes the conservation, domestication and cultivation of medicinal plants.
- Establishing legal mechanisms that recognize the rights of communities over the medicinal plants in their care/area.
- Incorporating information from traditional knowledge systems into school curricula and actively encourage efforts to pass on knowledge.
- Establishing a system to collect, organize, conserve and protect medicinal plants.
- Enact laws on the conservation and sustainable use of medicinal plants.
- Issue laws and regulations defining the rights and duties of traditional practitioners, herbalists, communities and other stakeholders.
- Put in place relevant laws to regulate traditional medical and herbal practices.



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