

The World We Want: Creating A New Architecture of Knowledge

by

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Introduction

Over the past decade global development agendas and civil societies' initiatives have increasingly challenged institutions of higher education to reshape their relationships with society to develop effective, sustainable partnerships to co-create knowledge for societal change and development. At this critical moment of humanity's survival and continuity, it is imperative that research be harnessed to enable people to solve their problems and improve their lives. To make this happen we need a new paradigm of research in academia where academes 'research with' and not 'research on' so as to engage with communities in the design, implementation and use of research to address people's needs. As well academes have to use their resources and expertise, and harness the knowledge, experiences and capacities of communities for communities' benefit. The goals of academic research are therefore not merely to advance scientific understanding but to "put people first", to ensure that knowledge produced contributes to making a concrete and constructive difference in people's lives and to our world, and that this knowledge is built on and from people's knowledge and lived wisdom. This is community-based engaged research, research that is conducted by, for and/or with the participation of community members: an emergent paradigm of really useful research for the 21st century. Engaged research is known to yield knowledge less likely to be identified in more traditional research approaches that often leave communities feeling exploited and not benefiting directly from the findings of the research. Apart from researchers' publications and presentations at conferences, these conventional forms of academic research often have little or only limited impact.

Engaged research have taken various forms and names in different parts of the world. A variety of terms (with subtle differences) exist (scientific collaborative research as per science shops, community-based health-care, participatory research, community-based research, participatory action research, co-operative inquiry, empowering research, conscientising research etc). These various forms of engaged research foster mutually respectful partnerships to generate usable, really useful knowledge for people to create the world they want. Though fragmented and encountering numerous challenges, these research partnerships offer a more collaborative

alternative that offer academes the opportunity to restore their relevance and to address local and global needs. These research partnerships are increasingly being recognized as important in yielding concrete knowledge and understanding that can guide policies and programs to reduce the various disparities and unsustainabilities of our turbulent, troubled world. Indeed such forms of university-community engagement has emerged to be a powerful means for higher education to refocus and strengthen its mission amid conflicting demands for commercialization and privatization. It has enabled higher education to return to its humanistic roots, benefiting academy and society.

This article briefly explicates the strategic emergence of university-community partnerships amidst a troubling turbulent world, and the potential of networks to nurture spaces and structures for sustained engagement of higher education institutions with communities.

A Troubling Global Context: Importance, Timing and the Need for New Knowledge

In 2000, amid great fanfare and optimism, the UN World Assembly endorsed a set of Millennium Development Goals to eliminate world poverty by 2015. In 2008, the scene is more somber: the World Bank says, “no developing country is likely to meet the Millennium Development Goals” (Tandon, 2008). The persistence of violence and armed struggle continues and terrorizes and kills large numbers of people. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, nearly a decade of violence in the 1990s led to over five million deaths, due directly to conflict-related casualties, as well as to disease and malnutrition exacerbated by conflict. (UNDP: 2008, xvii) In dealing with post-conflict areas, new research strategies and kinds of knowledge are needed, since “post-conflict recovery policy must begin with a robust understanding of the indigenous drivers of recovery” (UNDP, 2008, xix).

The economic meltdown which is now spreading into all corners of the world calls into question the capacity of market strategies to reduce poverty, close the gap between the rich and the poor or even provide a stable economic base for trade and development. In October of 2008, John Lipsky, Deputy Director of the International Monetary Fund described the global economic picture as “highly uncertain” and said that the “risks of a global recession loom large” (2008). We now know that his predictions have proven to be true and while some economies are beginning to move through the recession, the impact on cuts to social policies and entrenched unemployment have widened the gap between the rich and poor in most of our nations. Indeed our society of the 21st century is characterised by pervasive inequalities, poverty, insecurity and exclusion amidst abundance and prosperity. Rapid growth and improvements in standards of living are simultaneously generating disparities, divides, destruction, environmental, and diverse forms of unsustainabilities.

In effect, a new knowledge strategy and networking capacity is urgently called for. “In a globalized world, in which public issues and social problems stretch across wide spaces, affecting ever larger numbers of people, it becomes increasingly important for individuals and communities to learn together” (Gurstein & Angeles, 2007: 3). Knowledge must be mobilized

and activated by all social actors, in new and creative ways. In alliance with the communities in which they are based, and through the use of community-based research strategies, higher education institutions need to align and focus their considerable capacities on promoting innovative and effective government policies and civic action. *Community-university research partnerships are emerging as an important strategy mobilizing just such research and action* (Global Alliance on Community-Engaged Research, 2008).

Strategic Emergence of Community-University Research Partnerships Internationally

In the 1970s in the Netherlands, a structure for linking academic research to communities needs was created called Science Shop (<http://www.livingknowledge.org>). In Tanzania, India, Latin America and elsewhere, a new research approach called “participatory research”, which recognized the knowledge creating capacities of community, organizations and social movements, was also gaining visibility (Hall, 1975). Flash forward 40 years, and we have the emergence of a second or third wave of research and knowledge mobilization initiatives that build on the early work of the Science Shops and the Participatory Research practitioners and others. It is promoted and supported by a new set of networks and structures such as Sciences Citoyennes in France (<http://sciencescitoyennes.org>); the Living Knowledge Network based in Germany (<http://www.scienceshops.org>); The Popular Education Network based in Scotland (Crowther, 1999); Community-Based Research Canada (<http://uvic.ca/ocbr>); Community-University Partnerships for Health in the United States (<http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/>); as well as the National CBR Networking Initiative (<http://www.bonner.org/campus/cbr/home.htm>) and the University-Community Partnership for Social Action Network (<http://www.igloo.org/ucpsarnet>).

Additional networks and structures include the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (<http://www.pria.org>); the Academe Civil Society Network in ASEAN, the Global University Network for Innovation of Barcelona (<http://www.guni-rmies.net>); the Sub-Saharan African Participatory Research Network in Senegal; the Developing Research on Citizenship network based at the University of Sussex (<http://www.drc-citizenship.org>); Observatory PASCAL on Place Management, Community Engagement and Learning Regions (<http://www.obs-pascal.com>); the Australian University Community Engagement Association (Temple et al, 2005), and there are many other emerging networks. Between August of 2006 and May of 2008, representatives from many of these networks have been engaged in conversations about how best to support this emerging theory and practice of higher education community-based research. *We now have a space for the systematic sharing, deepening and theorising of experiences that did not exist in earlier years.*

GACER and the Conference on 'University-Community Engagement for Sustainability' in Penang, Malaysia (23-26 Nov, 2009)

The Global Alliance for Community Engaged Research is a “network of networks” made up of the Living Knowledge Network, the Society for Participatory Research in Asia, Community-Campus Partnerships for Health(USA), CEBEM (Latin America), African Participatory Research Network, University Community Partnership-Social Action Network (multi-cultural community network), Canadian Alliance for Community based Research (Canada) and more. The main objective of the Alliance is to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and information across continents and countries to enable interaction and collaboration to further the application and impact of community-based research for a sustainable just future for the people of the world. In line with this goal, GACER, in collaboration with University Sains Malaysia is organizing an international conference on **'University-Community Engagement for Sustainability'** in Penang, Malaysia from 23-26 Nov, 2009. This conference aims to revisit the missions of universities and to explore ways of making engagement with communities more meaningful, inclusive and sustainable. The conference will also explore ways to create an environment within universities that is conducive for transformative engagement to take place and to flourish. There will also be post-conference training workshops to help build capacities of academes, citizens and civil society organisations in community-university partnerships. As the first international conference on university-community engagement in Malaysia and in Asia, we hope to popularize, promote, popularise and legitimize the scholarship of engagement in Asia. For further information see <http://www.usm.my/icn/ucec/>.