Cummings, Sarah: Athena Institute, VU University Amsterdam/Knowledge for Development Partnership
sarahcummingswork@gmail.com
Authors: Sarah Cummings, Athena Institute, VU University Amsterdam, Netherlands
Barbara Regeer, Athena Institute, VU University Amsterdam, Netherlands
Suzanne Kiwanuka, Makerere University, Uganda
Chris Zielinski, University of Winchester, UK

Title: Linking local and global knowledge: lessons on improving the links between traditional and modern medicine in Africa

Research on local knowledge – roughly synonymous with indigenous, community and traditional knowledge – is dispersed over many academic disciplines, hindering understanding of its contribution to sustainable development. At the same time, many stakeholders, including academics, think tanks and UN policymakers, are arguing that knowledge should receive more attention within the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), both generally but also in terms of global health.

Local knowledge is particularly important in the field of global health because 80% of health services in sub-Saharan Africa are provided by traditional medicine. In resource poor contexts like sub-Saharan Africa, improved integration between modern allopathic medicine and traditional medicine is recognized as one way forward to improve health care, despite the many barriers between them.

Our study does a stock-take of perspectives on local knowledge within academic research on global health, as part of a wider exploration of the links between traditional and modern medicine. Based on a bibliographic search of 5 main medical and non-medical databases undertaken during October and November 2017, and updated in June 2018, some 35 references were found that examine the relationship between traditional and modern medicine. Based on a critical interpretive synthesis of the literature, we identify the large number of structural barriers to cooperation between traditional medicine and modern medicine at the level of policy and practice, although at the local level some good practices were found to exist.

Although many studies identified focus on the role of local knowledge, few are looking at the links between local and global knowledge. This study focuses on these links in the global health field to develop a framework, potentially applicable to other fields facing a similar challenge. In addition, recommendations are made to policymakers and practitioners in their efforts to integrate traditional and modern medicine. Finally, we also make suggestions for a future research agenda.

In terms of the meeting theme ‘Sustainable Development and Indigenous Peoples’, our study reflects on the terminologies indigenous and local knowledge. Although this study is focused on sub-Saharan Africa, it is probably also relevant to other geographies.