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*Civil Society and Construction of Knowledge  
Systems*

*Base Paper for Group II, Theme - VII*

*Dr. Rajesh Tandon*

*Executive Director*

*Society for Participatory Research in Asia*

*42 Tughlakabad Institutional Area*

*New Delhi-110 062*

*Ph +91- 11-698 1908, 698 9559*

*Fax- +91-11-698 0183*

*email: pria@sdalt.ernet.in*

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## Civil Society and Construction of Knowledge Systems

The purpose of this paper is to provide framework for deliberations on this important and emerging theme. In order to enable other presenters and discussants to focus on certain types of issues critical to this theme, the paper is divided into several sections.

## Social Construction of Knowledge Systems

The first premise of this paper is that knowledge is socially constructed<sup>(1)</sup>. There is no truth which is universally applicable for all times to come in all periods of history, in all communities and societies. Knowledge is an understanding of reality: understanding the way people live, the way groups and organisations function, the way in which the society and economy is organised, etc. At different levels of social reality and at different periods of human history, knowledge has been changing, just as understanding of

reality has been changing. Social construction of knowledge is particularly so for knowledge about social reality. While physical sciences have enough evidence to demonstrate the relativity of knowledge in physical sciences, there is hardly any dispute with respect to social knowledge or knowledge about social realities.

The second premise of this paper is that knowledge system is a complex enterprise which includes a number of elements.

The first element is the epistemology of knowledge. The theory or belief as to how knowledge develops, how authentic understanding of social reality is developed.

The second component is the form and manner in which knowledge is presented, organised, articulated.

The third element is the dissemination of that knowledge, its communication to others who may benefit by understanding and using this knowledge.

The fourth element is the institutional mechanism of knowledge producers and knowledge users, knowledge consumers etc.

In another sense one could examine the intellectual, material and institutional base of knowledge systems. The intellectual base will define the epistemological and philosophical aspects of knowledge. This is the question of 'knowledge for what' and how it is produced. The political economy of knowledge <sup>(2)</sup> is addressed through its material base: who is involved in production of knowledge, who provides the resources, how these resources are distributed, how decisions to apply resources to different components of the knowledge enterprise are made, etc. etc.

And the institutional base describes the manner in which the knowledge system is organised. This will include researchers, institutions for training of researchers, mechanisms for certification of researchers, formal systems of examining the validity, reliability and generalisability of knowledge produced by one part of the

enterprise, etc. The totality of these elements comprises the knowledge system.

The third premise of this paper is that the modern enterprise in knowledge system has grown parallel to the industrial revolution of the last 300 years. Knowledge about the physical sciences and realities began to explode with the industrial revolution as demands for new knowledge increased. In the post-industrial informational age, transformation of knowledge systems is taking place in response to the reorganisation of the dominant social, economic and political systems of our times.

### Nation-State and Construction of Knowledge

In the past century, the two major determinants of construction of knowledge systems had been modern nation-states and modern corporate-market actors <sup>(3)</sup>. Nation-states in Europe and North America had organised much before the second world war and the post-colonial countries constructed a modern nation-state in the

last five decades. In various parts of the world, the state has played a major role in construction of knowledge systems during this period. It has defined priorities for knowledge, it has provided the resources, it has created institutional mechanisms for certification, review and dissemination of knowledge from physical sciences to social, economic and political issues of contemporary societies. Nation-states through their agencies, departments and ministries have significantly controlled, determined and shaped the construction of modern knowledge systems.

### Corporate Actors and Construction of Knowledge

During the early part of this century, the rise of modern-corporate market system began to enter the arena of shaping construction of knowledge and knowledge systems. The demands and requirements of modern corporate enterprises began to define priority areas for research, provide resources, creating institutions as well as channels and mechanisms of dissemination and use. In recent

years, patenting of knowledge and measures like intellectual property rights have been used by corporate actors to profit from universally relevant and useful human knowledge. Knowledge, and knowledge systems are now being monopolised and controlled by modern corporate market institutions. In countries of the South, the neo-liberal consensus is only now beginning to promote the rise of modern corporate-market actors. As a result, enormous efforts are being made by the market-corporate sector to shape the construction of knowledge and knowledge systems in countries of the South. With the declining resources and capacities of the state in many countries of the South, the relative influence of the corporate-market institutions in shaping knowledge and knowledge systems has increased dramatically in recent years.

## Civil Society and Construction of Knowledge Systems

The world is witnessing a new phenomenon which goes beyond the state or the market. There is a re-discovery of associational human endeavours, of collective efforts by ordinary people, of citizen participation throughout the world. Various labels such as civil society, this sector has been recognised to have significant role in societal development, along with the state and the market. Therefore, the next premise of this paper is that the role of civil society in shaping knowledge and knowledge systems is an area for deeper understanding and analysis at this juncture of human history. While various definitions of civil society have suddenly emerged and academic and political debate on the relevance of this construct is raging, it is important to look at this in a historical perspective. Before the advent of modern nation states and modern markets actors, a lot of human activity was organised in communities, across families, in groups and associations, by people and their families, by citizens themselves<sup>(4)</sup>. This included a wide

range of social and cultural activities; it included managing community resources; it included economic exchange of goods and services; it comprised of mutual help and sharing of resources; it included mutual influence and control in face of conflicts and disagreements. Such an associational life with its own institutional and material base was widely developed in different parts of the world. This stream of human activity and this method of organising the same declined in the last five decades since its resource base was snatched away and its legitimacy was undermined by the state. Where market actors are already strong, they took advantage of the de-legitimisation of this method of organising human activity in order to perpetuate limited self-interest and profit-motive. Two types of associational citizen organizing is being carried out in contemporary context. On the one hand, they organise themselves for their own needs; on the other, they relate to the state and market institutions in order to make them transparent and accountable. Therefore, this paper is arguing that this third basis of understanding contemporary society must also be understood in terms of its influence in shaping knowledge and knowledge

systems. This is the essence of the role of civil society and the construction of knowledge systems <sup>(5)</sup>.

### Knowledge Base

*What therefore is the base of knowledge in civil society?*

The essential base of knowledge in civil society is life itself. In pursuit of various activities of daily living, in managing the family, community, the land, forest, water, in looking after the health and hunger of one's own family, in producing and consuming goods and service, life creates a vast series of experiences. This life itself becomes the base for understanding social reality and becomes the source of knowledge in civil society.

Related but equally important part of this is the daily problem-solving that occurs in the course of managing one's family, community and society. As problems repeat themselves over a

period of time, our experience in solving them again and again builds a body of knowledge, not only among us, but in the family and the community. Problem-solving around issues of daily life and living becomes the basis for understanding reality for a vast section of humanity throughout the two millennium.

Survival in the face of hardships, in the face of difficult physical and ecological circumstances has been a dominant mode of existence. Different communities and sections of societies develop different interests over a period of time. Their differences get contested in physically controlling the use of such natural resources as well as in controlling the minds of people. It is this struggle, this contest across communities, associations, classes, ethnic and linguistic groups, gender, which has been a major basis for developing new understanding and knowledge about human reality.

The fourth important base of knowledge has been intergenerational. Civil society operates through a network of informal arrangements, many of whom pass through generations

within families, communities and social groups. This tradition across generations becomes the basis for regularly refining, sharpening, improving our understanding and knowledge about different aspects of human endeavour. The intergenerational component of civil society knowledge base thus acquires a different order and quality than what could be called inter-professional base of modern knowledge systems.

### Knowledge Form

The second arena to examine the civil society and construction of knowledge systems is the form of knowledge. This knowledge system is knowledg-in-use. Here, the purpose of understanding is action and change <sup>(6)</sup>. Understanding reality is not a pursuit in itself, but in order to use that understanding for one's own life, that of the family, community and wider society. Therefore, knowledg-in-use is the form of civil society knowledge systems.

The second aspect of this form is the experiential nature of this knowledge. Since the base of knowledge is essentially life, life problems, struggle and contest across different groups and communities, it is the experience and analysis of that experience, individually and collectively which provides the form of knowledge. Such an experiential form is immediately relevant to knowledge-in-use and relies heavily on life experiences of individuals and collectives.

Third aspect is the axiomatic nature of this knowledge form. Where principles of understanding are translated into do's and don'ts. These axioms take the shape of operational principles so that they can be continuously relevant in action and in daily life. What may appear as an otherwise simplistic set up of axiomatic principles of do's and don'ts in daily behaviour, is actually a strong basis of such knowledge form <sup>(7)</sup>.

Finally, this knowledge form of civil society knowledge system depends on oral exchange, dialogue and communication. It survives

through word-of-mouth, through symbols, through rhythms, songs, dance, music and art. Such an oral tradition has been the strength of civil society knowledge form. However, in today's literate and written word context, the knowledge system in oral form needs to be articulated and documented for future use.

### Issues

Several issues acquire relevance for future inquiry and clarification in light of above.

1. The linkage between practice of civil society and processes of knowledge construction needs to be documented and analysed more deeply. While quite a bit of this linkage is visible in action, its documentation and analysis is rather inadequate.
2. The 'knowledge-in-use' and 'knowledge-in-book' have been historically distanced. This is the familiar dichotomy between

experience and expertise. Yet, in many situations, the interaction between the two is a reality. Very little is known about such interaction and the quality of knowledge that emerges from the same.

3. The process of resourcing knowledge systems is largely ignored in civil society. The 'surplus' resources of the state and the market are being increasingly put to use by civil society. In this situation, the material base of the knowledge system, and its construction, may generate contradictions within civil society. More needs to be understood about this as well.
4. Finally, the practitioners of 'knowledge-in-use' and academic producers of knowledge have a history of intermittent or inadequate interaction. As a result, comparative advantages and value-added of the two traditions has been less than made use of  
- How can this interaction be strengthened ?

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