Re-building Community-University Partnerships: Major Challenges in the Global South

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Introduction

When the whole world especially, the Asia-Pacific region is reeling under the impact of economical, political and ecological distress, the need of the hour is to channelize the knowledge resource base for the benefit of the poor, impoverished and marginalized sections of the society. Since its establishment in 1946, UNESCO has persistently stressed higher education's importance in the development of societies, and over the past few years has stressed its responsibilities in promoting sustainable development and the culture of peace. (Second World Conference on Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action held at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris from July 2009)

In creating a progressive society, strong economic values have got inculcated in every institution of the society. Karl Polanyi's formalist notion of economy is best suited to describe the market-dominated society of today. The institutions of higher education are also being affected by market driven forces. Education has almost become a commodity, which can be exchanged on economic terms and can be utilized for the benefit of the individual rather than the society at large. The student is now playing the role of a customer rather than a seeker of knowledge. Geographical borders are no longer constraining for reaching out to the prospective students. The Northern Universities are setting up campuses in the South. They are also collaborating with other institutions or franchisees to teach their courses under their brand name without getting involved in the complex administrative processes locally.

Globally, higher education is a form of business today. It is more of a commercialized affair and it has shown a growth of 7 per cent per year since the late 1990s. Private companies have also entered the education business to garner profit. Proceeds of such kind of exchange are so high that many government-controlled universities are seeking independence from governmental authority. In many countries including India, the government controls fee structure and it is

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usually higher for the foreign students, which cause a lot of anxiety to many. Thus many universities have created specific niches for foreign students. To capture the foreign market the courses are customized as per the international requirement and also wide publicizing tactics are resorted to (Kaul, 2006)

Since education business is generating good profit, therefore, education institutions are now pursuing students, especially foreign ones, using a wide variety of marketing strategies. Many delegations of universities and higher education institutions have come to India from UK, USA, Australia, Canada and European Union seeking opportunities for collaborations and partnerships. This is a matter of serious concern as they are offering courses, which are linked to producing graduates with market-oriented skills only. These skills would fetch these graduates higher salaries in the international market. But this trend can hardly be considered sustainable for local community. This kind of ‘brain drain’ is actually taking away the best and the brightest from southern countries and also the infrastructural facilities available to the rest of the people in the country cannot compete with the Northern Universities.

During the past couple of years, there has been a certain sense of urgency in reforming higher education in India. With growing commercialisation, content and pedagogy have also become market-oriented. Content has become vocationalised, skill oriented; pedagogy has become short term, rote learning, ahistorical and decontextualised (Tandon, 2008). From being a private good, higher education has to become a public social good, which would then have a lot to contribute to the needs of sustainable development. Historically, higher education has served the purpose of research and training. The knowledge production has been the major contributory function of the higher education institution. But the orthodox pedagogy has to give way to more engaging pedagogies where students could learn more from being actively involved with communities, i.e. gaining knowledge through praxis.

Universities today are facing the obligation of creating responsible citizens who would necessarily take the step towards creating a democratic and developed society. The rapid advances in sciences and technology are an added responsibility to shoulder for the universities. They need to produce technically sound individuals who would be able to take care of the world economy and global changes in the future. They should also be able to fulfill the social commitments of removing inequality and social injustice. Therefore, the university education has to be qualitatively enriched. Otherwise the products of university education would not be

able to meet the challenges in creating a free and fair society. This reaffirms the need for an alliance between universities and communities. Many such networks have been created and various universities are involved in doing community engaged research. It would be worthwhile to provide a brief analysis of all the major networks that are functioning in the global south on community – university partnership. This would bring to fore two important aspects: the obstacles in the path of fulfilling such a mutually beneficial negotiation; and secondly, the best way to harness the creative energies of all those who are working with the community or those who are from the academia trying to build policies for the future.

Community university partnership entails a process of exchange of knowledge between the two. Seeped into this process is reciprocity of learning, sharing of practical experiences and jointly spearheading the process of social and human development. This partnership is beneficial for both. For the academicians, it opens new avenues of research and also equips them with better examples to add to their teaching. Students benefit from such kind of learning, as they are able to assimilate knowledge in a better way and also increase their understanding of the relevance of community-university engagement.

The role of such an alliance is to bridge the gap between various actors in the development process so that they are able to address the issues of better livelihood approaches, sustainable development and just human rights for the people living in the fringes of the society. The disadvantaged or the oppressed individuals can also have a say in the governance process or assert their citizenship rights, but that is only possible when they have been brought into the fold of a strong civil society. A space needs to be created for differing voices on diverse issues. Equal opportunities and human rights would qualify for a better citizenship. Therefore, the actors in the development initiatives like the Government, Universities and the Civil Society Organisations are increasingly getting involved in joint collaborations to enhance the quality and ensure success of the various development schemes.

Transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary research is the emerging theme in the Universities or higher education institutes. Their focus is on developing research analysis which would be for the benefit of the masses rather than for the academe. Therefore, individual projects are giving way to joint ventures. They are engaging in knowledge generation with Civil Society Organisations to bring social, economic and political change in the communities. The Civil Society Organisations are thereby able to articulate their opinion to influence policy for the upliftment of the marginalized communities through the academe which earlier they could not do, as

they were not recognized agency of knowledge whereas the academic world had all the credibility as an excellent resource of knowledge. Academicians, on the other hand, got the empirical knowledge from the field, which had a greater impact on policy formulation and implementation.

Articulation and creation of knowledge base has taken a leap forward through such joint collaborations. Knowledge is no longer the domain of academe alone. Since knowledge is the basis for creating social changes therefore, all forms of knowledge, including, indigenous knowledge, has found a space for itself in the development sector. Such kind of information and expertise was earlier unavailable; therefore, now they are valued as precious data. Knowledge of the indigenous people, albeit in the Global North, has immensely helped in creating various sustainable development approaches.

The partnership approach justly involves community members, civil society organizations, academia and the policy institutions. All the partners contribute their expertise and share responsibility and ownership to enhance understanding of a given phenomenon and to integrate the knowledge gained with action to improve the well-being of community members and foster sustainable development. Diverse expertise to address complex community issues will increase trust and bridge cultural gaps between partners. The aspirations and engagement of the citizens, with the passage of time have changed. The collaborative engagement of community and university is a good modality by which the world can be improved along with the aspirations of citizens. (Pant, 2010)

According to Dr.Lean Heng Chan at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia, higher education can and must play an effective role in developing students towards social commitment in their work and life. Students should be inspired towards a more humane and sustainable now and future. Through teaching, teachers could engage with them to explore their understandings of the world not just as an objective fact ‘out there’ but also as part of one’s own surroundings and look for solutions to bring about constructive alternatives.

Widespread Initiatives in Partnership

Higher education institutions are enlarging their boundaries and making their borders porous and receptive to the diverse cultures outside. Since more and more people are getting educated and getting into universities, therefore it has become imperative for these institutions to be socially accountable. These institutions are

fundamentally doing teaching and research and taking part in some of the developmental outreach programmes. In today's globalised world, it has become essential for them to take part in the community-engaged research along with the community and civil society organisations to be effectively transformative. Multiplicity of cultures, values and religions makes the world complex and at the same time challenging. Dealing with such kind of diversity sometimes makes the entire development process slow but once the barrier is broken, then the chosen path seems realistic to achieve. Merging of the ideas of the various partners helps in driving the initiative.

Community-University engagements have involved multiple approaches like extension activities, service learning, engaged scholarship and community based research in the Global South. It has been resolutely admitted from the examples of the Global North that participatory research engagement wherein both the community as well as the university has exchanged their knowledge and resources in formulating futuristic development programmes have been extremely successful. GACER (Global Alliance on Community Engaged Research), Living Knowledge Network, The Talloires Network, GUNI (Global Universities Network for Innovation), and more from the Global North are extremely successful in reaching such a goal. All these networks are advancing towards enhancing the community-university partnership on the global platform. These work toward strengthening the grass root organization in enriching their knowledge base and enhancing their capabilities in dealing with various complex social, economical and ecological issues.

Many of the higher education institutions and other stakeholders in the North are actively involved in working towards such partnerships for many long years. But such kind of pro-active initiatives of collaborative work is still in its nascent stages in the south. These kinds of alliances in the South are slowly picking up the trend from the North.

An Indian Case Study

The Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), a civil society organisation, located in New Delhi has collaborated with the Mountain Development Research Centre (MDRC), in Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal University (HNBGU) in Srinagar, Uttarakhand.

HNBGU is headquartered at Srinagar, Pauri Garhwal district of Uttarakhand, India. It has two teaching campuses at Paruri and Tehri Garhwal. It is a residential- cum-

affiliating institution of higher learning with more than 180 affiliated colleges with jurisdiction over seven districts of the region. It is considered to be among the top ten large universities in the country.

PRIA's academic linkages programme aimed to involve institutes of higher education in community-based research, relevant to development goals and contributing toward public good. To this purpose, it aimed to create a common platform within HEIs where teaching & research activities contributed towards community service and also created a linkage between the community and the policy makers.

The process of initiating a partnership with HNBGU to encourage community-based research activities started early in 2004 when PRIA engaged the Department of Business Management in HNBGU on the issue of development of Uttarakhand. In 2005 an adhoc committee was formed under the Vice Chancellor. The committee decided to form a centre named Natural Harnessing Resource Centre (NHRC) to carry forward the agenda. Later the name was changed to Mountain Development Research Centre (MDRC)

MDRC emphasised on need-based research (drawn from the local community) to be undertaken by the university. The prime impact that the centre wanted to create was to channelise university research to the relevant development departments so that in framing policies the findings of the students could be useful.

With time MDRC's domain of work expanded and simultaneously new methods have been adopted to make the work of MDRC more effective. From taking university research findings to the department, MDRC now is also working on community issues directly. This is the second stage where to expand the reach of the project; it has started working among the people. It is trying to ensure that the existing rights are given to the people. The third stage, thought at inception, is that MDRC would interface with the government to provide some new rights; for instance, giving the affected people in any hydel-power project a percentage share in the company's profit.

In addition to training workshops, MDRC organizes interface between affected people and the government. It pushes the government departments to answer to people's queries. This is done in multiple rounds.

A need-based approach is being followed to decide the M. Phil and PhD topics, of

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the university students, through the involvement of MDRC. Students of Anthropology and Environmental Sciences, are provided field exposure as a part of their course work where they interact with the community. This forms a part of their assessment and thus is treated very seriously by the students.

So far ten people from the local community, including those living in the forest have been invited to the university to teach. Issues handled by them range from forestry, agriculture, industries, bio-diversity, herbal vegetation among others. A significant step has been taken in bringing in traditional knowledge to mainstream. Jag Mohan Junglee, a person who had pioneered the concept of mixed forest was invited by the university to take a teaching position in the university. Similarly, Narayan Singh Negi, an environmentalist and a social activist, was invited to the university and honoured for his achievement and service to the society.

PRIA provided the expertise by bringing in the method of participatory research to the university. It was extremely important as this tool was employed to involve community in knowledge generation and efforts were made to unearth the traditional wisdom already existing locally. Through this method, various individuals have also come up who possess or have developed traditional methods to preserve nature and community.

A significant reason for success of this centre is the goodwill that it has earned among the people for its honest and sustained effort for development of the region and the people. Professional work culture of the two partners and their academic bent of mind helped them to understand the nature of the work taken up under the Centre. Given the stamp of the university on MDRC, gaining acceptance or access to the government officers was not difficult.

Commonwealth Universities Extension and Engagement Network-Africa

The *ACU University Extension Network* provides a forum for the exchange of good practice in community engagement activity, helps to disseminate knowledge and project management skills amongst practitioners across the ACU membership, and relays relevant news and opportunities for collaboration to its members. The network was launched at the University of Ghana in April 2008, and comprises 500 individual members. While many institutions define these activities as community engagement, others define it as community outreach, while others focus on knowledge mobilisation and still others on research communication. The ACU

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Extension Network embraces a range of activities within this broad spectrum. The network is supported by the Development Partnerships in Higher Education, or DelPHE, programme led by the British Council, supported by the ACU, and funded by the Department for International Development in the United Kingdom.

Extension networks include people and organisations who normally act outside the higher education sector. This might include civil society organisations and NGOs, local government, industry, small-to-medium enterprises, development agencies and charities, and other international or national organisations. Sustained, formalised, and productive interaction with other sectors in society is a key goal of the university extension programme.

The kind of knowledge that is disseminated is relevant for many communities. There are many subjects and disciplines that have great developmental impact on local communities. For example, much extension activity is driven towards building capacity in agriculture and in rural regions. In these cases, universities engage with rural communities and disseminate knowledge on environmental sustainability, new agricultural techniques, principles of entrepreneurship, marketing and distribution, water engineering and sanitation, and other subjects relevant to rural communities. This may be done through training schemes, seminar series, cooperative working, or through dissemination of learning materials.

Many extension practitioners agree that this should be a two-way process. Actors in rural communities can also provide critical information and feedback to higher education institutions regarding the challenges faced by agriculturalists and rural communities, which can then help to inform the university research agenda. Such dialogue can help to bring universities into a better understanding of the development needs of their region, and can help universities play a stronger role in addressing these.

South Africa

Prof. Frederick Fourie (Rector, Vice-Chancellor, ***University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa***) in his keynote address (*Towards a South African scholarship of engagement: core and supplementary tasks of a university?*) had clarified the concept of engagement. The engaged university can be a constructive way of contextualizing South African universities Whereas a university can only provide its core functions because it has a base of scholarship, an intellectual base of independently asking hard questions to gain knowledge and insight, it must at

the same time be an engaged university that uses its academic capacities and functions to make a significant difference to the condition of its region, country and continent, helping – in this case – to eradicate the legacies of underdevelopment, poverty, colonialism and apartheid. It should be clear that such community engagement also is an important part of the transformation of society – and of the true transformation of a university. This can be denoted by the term "transformative engagement".

A particularly noteworthy strategy that the UFS has adopted is the establishment of "flagship" or key delivery sites for community engagement. The main purpose is to create empowering, collaborative "spaces" where staff, students and external participants can meet in order to engage in productive, multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral interaction. One such key delivery site or "flagship" is the MUCPP, or Mangaung University of the Free State Partnership Programme which was launched in 1991.

Malaysia, University of Science-Penang

The Universiti Sains Malaysia is very keen to generate a society that is imbued with dynamic and civic leadership as part of its civic role and social responsibility. They are channeling added resources and research facilities to position USM to contribute to community change relatively quickly and in ways that will ensure deeper and longer-lasting commitment to civic engagement across higher education. There are two major types of partnerships. The first are student initiatives conducted through student associations and co curricular activities. Activities that are conducted together with the USM Student Union are usually university initiatives that are more widespread and multidisciplinary in terms of faculty and student participation. The second sets of initiatives are those conducted by the faculties. They are often related to the nature of the disciplines and may or may not involve students. In initiatives that involve undergraduates, there is a deliberate attempt to make the community a classroom for learning the lessons in life. Since the programmes involve research, educational or student activities they may involve separate parts of the university's organisation. Realising that the community development aspects may not be well documented or followed up for impact and effectiveness, USM has taken the step to establish a University – Community Partnership office under the Deputy Vice Chancellor in charge of Industry and Community Partnership. The office is responsible for planning and implementing multidisciplinary university level community initiatives and acts as a one-stop center for community outreach. In

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addition the office would serve as a coordinating and documentation center for community related initiatives conducted by the faculties and research institutes. USM hosted the first Asia Conference on University- Community Partnership in November 2009.

Venezuela, Metropolitan University

Civic engagement at the ***Metropolitan University at Caracas*** (Venezuela) is a mutual

learning process. It aims to build partnerships and promote popular participation in addressing problems affecting the university's wider community. The university has espoused civic engagement as part of its strategic intent by formulating a broad policy known as Social Capital Initiative. The ultimate aim is to facilitate community development by adopting an educational model that promotes reciprocity in the way the universities interact with the communities. Currently, civic engagement is not explicitly supported in the government policy on higher education.

Major Challenges

Various studies have documented the need for collaborative research, which is for, with and by, the people themselves, with the support and partnership of 'experts'. It has been widely recognised that knowledge in action and knowledge for action were important for finding solutions to the problems of societies and communities (Tandon, 2002). Higher education institutions need to break away from the orthodox mode of classroom teaching. Faculties as well as students need to be engaged in empirical learning from the field situation. Alternative modes of learning, which were earlier on the fringes of academic priorities, are gradually finding a place in the course curricula of higher education institutions. Education institutions are becoming more accountable to the society. Slowly the threads of community – university partnerships that have weaved their way into the Universities of global North are able to negotiate a place for itself in the universities of the global South. More and more such networks are being created.

The essential focus is on how to harness a productive community – university partnership. The examples, mentioned above have faced various challenges in attaining a mutually beneficial end. Those are being presented here so that it acts a learning step for moving ahead.

Global South faces several challenges in moving this university-community partnership forward.

1. Many universities in the global south are still maintaining a traditional view of knowledge; knowledge seems to be the monopoly of academia; knowledge in the community is not recognized as legitimate. Such a perspective makes

partnerships with communities one-sided, where university alone produces knowledge and then shares with the community. Co-production of knowledge with the community is not encouraged. This is an epistemological constraint where indigenous knowledge, and

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knowledge produced through community actions is delegitimised. This is the first major challenge that needs to be overcome in global south.

2. The second major challenge follows from the above. University does not consider itself accountable to the public at large for

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its knowledge and education functions. Choice of research topics and subjects for teaching students are not made in respect of needs of the community. Whereas needs of the business are acknowledged, the same doesn’t happen with respect to the community. Therefore, there is

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no accountability of the university in research and teaching, and market forces dominate such choices.

3. On the other hand, communities in the global south, and civil society active in them, do not seem to value their partnerships with the academia. There is a history of

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mistrust between them, which has not been addressed in the contemporary context. Civil society and community leaders need to be sensitized to the contributions that universities can make to advance their interests and agendas.

4. Within academic institutions and

universities in the global south, there is growing pressure to conform to the world ranking systems. Such rankings do not take into account partnerships with communities. In fact, these ranking systems focus largely on theoretical research contributions which are assessed by

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their academic peers alone. Assessment by the community does not feature in any such ranking system. New ways of ranking universities need to be designed which incorporate partnerships with communities.

5. Social science research funding agencies in the

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global south are starved of research funds; whatever limited funds they have, they tend to favour such research which distances universities and researchers from the communities. While business is able to fund research it values, similar funding for community-based

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research is very limited in the global south.

6. Systems of promotion inside universities do not consider engagement with the communities as a legitimate criterion. As a result, even when students and faculty in a university or department want to

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pursue community partnerships, their efforts do not get recognized for promotions and awards. Promotion and reward systems in universities of the global south need to be reformed to include such criteria to enable scholars and students to pursue community engagement activities more

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willingly.

7. Policies in ministries of higher education in the global south do not have frameworks that encourage university-community partnerships. As a result, community scholars do not get easily invited to teach in the university system. University leaders

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and Vice-Chancellors, even when willing and motivated towards the promotion of community engagement, do not get support from policy-makers in their provinces or countries to take this agenda forward.

In light of the above challenges, collective efforts from the south and the north are essential to promote university-community partnerships. New alliances like GACER (Global Alliance for Community-Engaged Research) can play a critical role in sensitization of both universities and civil society of the global south. Likewise,

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influencing research councils and policy-makers in the global south needs to be a major program of alliances like GACER in the coming period. Motivating UNESCO and other such bodies can help in this regard.

While the challenges may look enormous, the examples of innovative partnerships briefly described in this paper seem to carry the hope that realising larger public benefits from such partnerships is both desirable and feasible.

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Acknowledgement

The material on the various networks and alliances have been taken from their original websites.

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Home

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Notes

[1]Authors work at PRIA (Society for Participatory Research in Asia) www.pria.org