

Among Equals

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Strengthening Community-Based Knowledge Mobilization through International Cooperation

The University of Victoria and the Society for Participatory Research in Asia

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Introduction

What do a non-governmental organization in India and a University in Canada have in common? How can a large publicly-supported University in British Columbia based in Victoria learn from and work as equals with an independently funded civil society-based organization in New Delhi?

This is a story about how two institutions, in two quite distinct parts of the world, are beginning to work together to strengthen the capacities of both institutions to work more effectively in research, capacity-building and the mobilization of knowledge in support of values of social justice, citizenship and democracy. This is a beginning story, not an ending story. This is the story of a medium sized Canadian University and a large Indian Civil Society Organisation. This is a story which is intended to continue for 20-25 years or more, not the usual 3 to 5 years of the development project cycle. This is not a story about a development project. This is a story of mutual learning, unfolding possibilities, relationships, and shared dreams. This is a story of two institutions, impatient with the limitations of convention, that work together because they want to break through new frontiers in service to local, national and global civil society. This is a story that is being repeated elsewhere in Canada and elsewhere in the world by activists, scholars and community-based workers who are deeply concerned with the challenge of , what Nelson Mandela calls, Turning this World Around. This story is one small story of putting aside the discourse of development for the discourse of collaboration, solidarity and mutual learning.

The Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)

Founded in 1981 in a small two room hut at Sainak Farms, a housing compound for retired military service families, PRIA has grown to be one of the most influential community-based research and training institution in the world. With a head office in New Delhi, it works with a network of 1200 grassroots civil society organizations in cooperation with 13 regional partners in Uttar Pradesh, Gujrat, Bihar, Orissa, Mumbai, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarnchal, Chhatisgar, Kerala and Jharkland. PRIA's vision of a desirable world is where relations across individuals and families, communities and nations are characterized by equity and justice. Besides socioeconomic equity, PRIA believes in gender justice as a cornerstone of such relations in the family, community and society. It argues that a balance between economic and social development with ecological regeneration requires thoughtful balance between local priorities and global demands. Informed, empowered citizens participate in deepening democracy with respect and tolerance for plurality and diversity. Further that balance between citizens' rights and responsibilities is nurtured through a balance between authority and accountability. Individual freedom and autonomy is sustained with collective solidarity for public good. PRIA's vision of a desirable world is based on values of equity, justice, freedom, peace and solidarity. PRIA's interventions focus on the interaction of capacity-building, knowledge-building and policy advocacy.

The University of Victoria

The University of Victoria is a medium sized Canadian university with 18,000 students. Located in Victoria on Vancouver Island, the University of Victoria has significant strengths in areas of ocean and earth science, in Aboriginal Studies, in Co-op and Experiential Education, in

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Asia and Pacific Studies and in Community-Based Research, Service Learning and Continuing Studies. The Faculty of Education which serves as the key link between PRIA and the University of Victoria, has 800 undergraduate students mostly involved in initial teacher preparation programmes and a similar number of graduate students, mostly involved in community-based Master's work. It is composed of a School of Physical Education, a Curriculum and Instruction Department and an Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies Department. It also has a Continuing Studies in Education unit. It has a strong focus on Aboriginal Education, Environmental Education, Community-based leadership and community-based research.

And while the University of Victoria has a broad mandate to promote excellence in knowledge development and mobilization across the full spectrum of its academic scope, it is beginning to recognize that it has a special interest and capacity in the dual and linked challenges of internationalization and community-based programming. The strategic plan of the University of Victoria says the following about community:

We are a product of our community and play an important role in the social, cultural and economic life of the region and the province. We recognize the importance of collaboration with other institutions in this region and across the province. We also recognize the importance of meeting the educational needs of a rapidly changing population in this region. Our goal is to establish UVic as a recognized cornerstone of the community, committed to the social, cultural and economic development of our region and nation.

The University of Victoria also has a strong mandate to internationalize its curriculum, to bring the world into the texts and the discussions of every course the university offers. It encourages engagement in international research activities and welcomes international students to the University. It has, for reasons of geographic location, a particular interest in Asia and the Pacific.

Mutual Learning?: Fine, but about what?

We know a little about each of the main partners in this story by now, but we don't know why they want to work together, much what they have to share with each other. Let's take a further look. PRIA has achieved an enviable international reputation as a research and training institution working across a wide range of social, environmental and economic sectors in India and elsewhere. The quality of its educational courses, the innovation developed in community-based participatory methodologies and its ability to link grassroots issues to global goals has brought many accolades and opportunities to it. One might say, that within global civil society networks, PRIA is much better known and more respected than the University of Victoria in spite of size differences. The University of Victoria, not surprisingly, has a large, robust and impressive capacity to deliver academic and professional programming through both its Faculty programmes and its internationally respected Division of Continuing Studies.

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PRIA has historically been funded by external foundations, international agencies and bi-lateral aid organizations. While it has increased dramatically its funding from Indian government sources over the past 10 years, particularly in the light of programmes focused on women involved in Panchayat Raj governance issues, PRIA is challenged by the need to find more sustainable long term financial arrangements.

The University of Victoria has a well established revenue generating model of continuing education which it has developed over the 40 years of University of Victoria history. The University of Victoria has a strong number of community-based research activities, but as yet no University-wide structure for better support and coordination of community-based research. In addition, while it has a long history of partnerships in China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, it has fewer contacts in India.

Both PRIA and the University of Victoria have an interest in strengthening community-university research partnerships. PRIA has initiated a series of annual university-community research conferences. The University of Victoria has initiated a campus wide Community-University research conference and has plans to hold a Canadian Community-University Research Expo in Victoria in 2007.

The focus of the PRIA-UVic Mutual Learning Collaboration is currently on:

- Building the capacity of PRIA's Continuing Education structures;
- Joint course development in global certificates in participatory methodologies;
- Collaboration between PRIA and the University of Victoria in India on the Annual University-Community research conferences;
- Proposed collaboration with PRIA for the 2007 CU Expo to be held in Victoria;
- An internship programme with interns from Canada going to work with PRIA in India;
- Internationalisation of University of Victoria courses through exchanges of teachers from PRIA and planned field schools in India;
- Collaboration in planning UVic Masters of Education programme in Community Leadership and Adult Learning (one course in India).

Conditions of Mutual Learning Amongst Equals

To date, there are no large scale project funds from CIDA or anyone else to facilitate what has begun. In many ways, we believe that the absence of large scale funding from outside donors may be an advantage when it is possible. Funding agencies inevitably have their own epistemological or ideological assumptions. Who is helping whom? What kinds of activities are eligible for funding or not? What kinds of accountability measures are needed? Instead, we have begun working by making opportunistic advantage of available funds that we each have on our respective sides. We have tapped into modest funds to enable our interns to travel to India to learn. We have hired Dr. Tandon, the President of PRIA to teach at the University of Victoria which enabled him to do much project work as well. The Division of Continuing Studies has generously made it possible for continuing education specialists to visit PRIA in New Delhi on at least two occasions. PRIA has sent several of its continuing education team to

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UVic for meetings with the Division of Continuing Studies and others. A significant group of University of Victoria Professors participated in the University-Community conference in Varanasi, India in February 2005. The Division of Continuing Studies has provided course development funds for PRIA and UVic to develop the first global certificate course in International Perspectives on Participatory Research and Evaluation and has approved PRIA taking its own fees for those students registering in India.

What are the principles that seem to be evolving?

- Mutual respect for the intellectual and practical contributions from both institutions
- Allowing those who will work together to meet and develop plans together
- Starting where you can...don't wait for big project funds
- Becoming friends and having fun
- Reminding each other why the work is needed in a world which is not OK
- Lots of reflection and assessment of progress as one goes along
- Food is important
- Building trust
- Never think about this work as simply a "project"
- Continually acknowledge others

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