International Collaboration for Changing the Culture of Research: UN SDGs and Knowledge for Change Consortium

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Universities are experiencing changes in the culture of research as they have known them. The theory of change being put forward in this article is based on the concept of international networking from and for the deepening of local participatory knowledge creation for social change.

Keywords: International collaboration, Resarch culture, Knowledge democracy, Higher education, Sustainable Development Goals

1. Background

Understandings within academia about the meaning of knowledge, about how knowledge is used, who creates knowledge, and the broader ecologies of knowledge have continued to undergo change. We are reminded that the role of the educated intellectual as a privileged curator of all knowledge was challenged many years ago when Gramsci (1971, 131) told us, «All men are intellectuals… but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals». Contemporary scholars who have challenged the dominant academic research cultures include de Sousa Santos (2007) with a discourse of «cognitive justice» and «epistemicide», Fricker (2013) with a discourse of «epistemic injustice», Wangoola (2000), Battiste (2011) and Ezeanya (2011) on «indigenous ways of knowing» and the authors of this article (Hall 1975; Hall *et al.* 2015) on the concepts of «participatory research» and «knowledge democracy». Taken together the message is clear,

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the monopoly of knowledge production once assumed to have been the domain of the university based academic has been broken. Knowledge is being understood as a product of the lives of people living and surviving in families, in communities, in workplaces, in social movements and more. And there is a growing acceptance that the world needs to recover and respect the ancient land based knowledges of the Indigenous peoples as at least part of the recipe for planetary survival. Universities are therefore experiencing changes in the culture of research as they have known them.

The authors of this article have been working together albeit from different parts of the world (Canada and India) for 40 years. They are pioneers in the knowledge movement called participatory research. They currently hold a joint position as co-chairs of the UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, a position which they have held since 2012. Under the umbrella of this Chair, a chair anchored by the University of Victoria in Canada and the non-governmental research group Participatory Research in Asia, the authors support the contemporary transformations of institutional culture of research through enhancing community-university research partnerships. We are doing this through a combination of research and publishing, presentations within higher education policy and practice networks and through the establishment of the Knowledge for Change (K4C) Global Consortium for Training in Community Based Research. Our work is one contribution to the global discussions on transformation of research cultures as expressed by the European Commission's attention to Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) or the North American Engaged Scholarship Consortium (REF for RRI and ESC). We are part of many who are working collaboratively on an international basis towards transforming the academic research culture.

2. Historical roots in participatory research

The authors first met in October of 1978 in Caracas, Venezuela at a founding meeting of the International Participatory Research Network. During those years influenced by the ideas of the late Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere, Paulo Freire, Marjorie Mbillinyi, Yusuf Kassam, Marja Liisa Swantz and others, Hall began to articulate what they called participatory research in Tanzania (Hall 1975). Tandon had just finished a PhD based on a year's living in southern Rajasthan working with rural women and men farmers on theories and practices of rural development. They agreed to work together on developing an international network to support theories and practices of participatory research. In 1983, Tandon led a team of civil society activist researchers to found PRIA, an NGO research and training organization that has continued its work of building research capacity with grassroots civil society organisations across most of the States of India.

In 2009, UNESCO held an International Conference on Higher Education. The authors were active in presentations and in working on the final communique. The final communique drew attention to the need to recog-

nize non-western forms of knowledge and for higher education institutions to take up active roles as agents of social responsibility. As a follow-up to the 2009 international Conference, UNESCO higher education division invited the authors to create a UNESCO Chair in the broad area of social responsibility in higher education. In 2012 the UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education was created. The mandate of the Chair is to build research capacity in the field of community-based research in the global South through South-South and North-South-South partnerships. We have extended the mandate to the «excluded North» as poverty, discrimination, exclusion are day by day increasing in the so called wealthier parts of the world.

The theory of change being put forward in this article, is based on the concept of international networking from and for the deepening of local participatory knowledge creation for social change. The authors are committed to work with others to sharing all of work and support the communities of knowledge workers committed to transformative change in this troubled world. We understand our focus on knowledge democracy as a contribution to the «Big Tent» of activists, practitioners, scholars and social movements, and community organizations. Since the beginning of their work in 2012, they have worked closely with a number of key regional and global associations including The Talloires Network, the Living Knowledge Network, the National Coordinating Council for Public Engagement in Higher Education (UK), PASCAL International Observatory, International Association for Higher Education, Association of Commonwealth Universities, and the Asia Pacific University Community Engagement Network.

3. Examples of research and international advocacy

The UNESCO Chair has led or been involved in a series of global state-of-the-art studies resulting in the release of several books, three of them open access. These research projects have contributed to deepening our understanding of engaged scholarship on an international scale, leading to clear policy recommendations for institutions, governments and research councils.

Knowledge, Democracy and Action: Community-University Research Partnerships in Global Perspectives (Hall *et al.* 2013) offers an introductory framework on knowledge democracy followed by case studies of community university research partnerships from Senegal, India, The Philippines, Mexico, Bolivia, Romania, Denmark, England, USA, Quebec, Canada, and Brazil. Analytic chapters focus on partnership structures, support structures, learning from the community, science shops and measuring of impact.

Learning and Teaching Community Based Research: Linking Pedagogy to Practice (Etmanski *et al.* 2014) is based on a study of how do we teach community-based participatory research. It is based on the experiences of academics, students and community partners in the Victoria area of British Columbia, Canada. It remains the most in-depth book on the pedagogy of participatory research.

Higher Education and Community-based Research: Creating a Global Vision (Munck *et al.* 2014) describes, analyses, and points a way forward for the field of community-based research as practiced within higher education. It sets the historical background for current debates and engages the leaders in this field to create an imagination-driven agenda for transformation. It surveys the rich experience of community-based research participants across countries and regions, stressing both the diversity of these experiences and their common themes. Finally, it sets forth visions of how higher education and community-based research can together move forward, to the benefit of all society.

Strengthening Community University Research Partnerships: Global Perspectives (Hall *et al.* 2015) presents findings from a global study of institutional arrangements for the facilitation and support of research partnerships between Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and Higher Education Institutions (HEI). The book outlines a number of important trends, challenges and approaches associated with how research partnerships are initiated, supported, and evaluated through a comparative study of different types of institutional arrangements. This includes a detailed overview of a global survey administered in over fifty countries and four languages, and twelve country case studies demonstrating strong institutional and policy support for Community University Research Partnerships (CURP).

Training the Next Generation of Community-based Researcher (Tandon *et al.* 2016) creates new interdisciplinary knowledge by examining CBR training practices in the thematic areas of local asset development, participatory citizenship, indigenous research methodologies and water governance in global and institutional settings. It further builds a global partnership to create more training opportunities with an emphasis on the Global South. It includes a series of pedagogical principles for the training of community based research coming out of three data sources: systematic literature reviews on training, teaching and learning CBR in five thematic areas, a global survey on training opportunities and capacity building in CBR, and 21 case studies on HEIs and CSOs providing top training programs in CBR.

4. Policy advocacy on knowledge, higher education and the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Many recent debates about higher education have focused upon quality, financing and student mobility. Larger questions about the social relevance of higher education has only just begun to be raised afresh. A recently published report by the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNi) clearly argues:

> Social responsibility emerges as the need to reconsider the social relevance of universities in light of the encounter of the local with the global, regarding priorities, demands, impacts and knowledge needs in the context of globalization. The competitiveness of nations – as the only way to achieve progress – should be ba-

lanced with inclusive social development and sustainability of the entire global population (GUNi 2017, 41).

This question can only be addressed adequately if it is agreed that the overarching purpose of higher education is shared «public good». HEIs and universities, therefore, are public institutions, contributing to public goods, irrespective of the nature of their financing. Treating higher education as a private good, to be financed by the individual students benefitting from it, as economists have argued, is to severely curtail the real and potential contributions of higher education (GUNi 2017). It has to be recognised that the purpose of higher education has to be defined in the contemporary societal context differently, independent of the means of resourcing a particular university or HEI. At the International Conference on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) hosted by GUNi in September 2017, Federico Mayor, Former Director-General of UNESCO, remarked that Universities have abandoned their previous commitment to educating future citizens. In this world where globalisation of indifference is growing, universities must prepare their students as citizens who practice and value freedom, equality and solidarity (Tandon 2014). In many societies, regions and communities, HEIs are some of the most resourced institutions. They have enormous physical infrastructure (classrooms, labs, residences, office space, recreational facilities, etc.) which are far superior to anything available to local communities, or even local government agencies. And much of this infrastructure is underutilized, when viewed in a 24 hour per day lens. HEIs also have enormous digital capacity in hardware, software and human-ware. It has financial resources, endowments and revenue streams. Intellectual resources and capacities of HEIs are unparalleled in such locations and places. Most importantly, HEIs have youthful energy, commitment and hope, as is reflected in its students. Further, in promoting engagement with society, universities have expanded their service mission, in which students are encouraged to contribute to development of communities.

However, core functions of teaching and research have remained cut off from such engagement. Engaged teaching and research can make universities contribute more directly to locally relevant and contextually appropriate SDGs. A classic example of this is the Responsible Research & Innovation (RRI) initiative of the European Union. RRI is a key action of the «Science with and for Society (SWAFS)» programme of Horizon 2020 (H2020). The European Commission defines RRI as an approach that anticipates and assesses potential implications and societal expectations with regard to research and innovation, with the aim to foster the design of inclusive and sustainable research and innovation (Tandon 2017). It implies that societal actors (researchers, citizens, policy makers, business, third sector organisations, etc.) work together during the whole research and innovation process in order to better align both the process and its outcomes with the values, needs and expectations of society. Further, the 2014 Rome Declaration on RRI outlines where the focus of future initiatives should be placed. In particular, the declaration calls European institutions, member

states, regional authorities and research and innovation performing organisations to focus on (Angelaki 2016):

– Building capacity for RRI through a variety of tools such as securing available resources and supporting global initiatives;

– Reviewing and adapting metrics by providing guidelines for the implementation and assessment of RRI;

– Implementing institutional changes that foster RRI in research and innovation performing organizations by reviewing their own procedures and practices to identify opportunities and obstacles, engaging civil society, developing and implementing strategies and guidelines, adapting curricula and providing training, and including RRI criteria in the evaluation and assessment of research staff.

Societally relevant higher education is applicable to everything that a university does (teaching, research, service). It is applicable to all disciplines and faculties, not just in extra-mural or extension departments. Also, HEIs – historically recognized as public institutions – have been the sites for knowledge production. In the context of the SDGs, when we realize the need for «alternative perspectives of knowledge» to fill the knowledge deficit for achieving these, the «research» function of HEIs gain much pertinence. However, the achievement of the SDGs requires an innovative approach towards the higher education missions, and the latter needs to be moulded in a way which helps achieve SDGs in the long run, particularly the research mission. In this light, being «engaged» in a mutually beneficial way is important. Increasing Expectations Towards Research Innovation is regarded as being essential to the transformations of human activities that will allow the SDGs to be achieved (Angelaki 2016). As we can no longer afford a business as usual approach, there is a widespread call for innovation from all sectors. Of particular importance are the increasing expectations from the field of research. In the context of the SDGs, research needs to contribute much more than what it has been doing traditionally. In addition to giving an understanding of phenomena, research is now perceived as being able to provide new solutions, through appreciating and incorporating alternative perspectives of knowledge. It has to be recognized that faced with the complexity of challenges and in the face of real-time SDG targets, civil society, politicians, donors and private actors have real and increasing expectations. To address these expectations, there is a need to strengthen the societal contribution of research, in various areas of socio-economic development. It is time to now bridge the gap between research and society, in ways in which the former can contribute towards the development outcomes of the latter. Lessons for this are available from the Science Shops model in Europe, which pursues research, based on research questions which emerge from the community. The RRI model too demonstrates how research can be used responsibly and innovatively to further development objectives. Achievement of the SDGs will also require finding new solutions to various socio-economic challenges, and new knowledge will be essential towards this end. Universities can undertake partnerships with local communities and stakeholders to co-create such knowledge which is appropriate to local contexts and decision-makers. Co-creation of

such knowledge is a pre-requisite to finding sustainable solutions. This in essence lays the foundation of «engaged research», which requires moving beyond traditional notions of top down research (dictated by academics), to a more collaborative/participative form of research, where research questions are framed in accordance with local community needs, and the research is designed in collaboration with the local stakeholders who are impacted by the particular problem that the research intends to address (Marniese and Marsell 2017). Practices in research which are engaged and responsible not only contribute to enhanced public accountability of HEIs, but also play a valuable role in addressing societal challenges and the development needs of a society/nation (FICCI 2017) High-quality, engaged university research in developmentally strategic areas can inform good policy, and can unearth solutions to key problems across all SDG focus areas (*ibidem*). Calls for this form of engaged research has played a critical role in establishing the validity and appropriateness of «Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR)» as a tool, which has the potential to provide sustainable solutions to critical societal challenges, and thus contribute towards achieving the SDGs.

5. CBPR: engaging in socially responsible research for achieving SDGs

In order to achieve the SDGs, a societal transformation is necessary and all actors must be mobilized. Through CBPR, there is a need to encourage strengthening of the collaborations between researchers, communities and civil society promoting the societal contribution of research. CBPR can effectively contribute towards the development of new knowledge and insights on various societal challenges linked to SDGs, and play an important role in providing sustainable solutions for the same. Being community-based and involving the values of participation and research for co-learning and co-generation of knowledge, CBPR can be used for tackling local issues (such as water, sanitation, resource management, gender equality, etc.), and in the process, result in greater ownership of local problems as a step towards sustainable «development», as compared to sustainable «growth». Three practical ways can be readily adopted under CBPR, for making the latter contribute to an informed understanding on SDGs:

1. *Framing locally usable research*. Students and faculty at HEIs may frame their research questions which may produce locally useful and actionable knowledge. Structured and regular interactions with local actors - district administration, local government, civil society, local business - may generate research questions that have relevance for achievement of SDGs locally. For example, SDG9 is targeting resilient infrastructure and sustainable industrialization. Engineering faculty and students at HEI may study specific infrastructure gaps from a resilience lens in a city or district. Departments of energy, minerals and mining may find interesting research topics on green technologies for local industry. Students and faculty of economics and business may define their research to support small/medium businesses in that location to become resilient. Monitoring air quality and

water treatment systems could be a very actionable research for teams of students and faculty.

2. *Building community knowledge partnerships*. HEIs may need to create boundary-spanning structures for realising cross-cutting partnerships (Minkler and Wallerstein 2008). However, when dealing with such partnerships, equally important is to be mindful of the existential power differentials among partners, their respective capacities and capabilities to contribute to the partnership, and its impacts on such collective efforts. A well thought out and calculated partnership, in turn increases the impact it has on the process as a whole. For example, SDG11 focuses on improving the quality of urban life. HEIs can partner with municipalities to contribute new knowledge for improved urbanization and governance of urban services. Most cities lack capacity to generate and maintain habitation level data, especially where rapid migration is occurring. Several faculties – statistics, urban studies, planning, economics – can support such research. Studies of land use in urban areas and in-situ improvements in housing infrastructure may be carried out by faculty of architecture, geography, and engineering. Operations research faculty and students may undertake mobility analysis to provide insights into transportation design in cities. Once such partnerships are built, ongoing nurturance of relationships by HEIs may enable a wide variety of research opportunities for students and faculty in support of SDGs.

3. *Learning new competencies*. Current training in research methodology in most universities does not prepare students to build partnerships. Not much attention is paid to attributes like critical thinking, conscientization and ethical orientation. Furthermore, training in research methodology does not teach how to integrate disciplinary interests with local research priorities. Students and their teachers do not know how to share their research findings with local stakeholders, other than in the form of a research papers written for a journal and/or a research conference (Hall *et al*. 2015). If a mutually beneficial partnership with local communities and institutions – business, government, civil society – is built, research partnership may become supportive of new knowledge and its use. In order to be able to undertake such partnerships and locally relevant research, students and researchers at HEIs need to develop certain additional competencies. It is possible to learn these competencies. Several innovative efforts have been going on in training of next generation of researchers in «community-based participatory research methodologies» (Tandon *et al*. 2016).

6. Building research capacity in the global South and the «excluded» North – The Knowledge for Change (K4C) consortium

Priority attention is being given in the early 2020s to creating opportunities for young people studying in universities as well as those working in community settings to learn how to do community based participatory research. Based on previous state-of-the-art studies on international developments in community-based participatory research funded in part by the

International Development Research Centre, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Canada and others responded to the question of how to create economical and sustainable structures in the global South and the «excluded» North for building research capacity in community-based participatory research. The K4C strategy that has emerged supports the creation of K4C hubs as formal partnerships between universities and community or practitioner organizations which emphasize training by doing CBR linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The K4C model builds capacities through a carefully crafted 21 week Mentor Training Program (MTP). Academics from higher education institutions and practitioners from civil society organisations are trained as Mentors, who go on to become champions and carry the socially responsible research agenda forward at the level of the university. On completing the MTP, the mentors are expected to design and launch a locally contextualized course in CBPR. Since 2017, this low-cost and high impact model has trained 70 mentors (in 3 batches), who have gone on to create 13 K4C Hubs in Canada, Cuba, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Malaysia, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda.

7. Conclusion

Our approach to changing the culture of research through collective sharing of research findings, working together on advocacy for change and supporting new learning opportunities for the young draws has emerged from our work over nearly 50 years. What began as a rejection of colonial research approaches by a few people mostly working in the global South, has grown to occupy the attention of academics, funding bodies, community organizations, local governments, government ministries and intergovernmental bodies. A transformation of our research cultures from one focused on careers of academics and rankings of our institutions to one based on using knowledge to address the critical calls our communities for justice, fairness, the end to gender violence and attention the climate crisis and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals is critical. We invite all who share these values and ideas to join this movement.

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