



EVENT REPORT

Building Capacities Of The Next Generation Of Community-Based Participatory Researchers

PRIA Conference Hall, PRIA, New Delhi

April 10, 2015

The UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education conducted a conversation on “How to build next generation of practitioners in community-based participatory research in global south?” on 10 April 2015 at PRIA’s head office in New Delhi.

It has been 40 years since the concept of participatory research was first articulated. Prof. Budd Hall and Dr Rajesh Tandon, UNESCO Co-Chairs, have worked together on practising, refining and promoting the methodology of participatory research during this period. As the methodology gained greater acceptance in academic bodies, they realised that opportunities for training the next generation of practitioners, scholars and champions of participatory research in the global South have not been keeping pace. The event on 10 April 2015 was an opportunity to have a deeper conversation about strategies and partnerships required to scale-up such capacities around the world.

The UNESCO Co-Chairs initiated the discussion around the issue of “Participatory Research In Action: Where Is the Future?”.¹ Through the inspirations, high points and low points of their own work with participatory research, they pointed to what helps promote participatory research in academe and why spaces and resources for participatory research action have reduced. Drs Hall and Tandon recounted how their interest in participatory research began and how this powerful tool can be used as an aid in the research, service and teaching goals of higher educational institutions. The shifting trends in education are going to further shape the future of participatory research as a research and learning tool.

The role of building relationships as part of community based research² was emphasised in particular. Participatory research is necessary to bring about sustainable social change; yet, the process is time-consuming and often researchers and funders do not have the time or resources to invest in the process. Grassroots civil society organisations, the frontline practitioners of participatory research, have unfortunately been reporting “evidence based impacts” for some time now, relegating qualitative measures (based on participatory methodologies) to the background.

Global Status of Capacity Building in Participatory Research

Capacity building of a next generation of participatory researchers is important. Participatory research is a way of doing meaningful social science research, and students need to be provided the opportunity to learn participatory research. What kind of training did participatory research learners want? What was the best possible way to provide them with this learning? There is very little research on how best to train people in community based research.

¹ This conversation was held as part of PRIA’s ongoing series of dialogues titled *PRIA-logues* – a series of conversations to gather the wisdom of those who have long been part of the third sector for the next generation of leaders. Full video of the dialogue will soon be available on PRIA’s YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/PRIAIndia>)

² “Participatory Research” (PR) and “Community Based Research” (CBR) are often used inter-changeably in higher educational institutions (and in this report), though the term Participatory Research is preferred because “community” can mean different things in different cultural contexts.

The UNESCO Chair has initiated a study, supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), on the status of capacity building in participatory research.³ This global study aims to create new interdisciplinary knowledge on the training for community based research and increase access to high quality training. The pilot phase of the survey was conducted in October 2014, in which 423 respondents from 59 countries answered a short online questionnaire. Majority of the respondents were higher educational instructors, and over 90 per cent of respondents were either previously involved in or were interested in further training on community based research. A broad overview of initial results shows interesting findings on the nature of training preferred across regions and that most practitioners have learnt participatory research through experiential/on-the-job training. Yet, this kind of training is hardly ever provided to students of participatory research in academic institutions. Issues regarding the type of online courses preferred by students and details of the nature of training currently being provided are going to be analysed in-depth over the next few months, including preparing 10-12 case studies. A practical guide to community based research training, a book on theory and practice of community based research, and video training materials will be produced as a result of the survey findings.



Pic 1: Walter Lepore, research scholar, University of Victoria

Teaching Participatory Research⁴

Teaching participatory research in the classroom should not only be about learning the techniques and methodologies, but should also promote social/relational expertise, a holistic and shared view of research, and collective reading and reflection. “It is important that students of participatory research first see community members as people, not merely segregated and categorised by age, gender, class, caste, etc, but more importantly see their place in the relations of power in society,

³ Walter Lepore’s presentation made on the occasion can be accessed at <http://www.slideshare.net/PRIIndia/walter-lepore-cbr-capacity-building>. Details of the project are available at <http://unescochair-cbrsr.org/unesco/building-the-next-generation-of-community-based-researchers-the-nextgen-project/>

⁴ Presentation made by Dr Andrea Vargiu can be accessed at <http://www.slideshare.net/PRIIndia/andrea-vargiu-cbr-capacity-building?related=1>

their interests and knowledge,” said Dr Andrea Vargiu, from Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sassari, Italy. He emphasised the need for the teaching of participatory research to be in classrooms and institutions that act as “social laboratories”, where the laboratory is a community of practice and cooperation, a place for autonomy, awareness and significance.



Pic 2: Dr Andrea Vargiu, University of Sassari, Italy

Prof. Arun Kumar from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi likened Prof. Vargiu’s idea for a social laboratory to the Gandhian idea of education and village based economy. “There exists a gap between what a community thinks and the language a researcher uses in his/her research.” Learning to bridge this gap was equally essential for the next generation of community based researchers, he felt.

Creating social laboratories may be resisted in current institutional structures of universities, but the next generation of participatory research teachers must push the boundaries to establish such centres of learning. Mutual support and cooperation from within and outside academia (especially from civil society organisations practicing participatory research) would be of enormous help in this regard. Yet, resistance is a part of life. “Why should we do away with this resistance and emphasise cooperation in teaching participatory research?” asked Ranjita Mohanty, independent scholar and practitioner. “We should learn to cope with such conflict, without allowing the conflict to escalate and make the teaching-learning process dysfunctional.”

Community based research is aimed at producing reflective practitioners who are sensitive to pro-people attitudes. “Promoting community based research among social sciences is more common, and easy, but in building the next generation we must also pay attention to students from science and technology backgrounds as well,” said Prof. Devi Prasad, from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

“Capacities of both social work educators and students need to be built,” emphasised Dr Sandra Joseph, from Stella Maris College, Chennai. Agreeing that training opportunities for fellow teachers at the university were needed, Dr Manju Panwar, Head, Department of Social Work, BPS Women’s University, Sonipat, said, “Training should bring about an attitudinal change towards community based research.”

Mobilising Resources for Building Capacity in Community-based Participatory Research

Mobilising resources for community-based participatory research in the university structure is a big challenge that has to be faced. India can learn lessons from the experience of other regions.

European universities are presently faced with the urgent challenge of improving their performance related to community based research and have to make strategic choices where to focus their community based research efforts. Over the past three decades, Europe’s universities have become more autonomous in decision making, but with financial difficulties resulting from Europe’s economic crisis, they have begun to prioritise the value of their activities in increasingly economic terms. Public/community engagement activities with income generation potential (targeted primarily at businesses as the “community”) have become more important, thereby marginalising other community engagement/community research activities. Community engagement is more a choice than a prescribed compulsion for the European university, and risks getting lost in the noise of markets, league-tables, rankings and competition. Strategies and actions to advance and reframe community engagement in European universities need, among others, changes in the university’s organisational structure, an evaluation system to recognise and reward community engagement, incentivise national and regional networks, and encourage private and public funders that university civic engagement programmes are a promising investment opportunity.⁵



Pic 3: Dr Cristina Escrigas, Executive director, GUNi

⁵ Dr Cristina Escrigas, Advisor, Global University Network for Innovation (GUNi), Barcelona presented the European experience based on GUNi’s 5th Higher Education report. Her presentation can be accessed at <http://www.slideshare.net/PRIIndia/cristina-escrigas-cbr-capacity-building?related=4>

“We want to do community based resources, but always ask where are the resources going to come from? From more alliances and relationships! From building champions, particularly the students, who are more keen to undertake community based research. It is the faculty and institution that needs convincing,” said Dr Carol Ma, Associate Director, Service-Learning, Lingnan University in Hong Kong, speaking from her experience over the last decade in raising resources from different sources to make the Office of Service-Learning at Lingnan University self-funded.⁶ “It is through building relationships when explaining to my fellow colleagues what community based research is that different academicians at Lingnan University have now begun to cherish the cause of community based research within the university.” To promote community based research it is essential to create champions in different departments, who form a team and share information with each other. Within the academic institutional structure, there is also need for division of labour. “In Lingnan University, there are different departments that promote community based research with other universities in Hong Kong, that promote it regionally and those which promote it at the international level,” she said. “Ultimately, to mobilise resources we need to passionately believe in what we are doing, be persistent, be energetic and be willing to change.”



Pic 4: Dr Carol Ma, Associate Director, Service-Learning, Lingnan University in Hong Kong

“Let us be careful though in use of the terms ‘champion’ and ‘intellectual’ in the context of promoting community based research, as they have different meanings,” said Walter Lepore, from University of Victoria, Canada. “Champion connotes competition, but community based research is about collaboration. The conventional idea of the ‘intellectual’ is ‘the one who thinks’. But, in reality, an intellectual is the one who makes you think. Therefore, anyone can be an intellectual, even from the community. We should also use the term ‘smart practices’, rather than ‘best practices’,” he said.

“We need to get university colleagues excited about community engagement. If you want people to buy into the idea of community based research, then it has to be sold on the basis of some exciting ideas,” says Prof. Surajit Sarkar, from the Centre for Community Knowledge, Ambedkar University,

⁶ Carol Ma’s presentation made on the occasion can be accessed at <http://www.slideshare.net/PRIIndia/carol-ma-cbr-capacity-building?related=3>

New Delhi. For example, some of the buildings in Ambedkar University have historical value, particularly the building which houses the Dara Shikoh Library. A university is an intellectual space for the public. Therefore, a person like Dara Shikoh, who was erudite and a great collector of books, becomes a symbol that can be used to interest people in collecting alternative histories. The centre has undertaken some community knowledge documentation projects and different departments of the university were encouraged to get involved in these projects. The Neighbourhood Museum Programme of the centre worked with community based organisations to build linkages with the community and academicians. Being a government funded institution, Ambedkar University has also been able to build linkages with government programmes (such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan) and collaborate with other government funded institutions (such as Delhi Urban Arts Commission). “Community based research can be promoted by keeping our antennae up on what is being missed through conventional research. For this, we need to be innovative in how we use information we have access to and in building partnerships,” Dr Sarkar said.



Pic 5: Dr Surajit Sarkar, Ambedkar University, New Delhi

Dr Andrea Varigu, from University of Sassari, Italy, likened the opening up of spaces for community based research to the concept of the “subtle art of tenants”. “Similar apartments given to tenants are changed internally to reflect the needs and cultures of the tenants. Each tenant inhabits their space according to their inner personalities. Similarly, promoters and practitioners of community based research can create and use their own spaces within the structure of the university,” he said.

The Community-University Expo (CUE) organised by the Office for Community Based Research at the University of Victoria, Canada, has been a successful initiative to promote community based research. Held every two to three years, research partners and the community come together at this event to discuss ideas and practical issues for community based research. “The first event drew only about 300 participants across Canada; the fifth event to be held later in 2015 has drawn nearly a 1000 participants,” informed Prof. Budd Hall, UNESCO Co-Chair and Professor of Public

Administration, University of Victoria. “Similar expos can be organised at regional, provincial and local levels in India and other countries.”

“Spaces for community-university interaction are important,” agreed Prof. Devi Prasad, from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. “Such spaces for promoting community based research in universities in North America and Europe are restricted, as they are older, well established institutions. New universities coming up in Africa and post-Communist societies, and private universities in India, are institutions where such spaces can be promoted and opened up.”

There are other spaces, such as online spaces, where different kinds of knowledge that produce social change have emerged over the past few years. “Community based research initiatives need to engage with these new sites of knowledge as well, along with the community,” said Ranjita Mohanty, independent scholar and practitioner.

Many students, institutions and academics come together in different events. “How are we engaging with them, and using these opportunities to promote community based research and inculcate the importance of participatory research? Academic staff colleges which train administrative/ government officials should also be engaged with to promote community based research,” said Anshuman Karol, from PRIA, New Delhi, emphasising the need to use the power of networks.

Role of Civil Society Organisations in Promoting Community Based Research

Civil society organisations are a wonderful space for the experiential learning of participatory research.

If we are going to resolve social challenges, new partnerships and collaborations between academia and civil society organisations are required. For example, participatory research can be used to understand the structural aspects of poverty in the search for livelihood solutions. “There is a need for some ‘grand ideas’. Generating such ideas would require understanding inequality and participatory research is a powerful tool to bring people together in exploring this understanding,” said Mr Jagadananda, Member Secretary, Centre for Youth & Social Development (CYSD).

“Last month when I visited a village in rural Odisha, the most recent development project I was shown in the village was a common shelter for cattle. When asked, the community were very happy with the shelter but were not going to use the shelter, since they did not wish to keep their cattle together in a common space. Three other such common shelters remain unutilised in the village. There are many other such examples, all of which show that in India, even after 65 years of independence, development in the name of the community hardly ever reaches the community and research is still not conceived keeping the community centre-stage. Recently, many universities in India have started schools of development studies and public policy research. This is a good moment for civil society to engage with them institutionally. Academic institutions need to commit to community based research along with civil society organisations. Responsibility lies with civil society to be able to leverage this.”



Pic 6: Mr Jagdananda, Member Secretary, Centre for Youth & Social Development (CYSD)

Integrating participatory research into academia and the work of civil society organisations requires civil society organisations and participatory researchers networking together. Isolated researchers/institutions and civil society organisations devoted to promoting and practicing participatory research is not sufficient. The Network of Collaborating Regional Service Organisations (NCRSOs) is trying to roll out participatory research and participatory training, and building bridges with civil society organisations and communities. More such efforts are required. Community monitoring of educational institutions is also important.

Civil society organisations also need to engage more with local governance institutions and move towards people-centred advocacy. “Advocacy is not just required at the international/UN level, but also at the local governance level. Here, demystification of people’s needs/demands to the local authorities is an important role civil society organisations can play,” said Mr Jagdananda.

“I urge you to act on your own to promote community based research but also build networks and work collectively to make visible alternative methodologies of research,” said Dr Rajesh Tandon, UNESCO Co-Chair, welcoming all the ideas shared during the day. “It is equally important,” he stressed, “to keep having such conversations to keep us motivated and enthused.”

ANNEXURE 1: Programme Design

Building Capacities Of The Next Generation Of Community-Based Participatory Researchers PRIA Conference Hall, PRIA, New Delhi April 10, 2015	
10.30 a.m. – 11.00 a.m.	PRIA-logue: Participatory Research In Action: Where Is the Future? Conversation between Prof Budd L Hall and Dr Rajesh Tandon
11.00 a.m. – 11.30 a.m.	Q&A with audience
11.30 a.m. – 11.45 a.m.	Current Issues in Capacity Building in Participatory Research Global Status of Capacity Building in Participatory Research Mr Walter Lepore, Research Scholar, University of Victoria, Canada
12.00 noon – 12.15 p.m.	Teaching Participatory Research: Issues and Challenges Dr Andrea Vargiu, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sassari, Sassari, Italy
12.15 p.m. – 1.00 p.m.	Open discussion
1.00 p.m. – 2.00 p.m.	Lunch
2.00 p.m. – 2.45 p.m.	Panel discussion: Mobilising Resources for Building Capacity in Community-based Participatory Research Experiences from Europe by Dr Cristina Escrigas, Advisor, Global University Network for Innovation (GUNi), Barcelona Experiences from Hong Kong by Dr Carol Ma, Associate Director, Service-Learning (OSL), Lingnan University in Hong Kong, China Experiences of civil society by Mr Jagadananda, Member Secretary, Centre for Youth & Social Development (CYSO), Odisha The role of universities by Dr Surajit Sarkar, Associate Professor, Ambedkar University, New Delhi
2.45 p.m. – 4.00 p.m.	Open discussion
4.00 p.m.	Closing comments

ANNEXURE 2: List of Participants

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