

Knowledge Democracy & Excellence in Engagement

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Abstract

We often come across theories and aspects related to ‘knowledge’, but seldom do we try to understand its hidden implications. Knowledge as understood generally is about the information of facts and understanding of a subject. This article, essentially argues against this understanding. It explores the multiple dimensions of ‘knowledge’ through a literature review and illustrations of practical examples. It makes a case of how important the process of knowledge creation is, especially amidst the current societal challenges we are faced with. It also outlines the importance of co-creation of knowledge, through acknowledgement and valuation of alternate paradigms of knowledge. Further, it discusses the concept of ‘knowledge democracy’, and how Institutions of Higher Education, by abiding with its principles can help achieve ‘excellence in engagement’. The article concludes with the findings of two studies undertaken by the UNESCO Chair, which were based on the principles of ‘knowledge democracy’ and ‘excellence in engagement’.

Key words: *Knowledge, democracy, co-construction, decolonization, engagement*

Introduction

“There are key opportunities for a transformative knowledge agenda that is co-constructed with those who are experiencing inequalities and are in a position to influence change through policies, practices and politics...In a world in which knowledge shapes power and voice, and vice versa, the fundamental inequality in the production of knowledge about inequality itself must be addressed (World Social Science Report (WSSR), 2016, p. 275)”.

The recently released 2016 World Social Science Report (WSSR), –*Challenging Inequalities: Pathways to a Just World*, is a welcome addition to the literature on inequality. Inequality has become a global concern for citizens, activists, scholars and policy makers over the past 20 years as it is inexorably linked to issues of planetary survival, health, gender justice, cultural justice and more. One of the most interesting chapters is “Transformative Knowledge for a Just World”. In this chapter, the editors of the Report note that, “Inherent in this challenge is knowledge inequality itself, and how knowledge inequalities link to other intersecting inequalities. These include inequalities in the construction of knowledge – which kinds of knowledge are produced, by whom and where” (WSSR, 2016, p. 274).

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It is a welcome addition to our understanding of knowledge democracy. It supports and draws from not only work that those of us associated with the UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research have been doing, but also the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Enrique Dussere, Paulo Wangoola, Shiv Visvanathan, Vandana Shiva and others, including John Gaventa and his colleagues.

This article draws from the early work of Tandon and Hall in developing and extending the theory and practice of *participatory research* beginning in the 1970s, from years of linking knowledge and practice in India, Canada and elsewhere and more recently under the umbrella of the UNESCO Chair in CBR. The history of participatory research owes a great deal to the praxis of Freire, Horton, FalsBorda, Robert Chambers, John Gaventa, and others. In this article, we move beyond that history to share thoughts on knowledge and its relevance to the global challenges of our times, movements towards decolonisation of knowledge and the increased recognition of subaltern knowledge, the emerging discourse of knowledge democracy, the contemporary opportunities for community university research partnerships, and the challenge of building capacity in both civil society and the academy for a transformative co-construction of knowledge.

Knowledge

What is knowledge? How it is created? Are there multiple traditions and cultures of knowledge? Has today's dominant positivistic knowledge system been the only one in history? Or is it seen as something subjective – one which is under construction and steadily changing? (Walsh & Rastegari, 2015). How does knowledge relate to contemporary societal dynamics? Such varied conceptions of 'knowledge' have continued to intrigue scholars and philosophers of all times. In the growing discourse of knowledge economy and knowledge society, it is fruitful to be aware of diversities and pluralities of knowledge, modes of knowledge production, and forms of knowledge dissemination. Escrigas et. al, argues that:

“Knowledge is defined in several ways: the facts, feelings or experiences of a person or a group of people, a state of knowing or awareness, and/or the consciousness or the familiarity gained by experience or learning. Knowledge is created through research, through the experience of the wise, through the act of surviving in the world, and is represented in text, poetry, music, political discourse, social media, speeches, drama and storytelling. Knowledge is linked to practical skills, to our working lives and to universal and abstract thought. Knowledge is created everyday by each one of us and is central to who we are as human beings” (Escrigas, et. al, 2014, p. Xxxiii)

During the last years of the 20th century, there has been an increased importance given to the role of knowledge. The dominant discourse has been on knowledge economy. Digital world is making a bigger contribution to knowledge economy around the world. However, the growing inequality in the world of knowledge has been a persistent phenomenon. Certain dominant knowledge institutions and knowledge perspectives have been shaping global socio-economic order in the contemporary society. This assumes special importance in light of the challenges of current times. Today, humanity today is faced with a co-existence of great achievements and failures. Although it has achieved enormous prosperity in the past fifty years; yet, one-fifth of all people live in poverty at less than \$1.25 a day. In the midst of plenty, there is entrenched poverty and scarcity; 40% of all children in the world are malnourished; more people have mobiles than access to toilets. Rapid economic growth has also been associated with growing environmental degradation (Tandon, 2014, p. 2).

Clearly, these global trends affect different regions, communities & households differently. The cumulative impacts of these trends imply that humanity as a whole faces enormous global challenges. These challenges have arisen out of certain global forces, models and approaches being adopted around the world. Hence, the solutions to these global challenges have to be approached using a global lens. Although specific solutions to these challenges have to be contextually devised, it is critical that efforts at finding solutions are both local and global. New models of human development and well-being that place human happiness at the centre have to be consensually evolved (Tandon, 2014, p. 5).

Therefore, there is a need to collectively find new and innovative ways for people to work together to take actions on the deep issues that confront us all. It is here that equality and co-creation of knowledge becomes extremely important. This is because democratic process of co-creation of knowledge for social change is an important contribution to the deep transformations that we all desire. The critical role of knowledge has also been outlined by the emphasis placed by the UN in its sustainable development goals. One of the targets under achieving SDG number 4, relating to inclusive and quality education states that:

“By 2030, it needs to be ensured that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development” (UN, 2016, webpage).

Society’s future directions have to be based on universally accepted values of equity, justice, inclusion, peace and sustainability. The pursuit of these values has to be integrated into the very design of productive economy, settlement planning, community development, democratic governance and knowledge creation, recognition and sharing. The invention of such models, approaches and formulations has to include at the forefront new ways of knowing, new ways of interpreting cosmologies of knowledge and a diversity of perspectives on knowledge (Tandon, 2014, p. 5).

“We can address the power of knowledge to build the world we want; a world where social, economic and ecological justice includes all citizens irrespective of class, ethnicity, race, gender and age. A world in which life is respected no matter what form it takes. A world that shares an understanding of the interdependence of the social, human and environmental dimensions and the key of our collective success is cooperation (Hall, et. al., 2014, p. 301)”

Therefore, now is the moment to widen the scope of knowledge in society and move beyond creating fragmented solutions to a true knowledge-based society through engagement with citizenry as a whole, at all scales of activity, to dealing with the problematic issues of the day, along with global challenges. The creation and dissemination of knowledge could contribute to transforming the paradigms and beliefs established in social, economic and political systems, and move forward to creative and innovative ways of thinking and imagining new realities (Escrigas, et. al, p. Xxxiv).

The Case for Knowledge Democracy

At the heart of transformative potential of knowledge production and dissemination is a deepened understanding of knowledge democracy. What do we mean by knowledge

democracy? Knowledge democracy refers to an interrelationship of phenomena. First, it calls for recognition of ecologies of knowledge and cognitive justice such as organic, spiritual and land-based systems, frameworks arising from our social movements, and the knowledge of the marginalized or excluded everywhere. De Sousa Santos has said “There will be no global social justice until there is global cognitive justice” (Santos, 2007, p. 10).

Secondly it affirms that knowledge is both created and represented in multiple forms including text, image, numbers, story, music, drama, poetry, ceremony, meditation and more.

Third, and fundamental to our thinking about knowledge democracy is understanding that knowledge is a powerful tool for taking action in social movements and elsewhere to deepen democracy and to struggle for a fairer and healthier world.

And finally, knowledge democracy is about open access for the sharing of knowledge so that everyone who needs knowledge has access to it. Knowledge democracy is about intentionally linking values of justice, fairness and action to the process of creating and using knowledge.

As Tandon (2013) has argued,

“...different voices represent different forms and expressions of knowledge—different modes and articulations of knowledge from diverse experiences, locations and perspectives. This is the essence of ‘knowledge democracy’—a movement that respects multiple modes, forms, sources and idioms of knowledge production, representation and dissemination (Tandon, 2013, blogpiece)”

So, essentially, tools of knowledge production are universally available to all humanity. However, what has caused the discrimination is perpetuation of instrumental rationality as the only epistemology. Tandon (2014) argues that, “humans get to know through thinking; yes, cognition and rational thinking is important. But, humans also know from acting and feeling; yet, acting upon the world (learning by doing) and feeling about the world (phenomenology of everyday life) have not been accepted as legitimate modes of knowing. This needs to change if knowledge democracy has to be established (p.4)”.

Focusing attention on this theme, Tandon (2016) argues:

“At this juncture of humanity, as we stand at crossroads, we seek to ask: What should be the nature of human thought, emotion and action? Should we continue on this path forever? Or should we pause to discover another? The human mind, its knowledge and capacity to dream can provide seeds for re-discovery. In taking steps towards such re-discovery, we need to look around the world at Institutions of Higher Education (Tandon, et al, 2016, p.1)”.

How can existing recognised centres of knowledge production (like universities, higher education and research institutions), play an important role in promoting knowledge democracy?

By taking a deliberate standpoint of engagement, universities need to integrate their three missions---that engagement as a standpoint is not ghettoised in service alone, but engaged stance is integrated into research and teaching as well. Production of new knowledge and its learning by students is possible through engagements with communities; such an engagement may also produce socially relevant knowledge. It may open up the possibility that the learning by students is based on deeper understanding of their contexts and a respect for

knowledge in communities. It is this process of *co-construction of knowledge* that may enhance the contributions of universities as sites for practice of knowledge democracy (Tandon, 2014, p. 4). Universities can thus provide spaces and intellectual resources to complement and build on the enormous cultural and social capital of communities. UNESCO's recent declarations are exhorting universities to re-examine their research and teaching practices in light of 'preparing the next generation of ethical global citizens' (Tandon, 2014, p. 5).

"Higher Education Institutions, through their core functions (teaching, research and service to the community) carried out in the context of institutional autonomy and academic freedom should increase their interdisciplinary focus and promote critical thinking and active citizenship. This would contribute to sustainable development, peace, wellbeing and the realization of human right [Higher Education] must not only give solid skills for the present and future world but must also contribute to the education of ethical citizens committed to the construction of peace, the defense of human rights and the values of democracy (UNESCO, 2009, p. 2)."

Further arguments for such engaged standpoint are presented in 5th GUNi Report on Higher Education,

"The recovery of indigenous intellectual traditions and resources is a priority task. Course structures, syllabuses, books, reading materials, research models and research areas must reflect the treasury of our thoughts, the riches of our indigenous traditions and the felt necessities of our societies. This must be matched with learning environments on which students do not experience learning as a burden, but as a force that liberates the soul and leads to the uplifting of the society. Above all, universities must retrieve their original task of creating good citizens instead of only good workers (Escrigas et. al., 2014, p. xxxviii)."

Cognitive justice& Ecologies of knowledge

In the early 1970's, Freire's '*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*' and '*Education for Critical Consciousness*', swept the globe. These books and nearly two dozen others that followed propose that *education, though in inequitable societies predominantly a tool of elites, is also a democratic egalitarian weapon* (Gibson, 1999). Freire says that "*liberating education lies in cognition, not in transferrals of education*". This was followed by the development of participatory tools and methodologies such as PRA and PAR in the 1980s. These were based on principles such as; direct learning from local people, offsetting biases, optimizing trade-offs, triangulating, and seeking diversity, analysis by local people; practicing critical self-awareness and responsibility; and sharing (Chambers, 1994, p. 1437). However, unfortunately, modern systems of collating knowledge and imparting education have been a slave to academic monopolism. This nature of knowledge realities have been acknowledged by several other authors in their literary works, who have linked 'social justice to cognitive justice'.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos' has a narrative that begins with his observation that in the realm of knowledge we have created an intellectual abyss, which hinders human progress. Abyssal thinking, he notes, "Consists in granting to modern science the monopoly of the universal distinction between true and false to the detriment of ... alternative bodies of knowledge" (Santos, 2007, p.47). De Sousa Santos makes the link between values and aspirations tightly

in saying, "Global social injustice is therefore intimately linked to global cognitive injustice. The struggle for global social justice will, therefore, be a struggle for cognitive justice as well (47)". Shiv Visvanathan contributes to this discourse expanding the concept of cognitive justice, noting that

"The idea of cognitive justice sensitizes us not only to forms of knowledge but also to the diverse communities of problem solving. What one offers then is a democratic imagination with a non-market, non-competitive view of the world, where conversation, reciprocity, translation create knowledge not as an expert, almost zero-sum view of the world but as a collaboration of memories, legacies, heritages, a manifold heuristics of problem solving, where a citizen takes both power and knowledge into his or her own hands. These forms of knowledge, especially the ideas of complexity, represent new forms of power sharing and problem-solving that goes beyond the limits of voice and resistance. They are empowering because they transcend the standard cartographies of power and innovation, which are hegemonic. By incorporating the dynamics of knowledge into democracy, we reframe the axiomatics of knowledge based on hospitality, community, non-violence, humility and a multiple idea of time, where the citizen as trustee and inventor visualizes and creates a new self reflexive idea of democracy around actual communities of practice (Visvanathan, 2009)".

Globally, there are instances of how knowledge has been produced within communities and people; and the kind of impact it has achieved. Such varied ecologies of knowledge consist of many sources, venues, forms and species of knowledge agents in a symbiotic relationship of productive exchange and value creation. Such knowledge is engaged, active, dynamic and also linked to social, political, cultural or sustainable changes.

'..PRIA's co-constructed knowledge is linked to a variety of social movements in India. Mpambo's mother tongue scholars are stimulating an unprecedented reawakening of Afrikan spiritual knowledge and sharing in Uganda. The shack dwellers of Durban and beyond have boldly taken the word university as their own and turned the knowledge hierarchies upside down in the service of justice for the poor. The Indigenous language champions working with the First People's Cultural Council have staked a claim to epistemological privilege over the western trained non-Indigenous linguists. The healers from South Africa have staked their claims to knowledge superiority not to settle any epistemological scores with western science, but in their commitment to better serve the health needs of their people. These knowledge innovators have all facilitated various means of creating, sharing and accessing knowledge that is not part of what is often called the western canon. For a variety of justice, cultural, spiritual, environmental, health reasons, the application of knowledge from the western canon in each one of these stories was seen as insufficient. The contexts, conditions, values, uses, politics of knowledge in each of these stories called for an opening outwards of our comfortable assumptions about whose knowledge counts and what the relationship between knowledge and life might be (Hall, 2015, p. 5).

Considering the varied ecologies of knowledge and its role in fostering knowledge democracy, it is important to note that knowledge is uncovered, created, represented and shared throughout our world in dynamic ways that that go beyond normative printed texts, peer-reviewed journal articles, books and even new digitised choruses in the form of blogs, tweets and websites. In the lives of communities, in social movements and many other quests

for justice, transformation and change, knowledge is created, represented and shared through age-old practices such as the ceremonies of indigenous people, and the sharing of stories that keep alive cultural practices and ways of knowing that would otherwise be erased. Knowledge is also created, represented and shared through poems and songs that call us to witness and action, through sculptures and images that of lament, memory and resistance. Transformative forms of understanding and knowledge are also embedded in the collective community quilts sewn by women who protest polluting development schemes, and in the large puppets that accompany demonstrations and acts of defiance. Theatre both on stage as through the work of Brecht or in communities in forms of forum theatre, theatre of the oppressed or popular theatre, has also been used as a powerful form of transformative knowledge making and engagement.

Through a lens of feminist arts-based education and research, Clover has articulated a number of characteristics or roles the arts played in knowledge creation and mobilisation (2006). The first was versatility and diversity, which speaks to the multiplicity of art genres and artistic practices as well as the types of issues and understandings these arts uncover and represent. The second is universality and familiarity. By this Clover means that all cultures around the world have forms of artistic practice and expression, which capture and represent the essence of who they are. Thirdly, she speaks of the imagination, and its ability to defy what Wyman calls 'the constraints of expectation and the everyday'. By liberating the imagination through cultural engagement and expression, we can both imagine and re-imagine the world in new ways, thus creating new forms of knowledge. Building on this, Clover speaks to the power of the symbolic and metaphorical nature of art to speak to meanings that go beyond the confines of words and language and make new connections between ideas and understanding.

Decolonisation, epistemicide and subaltern knowledge: Pathways to Knowledge Democracy

The South African students have called for the decolonisation of the higher education curriculum in their universities. When we hear this call, we think that we understand it because of the history of white domination and racialization of education in that country.

But what do we think when we hear that call by students and activists in India, England, Canada and elsewhere? There are several places in the WSSR that cite the uneven production of academic knowledge showing how the USA dominates academic publishing (2016, p. 338). But the idea of decolonising our higher education institutions is much more than this. It is a response to what de Sousa Santos has called the epistemicide carried out by the western European cultural, economic and political project of the recent 500 years. Readers of this article be they in Tanzania, Brazil, Canada, India or elsewhere know that the core theoretical content, the intellectual substance of nearly all the universities of the world are variations on what is called the Western canon. Lebakeng, Phalane, Dalindjebo (South Africa), Odara-Hoppers (South Africa-Uganda), Wangoola (Uganda) and Ezeanya (Rwanda) have written/worked extensively on the importance of the recovery of the intellectual traditions of the continent. "Institutions of higher education in South Africa were (and still are) copycats whose primary function was (and still is) to serve and promote colonial Western values" (Lebakeng, 2006, p. 73). Similarly Ezeanya adds, "In Africa, the research agenda, curriculum and 'given' conceptual frameworks should be continuously re-examined ...with the aim of eschewing all manifestations of new-colonial underpinnings and emphasizing indigenous ideas (Ezeyanya, 2011, p. 3).

So decolonisation at the University of Victoria, in Canada is a call among other things for a recovery and a placement of Indigenous knowledge amongst the central aspects of curriculum. Decolonisation is a revolutionary idea and practice. But how did the Western canon come to dominate our collective higher education institutions?

To understand that we have to look at what Grosfoguel has called the, “Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century” (Grosfoguel, 2013). It seems that the story of dispossessing the people from the ownership of their ideas in the medieval universities that brought ecclesiastical power to the new universities was just the start of our knowledge story. Grosfoguel pulls four distinct stories of epistemicide, stories almost always treated as separate historical processes, together. In doing so we learn in a powerful manner how intellectual colonization has emerged. The four epistemicides are the conquest of Al-Andalus, the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Europe, the conquest of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas started by the Spanish, continued by the French and the English and still underway today in the contemporary Western Hemisphere. The creation of the slave trade that resulted in millions killed in Africa and at sea and more totally de-humanized by enslavement in the Americas was a third genocidal knowledge conquest. Finally the killing of millions of Indo-European women mostly through burning at the stake as witches because of knowledge practices that were not controlled by men. These conquests transformed Europe from itself being at the periphery of an earlier dominant Islamic centre of intellectual power to taking centre stage. But in an historic irony Spain and Portugal, the leading military and intellectual powers of the 15th Century have been shut out of the post 16th Century Northern European monopoly of knowledge.

What is important for us to understand is that these four conquests were both military and epistemological/ideological. At the height of the Al-Adalus Empire in Europe, the city of Cordoba had a 500,000-book library. This was at a time when other intellectual centres in Europe would have had libraries of 5-10,000 books. The Spanish burned the library in Cordoba and elsewhere. They destroyed most of the codices in the Mayan, Inca and Aztec empires as well. Women’s knowledge, which was largely oral was simply silenced as was the knowledge of Africa. African slaves were portrayed as non-humans incapable of Western style thought. Hegel for example in commenting on Africans says, “Among negroes it is the case that consciousness has not attained even the intuition of any sort of objectivity...the negro is the man as beast (Lectures 218)” (as quoted in Dussell 1993:70). The continued linguicide of Indigenous languages in North America and throughout the world today is evidence that the patterns established through conquest in the 16th Centuries is still deeply entrenched in our own minds and most certainly in our higher education institutions.

Achieving ‘Excellence in Engagement’

Considering the aforementioned account on the role of ‘knowledge systems’, contemporary opportunities and challenges, meanings of knowledge democracy and its linkages to social justice; we now move towards ‘*excellence in engagement*’. Engagement is the process of building relationships with people and putting those relationships to work to accomplish shared goals, i.e. involving those who are at the heart of the change we wish to see. Achievement of excellence in such engagement practices can be through a high quality of work in conducting research, building partnerships, co-constructing and mobilizing knowledge for achieving sound impact.

The work of UNESCO Chair over the last few years has been continuously striving to achieve such ‘excellence in engagement’ through research, policy advocacy, knowledge

mobilization and capacity enhancement. Two of the projects it has recently undertaken, bear testimony to its efforts in this direction. Presented below are the experiences and lessons of these projects, and how they have essentially propagated the agenda of *'excellence in engagement'* by promoting ideas which support the latter. The first example is that of a project on 'Strengthening Community University Research Partnerships', which is based on the idea of co-construction of knowledge, and the second is the project on 'Building the Next Generation of Community Based Researchers' which promoted building capacities for 'engaged research'.

Practice in co-construction of knowledge: A step towards 'Engaged Excellence'

Historically, universities have not only produced knowledge but have also been the arbiters of which knowledge is 'good' and 'valid', establishing the very frameworks by which such assessments are made. Tautologically, universities have long considered knowledge produced by universities as the best and most legitimate. But in the face of global crises that challenge humanity's capacity to respond, the value of alternative forms and paradigms of knowledge is being revisited (Bivens et. al., 2015, p. 6). As the ability of the technical-rationalist knowledge long-favoured and reproduced by universities is questioned for its adequacy for the current moment, researchers are increasingly moved to work with organizations and communities outside of the university in order to co-generate knowledge which draws dynamically on multiple epistemologies and life-worlds. Cultivating research partnerships with communities and civil society organizations is a way of making subaltern knowledge visible. Such co-creative acts of knowledge production are at the heart of the university's contribution to deepening knowledge democracy and cognitive justice (Bivens et. al., 2015, p. 6).

The sharing of knowledge between universities and their communities has been a prominent feature of the field of adult education in Europe since the establishment of the extra-mural division of Cambridge University in 1873. The Extra-mural tradition has found counterparts in most of the universities of Europe as Continuing Education, Extension services and so forth (Hall, et. al., 2015). The most recent developments in higher education and community engagement have taken different organisational forms. Science Shops have proliferated in European universities, inspired by the Dutch examples from the 1970s. Community University Partnership Programmes have been initiated in England. Offices of Community Based Research have surfaced in Canada and elsewhere (Hall et. al., 2015).

Further, many efforts are being made for advocacy for such views expressed in the Global Communique on Enhancing Community University Engagement between the Global North and South issues by the Big Tent group of higher education networks (Bivens et. al., 2015, p. 7):

"...we believe that the transformative potential of our community sector organizations and our higher education institutions is enhanced when we combine our collective knowledge, global connections, skills and resources to address the myriad of social cultural economic health and environmental challenges in our places and regions".

Critical Factors in Research Partnerships

'Strengthening Community University Research Partnerships' was a global study (undertaken by the UNESCO Chair during 2014-2015) of institutional arrangements for the facilitation and support of research partnership between community groups and universities.

Inclusive of a survey on the global trends in support structures for CURPs, and 12 country case studies, the main findings that emerged from the study are as follows (Hall, et. al., 2015):

Lessons from the global survey:

- *Strong need for institutional investment in structures to support and facilitate community and academic interests.*
- *Large variation in the language, conceptualization and practice of these engagements, from 'extension' to 'co-creation' of knowledge.*
- *The 'knowledge cultures' of CSOs and HEIs are very different.*
- *An emerging contradiction between professed commitment to co-construction of knowledge and partnerships with communities and the actual practice of doing CBR (i.e. origins of research, sharing of resources)*
- *Expressed need for building community capacity to play equitable roles in the research partnerships*

Lessons from case studies

- *When national policy creates formal expectations to promote Community Engagement (CE), HEIs tend to show greater readiness; earmarked funding for CE further facilitates CE by HEIs*
- *Top leadership of Ministries and HEIs can have huge impacts on promotion of CE in general, and CURPs in particular; by prioritising CE in research functions of HEIs, such leaders can push co-creation of knowledge*
- *Middle level leadership—Deans, Centre Directors, Professors—and student leaders can nurture and operationalise CE (and CURP) by championing these in their faculty, centre, association*
- *Even when reporting and monitoring mechanisms exist within HEIs, accountability to communities and reporting to civil society is not a common practice at all.*
- *Long term commitment to CE and CURP is required to institutionalise such practice; support for such 5-10 year partnerships is critical*
- *Investing in CB of students and faculty at HEIs (and in community and civil society) to learn about partnerships and CBPR methodologies is critically missing*
- *In general, civil society has shied away from demanding greater responsiveness and accountability from HEIs and the system of higher education in various countries around the world*
- *The mind-set in HEIs continues to negate community knowledge and practitioner expertise; widespread systematisation of practitioner knowledge and sensitisation of next generation of researchers can make a difference*

Excellence in Engagement means building capacity for transformative and co-created knowledge

The concept of excellence in engagement may be understood in several ways. We suggest that one of the most important challenges in implementing a notion as open as excellence in engagement lies in providing many more opportunities for students, researchers, civil society workers, social movement activists to learn how to gather, promote, identify, create, share

and systematise knowledge. Co-constructing transformative knowledge is not easy. Even the recognition of civil society and social movements as privileged locations for knowledge construction is not accepted by many academics. Community based participatory research is not just one more module to be added or highlighted in standard research methods courses. What does engagement really mean? Can a rather vague concept such as excellence prove itself valuable in contributing to a new understanding of knowledge?

“Questioning where the next generation of community based researchers would be able to learn CBR, the UNESCO Chair turned to Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada to support a global study titled ‘Building the Next Generation of Community Based Researchers’. The project intended to find out where people in various parts of the world have been learning to do CBR, what principles of CBR might be derived from these diverse learning locations, and explore various partnership arrangements that might lead us toward more collaboration in building global capacity in CBR (UNESCO Chair, 2016, p. 5)”.

Key takeaways from the study are as follows (Tandon, et. al., 2016):

- *There is high demand and a low offer of CBR training opportunities. The main challenge is how to meet the existing demand of training in CBR and how to complement the existing offer.*
- *Specialized training is needed in CBR in the four thematic areas of the NextGen project (water governance, Indigenous research methodologies, asset-based community development, and governance and citizenship) as well as in broader multi- and inter-sectoral fields.*
- *There needs to be a mix of training opportunities in every region that includes face-to-face learning, online options, experiential learning, as well as short and long term training courses.*
- *Future training opportunities should take into account regional differences (e.g., learning cultures, infrastructure, languages) and provide contextually important learning materials.*
- *Different dimensions have to be taken into account when designing and offering more training opportunities in CBR, for instance, the location of training (e.g., HEIs, CSOs, community settings); the expected length of engagement in CBR (i.e., over a long period and/or controlled by local community, or short term CBR like in some participatory action research and service learning activities).*

The study also established a pedagogical framework for CBR training to be provided to the next generation of community based researchers. The intention of this framework is to be robust and theoretically well founded, but also flexible and simple enough to be readily translated into effective CBR teaching and training strategies and practices in geographically, politically and culturally diverse contexts. The framework is made of five pedagogical principles emerging from the findings of the Next Gen project, which tend to underpin the pedagogy of CBR and appear relevant to be included in future training of community based researchers (Tandon et al., 2016). These principles are:

1. *An orientation towards research ethics and values*
2. *Development of a deep understanding of power and partnerships*
3. *Incorporation of multiple modes of enquiry*

4. *Participation in learning CBR and ensuring a balance between classroom (theory) and field (practice)*
5. *The role of researcher as CBR facilitator*

An exciting time for knowledge workers

The calls for decolonising and democratising knowledge, the exploration of knowledge inequalities, the increased visibility of Indigenous knowledge, and the institutionalisation of structures to support community university research partnerships have opened up a brave new world for knowledge workers and the communities and movements where they interact. But make no mistake, the achievement of knowledge democracy and excellence in engagement will demand much courage, networking, willingness to stand up to the gatekeepers of the Western canon and disciplinary orthodoxies. There is an open door however and we are beginning to pass inside.

As UNESCO Chair, we have launched a K4C consortium to build capacities for engaged research excellence around the world. In partnership with local hubs which bring academia and civil society together, K4C will create classroom, field-based and online learning opportunities for students and practitioners together, situated in local cultural and language contexts. We invite readers of this journal to join this journey.

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