Call for Afro-centric Theory and Practice in Community Based Research and Engagement

Closing Remarks to African Regional Conference on University-Community Partnerships in Dakar, March 25-26, 2011

Budd L Hall, Global Alliance on Community-Engaged Research and the University of Victoria, Canada

I am pleased to bring you Greetings and best wishes for a successful conference from Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Chair of the Global Alliance for Community-Engaged Research

Thank you Mr. President. Before beginning I would like to express my thanks and appreciation to those who have been responsible for organizing this historic event. To Professor Aliou Gissé for his leadership and courage to undertake overall responsibility for the conference. To Drs. Juliet Millican and Polly Rodriguez from the University of Brighton who have provided inspired support and great good will. To my very good friends of more than 35 years, Prof. Boubacar Diop and Dr. Lamine Kane for their lifetimes of engagement and commitment in this work.

I would like to share three things with you today, first is a poem that I have written that originated as a dream about the beginnings of life. Secondly, some observations about the role of African intellectual leadership in community based research and engagement and thirdly some thoughts on next steps.

Creation Song

Our cries of fear and pain

Our cries of joy of happiness

Were our first poems

Before words

Before sentences

Before grammar

Before language

We imitated birds and other animals

And found that with our sounds we could share

Our experience and tell a story

With each other

Our first sounds/poems
Creating community through
A common sense of whom we were

We put our sounds together
We repeated them to each other
We created memory through sounds

We changed the pitch in our voices
We changed the rhythm in our delivery
And we had song
And we had story
And each of us was a poet
A storyteller

Our poems were of the earth and the water
Of the rocks, the trees, the other animals, the grasses
And at night with full moon's light, we shared our stories
The Old, talking to the young

And when we died
The poems remained
The stories remained
Our words
Our language

They reminded us of whom we were
Where we were going
Where we had been

Our poems and songs became our culture
We gave birth to these poems and songs
And in return, the songs and poems gave
Life to us in families, communities, and kingdoms

With our stories we existed
Without our stories
Without our songs
Without our words
We were not alive

The world was therefore sounded, cried and spoken
Into being
Our lives were sung into existence
And over the thousands of years
As we drifted and filled the earth with people
Our languages gave us our identity
Who we were, and importantly
Who we were not

We were the people of the large mountain
We were the people of the standing stone
We were the people of the large Salmon River

We were the people of the broad savannah
We were the people of the Nile Valley
We shared stories of 20,000 years and more

And although through time our words and languages
Have come to be distinct
The first purpose of language has always been to foster community
Not to drive us apart
And never to use language to say that some ideas and some people
Are more important than others
And not to say that one language alone can be a global language
While other languages are good only for small ideas
Ideas of the village

Who am I then?
Who am I to come to Dakar?
To come to Senegal
To come to Africa
And share words in the same language
Of those people who
Bring death into our world?

Who am I, someone so far removed from his
Own tribal origins to have forgotten whatever language
His ancestors once spoke?
Who am I, to have been the great grand child of English settlers?

Who took the land of the Halalt First Nations People
On Vancouver Island
So that their English-speaking children might
Have more food and better houses and better medical care than
The Halalt-language speaking children whose land they took?

What is the meaning of my coming to this land, this Africa where
All human life began?
I am made humble by the presence of so many gods and Ancestors
Among us here today
I am lost at this moment and have no real answers for myself
Let alone for any others hearing me today or reading these words

I know only one thing
That our words, our languages, our differences, our dreams and our
Ferocious anger at injustice and poverty and cruelty
Must be shared

And I know one more thing
That the feeling of the soil on the soles of our feet
Or of our hand dipping into our rivers or our seas
Or of the sounds of birds at sunrise
Or of the cries of newly born children and other animals
Or of the sounds of the kora, the drums and xylophones
Or of the singing together in celebration that hope still exists
Or of the memories kept alive in our Mother Tongue

Are carried in our words

With our poetry

With our songs

Words and songs born of African soil

And carried in our hearts to every corner of this planet

Still carrying life

Still rejecting despair

Still making resistance possible

Still conveying tenderness

Still linking friend to friend

Still expressing our love

African Roots of Community Based Research and Engagement

In 2011 you could be excused for believing that community-engaged research has originated in the United States or in England or Canada or Australia. So much of the recent writing and the contemporary visibility and advocacy seems to be coming from networks such the Global Alliance for Community Engaged Research, the Living Knowledge Network, The Talloires Network, the Commonwealth Network, the Global University Network for Innovation and others. If you think this, you would not be alone, but you would be wrong.

As the story from the poem tells us, life began in Africa, not African life, but all life. In Africa we have the largest number of indigenous language speakers in the world representing an extraordinary global intellectual resource base.

I want us to recall the poetry and philosophy of the late President Leopold Senghor, the founding President of Senegal. It is hard to imagine today the extraordinary impact that his challenges to white western intellectual thought that his poetry and theories of Negritude provoked in the established intellectual circles of France and the rest of the academic world. He called for an Afro-centric framework, a history of reflection and thought based on the hundreds of thousands of years of African thought, not just the more recent western European thinking.

In our own fields of work we need to be reminded that it was here in Senegal that the late Ben Mady Cissé theorized and promoted the concepts of animation rurale, a form of community engagement and action that encouraged students and academics

to reinvent themselves and make a contribution to their communities through a process of learning and listening to rural women and men.

I am speaking as well of Lamine Kane, the founder of the African Participatory Research Network and a young colleague of Ben Mady Cissé, who founded REPAS, the Reseau Africaine de Recherche Participative in the mid 1970s.

I am speaking of Profeseur Boubakar Diop, an activist-scholar, a Professor of ancient history at the Université de Dakar who has been a trade union leader, an NGO leader, a global leader in adult education and who most recently hosted the World Social Forum in Dakar, the summit of social movements.

But let me go back further. Augustino Neto of Angola, Amilcar Cabral of Guinea Bissau, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Marcelino Dos Santos of Mozambique laid the modern foundations of community based research with their passionate and bold claims that African minds, ideas, hopes, claims for justice were the equal to any on this planet. They each had extensive exposure to advanced western education, to university scholarship, but they kept their feet, their heads and their hearts in their African communities. They created pedagogies of social and political transformation based on the knowledge of African peoples---their peoples.

At my University, the University of Victoria, it is now possible to obtain a PhD degree using principles of participatory research. Perhaps this is possible in your universities as well.

Few people will remember that the very concept or discourse of participatory research first emerged in Africa, in places like Tanzania and Senegal in the early and mid 1970s. Names such as Kemal Mustafa, Anacletti, Derick Mulenga, Paulo Wangoola, Marjorie Mbillinyi, Marje-Lisse Swantz, Lamine Kane and Yusuf Kassam and more contributed to a global network long before places like Canada were able to speak about it.

Some of you may remember the remarkable African history book written by the late Walter Rodney of Guyana. It was called, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* and described how the slave trade and related early trade strategies of European colonialisation were responsible for destroying African trade practices and means of social and economic development, the impacts of which can be still felt.

In fact Higher Education in Africa over the past 40-50 years in Africa has also been dramatically underdeveloped by industrialized nations' frameworks and practices. The World Bank contributed substantially to this underdevelopment and weakening through first their structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 90s which demanded cutting of the public support for education, health and social support. The specific impact on Higher Education came from their return-on-investment studies of the times that suggested that only investments in primary schooling were worthy of bank funding. The combination of structural adjustment policies and neglect by the major international funding agencies contributed to a serious

deterioration of the newly created universities that had shown so much hope at the time of independence.

But our own universities are guilty today of contributing to the underdevelopment of African Universities in a manner, which is continuing at an unchecked pace. The lack of investment in developing research capacities within African higher education institutions and the parallel cuts to public higher education institutions in Europe, North America and Australia have resulted in aggressive global recruitment drives by our universities to find the best and the brightest post-graduate students and entice them and their governments to pay fees many times what domestic students in our countries pay in order to make up for their own budget strains. And as we know, many of these students, perhaps most of these students never return to Africa. Those of us involved in international community-university research collaboration and networking cannot remain silent in the face of this contemporary form of intellectual colonialism which in the long run deprives both African, but ultimately the world of a fully flourishing autonomous African intellectual contribution to our survival as living beings on the planet.

Let those in Africa cry out for universities that are truly African universities where African history, epistemology, spirituality, science and language take the place and not western universities located in Africa.

Let each one of us here today in Dakar at this historic event, make a pledge to carry the spirit of African-based community university research and engagement forward in our NGOs, our universities, our social movements and in our own intellectual lives.

The world needs African leadership in this field. We are hungry for community. We need Afro-centric theory and practice of Community Based participatory research and engagement to arise and take its place once more in the highest peaks of intellectual achievement.

Vive les racines de recherche participative en Afrique

Vive les gryots et les Professeurs en traviallent ensemble

Vive le savoir Africaine comme lumiere dans le monde

Vive les partenariat entre universités et communautés

Merci beaucoup