

Analytical Note on Data Collected from North Bengal University (NBU), Siliguri

Community Engagement with Higher Educational Institutions and Social Responsibility in Higher Education

Category I: Linking learning with community service

In this approach, students and teachers apply their knowledge and skills in a chosen community to improve the lives of people in that community. This can be achieved through 'adoption' of a specific village or slum, and then providing engagement opportunities to students from various disciplines and courses to apply their knowledge to address the challenges of that specific community

From the data available from the survey in North Bengal, it emerged that such service learning activities are primarily channelled through the NSS units of the various colleges. The students enrolled into the program are engaged in conducting and organizing activities and programs, for the broader benefit of the society. A brief illustration of such initiatives taken up in some of the colleges affiliated under NBU is as under:

1. Rural Agricultural Work Experience Program (RAWE)

Under this program, run by the Uttar Banga Krishi Vishwavidyalaya, the students volunteered and got an opportunity to work with the farmers in their fields, wherein they not only disseminated their knowledge, but also helped the farmers, apply it in their activities to acquire a sustainable income.

2. 6 month experiential learning program with respect to agriculture extension.

Here, the programs/projects were conducted in a participatory mode, wherein, the community/farmers were provided knowledge regarding extension activities in agriculture. Using this knowledge, the farmers then conducted field trials. Here, the students go to the villages for a period of 6 months, are involved in an array of agricultural activities. They prepared village maps, maps depicting the village's resources, which proved to be a major source of knowledge to them, as also to the village people. This was a good example of how knowledge from the universities, flowed directly to the fields through the channel of the university students and the farmers themselves.

3. General Community Service Activities

- Blood Donation/Thalassemia detection/Free eye check-up/free dental check-up camps; lifestyle management camps for improvement of sanitation, cleaning of roads, renovation of primary schools, etc.
- Educational aid given to primary/high school students
- NSS students volunteering for preparing food under the Mid-Day Meal Scheme in the schools of the nearby villages/wards.
- Organization of Health Camps

- In collaboration with local SHGs, the provision of funds for commercial activities such as piglet farming/pineapple plantation/tea garden plantation etc.
- Adoption of slums such as “Ward No. 18”, by ABN Seal College, Cooch Behar, wherein the students discuss the problems of the community, and provide them with solutions, which can be in the way of information dissemination on health care, sanitation, general environment, etc.
- Apart from this, certain villages are also adopted by colleges such as Sitalkuchi College, Cooch Behar, where the students engage in organizing awareness programs on issues such as health, sanitation etc. Similarly, A C College, Jalpaigudi has adopted a village “Mundabasti, wherein, they are running specialized courses on women empowerment, which include training being provided in soft toy making, papad making etc.
- Another example of such specialized courses being conducted was a Certificate & Diploma Course on Career Oriented Programs on Women’s Studies, being offered by Southfield College, Darjeeling.

4. Community Colleges

This initiative was started with a vision that the students play a meaningful role in the society. At present, it is functional in St Xavier’s & Mainaguri College, Jalpaigudi. This section offers students opportunities to develop skills such as a range of computer courses (Basic, Multimedia, Financial, Accounting).

PRIA’s Comments:

- From the survey that was carried out to different colleges, it emerged that whatever activities were taking place, was a part of the routine procedure of the colleges, that was mandated to be carried out through the NSS units, and also as per the criteria laid down by the University. It also emerged that no academic credits, was awarded to the students, who were entitled to only a certificate, on completion of the specific number of hours devoted to social work.
- Along with this, herein, no engagement of any sort is visible. Mostly it is a one-way discourse from the students/colleges towards the community, who appear to be mere passive recipients of the benefits handed out. Therefore, the essence of engagement from their side seems to be missing here.
- As regards the community colleges too, the process of engagement per say, is not clearly visible. This is because even these community colleges and the courses they offer are primarily meant for the students. Even though they do have a vision of these students playing a bigger role in the society, it seems to be pretty distant at the moment.

Category II: Researching with the community

In this approach, various faculties and programmes of higher educational institutions devise joint research projects in partnerships with the communities. In this approach, the community's own knowledge is integrated into the design and conduct of the research. New research by students and their teachers gets conducted and students complete their thesis/dissertation and research papers to complete their academic requirements (which can later be published), and at the same time the community's knowledge is systematised and integrated in this research

There were no ongoing activity/programs, which came in the ambit of this category. One exception in this regard was the Uttar Banga Krishi Vishwavidyalaya. Since they were mandated to perform 10% research & 20% extension activities through all departments, they had initiated some research projects, in conjunction with the community. The details of such initiatives are as below:

1. *Six month experiential learning program with respect to agriculture extension.*

Here, the programs/projects were conducted in a participatory mode, wherein, the community/farmers were provided knowledge regarding extension activities in agriculture. Using this knowledge, the farmers then conducted field trials. This was a good example of how knowledge from the universities, flowed directly to the fields through the channel of the university students and the farmers themselves.

2. *Research project on Climate Resilient Integrated Farming System in Eastern Gangetic Plain, Nepal & Bangladesh*

This project, funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), sees extensive field trials being done, in conjunction with the students and the farmers. Several innovative techniques and methodologies are put to use, to test their viability. Such research work immensely benefits the communities, as they get equipped with latest technologies under the realm of climate resilient agriculture.

3. *National Initiative on Climate Resilient Agriculture*

Funded by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), this project also runs on the lines, similar to the one mentioned above.

4. *Other project work aimed at Social Welfare*

Several departments are engaged in various project works, such as the Geography/Geology departments, conducting projects on river basins, soil erosion, biodiversity etc.

PRIA's Comments:

- Unfortunately, herein, the essence of “researching with the community”, is completely lost. The projects that were being initiated if at all done, were completely the college’s or its teacher’s prerogative. Nowhere was it found that the local’s knowledge was being integrated or systematised into the process. Even in the research projects undertaken by the Uttar Banga Krishi Vishvidyalaa, who were engaging with the communities, were primarily disseminating the information to the latter, who were then putting it into practice as field trials. Therefore, it was desired that this one way discourse be altered into a two way flow of information, even if limited at the initial stages, so that we take a step ahead into the process.
- There were no example/instances available wherein the students were completing their thesis/dissertation work as a result of such research projects. . These projects are therefore being carried out in a uni-directional manner, and more so to satisfy college’s/university’s requirements, where tapping of the indigenous knowledge is not adhered to.

Category III: Knowledge Sharing with the Community

The knowledge available with students and teachers in various disciplines is made available to the local community to realize its developmental aspirations, secure its entitlements and claim its rights from various public and private agencies. These can take the forms of enumerations, surveys, camps, trainings, learning manuals/films, maps, study reports, public hearings, policy briefs, and engagement with urban homeless shelters, teaching and health services in poor communities, legal aid clinics for under-privileged etc.

As stated earlier, that what was happening was primarily a one-way discourse from the University/students towards the community, therefore, a number of activities were being done under this category. They were primarily meant for knowledge dissemination and awareness generation among the communities.

1. Knowledge Dissemination with respect to Agriculture Extension

The programs under this are as under:

- Hands on Training on Mushroom Cultivation, conducted by the Plant pathology Department, for rural unemployed youth/women, etc. Herein, mostly the final year students are associated with it. The training is given by the teachers, along with some technical assistants who help in conducting the training program.
- Hands on Training on Biofertilizers & Biocontrol Agent Production, conducted by the Department of Agricultural Entomology & Plant Pathology
- Hands on Training on Vermicomposting, conducted by the Department of Agronomy
- Hands on Training on Floriculture & Post Harvest Technology, conducted by the faculty of Horticulture.

2. Social Outreach Programs

Such programs are meant to benefit of children, women and youth in the tea gardens and villages. An example in this context is St Xavier's College, Jalpaigudi which has initiated literacy programs for children in Mujnai, Ramjhora and Sayyedabad tea gardens. The college has also initiated evening meal program for malnourished children, free computer education to the youth and a very popular skill training program for illiterate women and girls by teaching them tailoring, embroidery, etc. Along with this, there are courses in Hardware/Repairing/Bakery, etc. The college organizes daily evening classes for the school going children of neighbouring Balaigach and Kheripara villages, wherein they are trained in subjects such as English, Mathematics, etc.

3. Programs aimed at enhancing the overall knowledge levels of the communities

Such programs included initiatives which were specifically targeted towards themes such as educational awareness, health awareness, immunization programs, programs which were inclusive of economic benefits, environmental awareness, information dissemination on infrastructure, transport etc.

PRIA's Comments:

- However, as regards "knowledge sharing with the community", comparatively better job was being done. Here, it was seen that the NSS units of almost all the surveyed colleges were enthusiastically engaging in such initiatives, and were carrying out an array of programs, meant for both knowledge sharing and overall development.
- Some of the courses that were being carried out for the community such as those meant to develop skill sets or academic courses, mentioned under Category I (Learning with the community) cut across this category as well.
- However, as provision of health camps/ trainings/teaching was easily visible, other forms of knowledge sharing such as sharing of survey/study reports/policy briefs was not seen. If this aspect could be adhered to, then this category of community engagement could be better diversified in North Bengal.

Category IV: Designing New Curriculum and Courses

In consultations with local communities, local students, local community-based organisations, HEIs design new curricula and courses that respond to specific needs of the community; such courses may be short-term workshops, certificates and degrees as well. They are meant for community members, as well as students already in formally enrolled HEIs.

There are no such initiatives being taken, across the colleges of North Bengal.

Category V: Including Practitioners as Teachers

Local community elders, women leaders, tribals and civil society practitioners have enormous practical knowledge of a wide variety of issues—from agriculture and forestry to child-rearing, micro-planning and project management. This expertise can be tapped by inviting such practitioners inside the institution to co-teach courses both in the classrooms and in the field.

There are no such initiatives being taken, across the colleges of North Bengal.

Category VI: Social Innovation by students

In consultation with student unions, associations and clubs, student initiated learning projects which have a social impact can be supported. Such social innovation projects by students can also have meaningful links to curriculum and courses.

There are no such initiatives being taken, across the colleges of North Bengal. However, in some of the colleges like the Sitalkuchi College of Cooch Behar, the teachers have initiative a couple of projects aimed at mitigating the health problems of the local people.

Final comments from college authorities:

- ***With respect to collaborations with NGOs, local authorities, Government departments/Ministry, for undertaking community development work***

In this regard, the collaborations with external agencies seemed to be limited. Where there was governmental support for some colleges (For eg, Uttar Banga Krishi Vishwavidyalaya, Cooch Behar & Ghoom Jorebunglow College, Darjeeling), others did collaborate with local NGOs, for undertaking such work. Some of them were:

- FOCEP (funded by Japan), collaborating with Ghoom Jorebunglow College, Darjeeling
- ANWESHA, SATMILE SATISH CLUB & CDHI, collaborating with Uttar Banga Krishi Vishwavidyalaya, Cooch Behar & Ghoom Jorebunglow College, for undertaking irrigation projects and climate resilient agriculture/climate smart technologies.
- ICDRC, collaborating with St Xavier's College, Jalpaigudi

- ***Overall view of the colleges, on the theme of community engagement, and their perspectives on it***

Most of the college authorities did accept that the degree of community engagement per say that was happening in North Bengal was limited. This was especially clear when we set to research the engagement from the side of the community. This was because although the one way discourse from the colleges to the community was evident and easily visible, the case vice versa was not so. Some of the principals also shared that the extremely poor profile of the community in North Bengal greatly limited the scope of such work.

Therefore, most of them were of the view that the involvement of their institution for comprehending local problems and for capacity building of the local community members was far from satisfactory. However, herein, a clear contrast was seen in the opinion of the colleges in the plains, with those in the hills in Darjeeling. They seem to be quite satisfied with their efforts, and admitted that the community people engaged in their initiatives much pro-actively, compared to the scenario in the plains. However, they were faced with other issues such as political turmoil's, frequent calling of strikes, etc., which limited their efforts.

Some of the other issues that emerged on discussions with the college authorities, and their respective perceptions on the issue are listed as under:

(a) Limitations of the colleges

(i) *Funding constraints:*

As shared by some authorities, the limited provision of funds greatly limited their exercise of community engagement. As a result, they had to resort to whatever resources were available to them, to fill the criteria as underlined by the University authorities. Herein, although they wanted to do more, such constraints limited the means and ways were at their disposal.

(ii) *Lack of Manpower*

Where funds were available in ample quantities, other inhibitions like lack of manpower, proved to be a major roadblock. As for instance, in the Uttar Banga Krishi Vishwavidyalaya, there was no recruitment of teachers since the last five years. This as a result also limited the capacities of the colleges.

(iii) *Lack of co-ordination between agencies/allied departments*

In cases where a couple of agencies were involved in carrying out a particular task, for e.g., the State department of Agriculture, NGOs, Universities, there was a lack of co-ordination and planning between them. Such procedural hassles greatly limited the desired result of the work being carried out.

(iv) *Policy restrictions*

Since the colleges were bounded by the procedures laid down at the University level, some of the NSS Program Officers shared that such policies and directives needed to be broad based. This was required for inclusion of various schemes/programs, which stood restricted amidst the binding criterions.

(v) *Rural colleges need to be involved in community development projects*

Some of the principals shared that the colleges in rural areas need to be involved in such projects, and for this purpose, UGC and other NGOs should extend a helping hand.

(vi) *No credits are available to the teachers/students involved with the NSS units*

It was also shared that the teachers who devoted their time and energy in carrying out various community development work, were entitled to no credits. In order to incentivise their work, the teachers should be entitled to benefits such as CAS (Career Advancement Scheme), while the students too should be awarded academic credits, in addition to the provision of the regular certificate for work done under NSS.

(vii) *Paucity of time*

The Southfield College, Darjeeling shared that the paucity of time prevented the college from engaging in community service in a big way. With the shadow of fear of strikes and political turmoil, the college does not get enough time to spend on development work for the community.

(b) Limitations faced from the side of the community

(i) *Farmers were non-receptive*

The farmers in North Bengal greatly depended on subsidies that were being given to them. Therefore they adhered to the technological details made available to them, only as long as they enjoyed such subsidiary benefits. The moment they were withdrawn, they too renounced the modern practices, and went back to what suited them previously. In such cases, all agricultural extension activities stood handicapped.

(ii) *Non-participation of the community*

As shared by some authorities, in the absence of participation and forth coming nature of the community people, the students/NSS teacher in charges were also faced with problems while carrying out the various community development works.

(iii) *Illiteracy and unemployment majorly restricted engagement from their side*

The poor and unemployed character of the community people in North Bengal, not only limited the scope of their participation, but also limited their interests in any such engagement with the college authorities. Therefore, as shared by some of the principals, the primary need of the hour was educating them and making them aware of things that would benefit them in the long run.

(iv) *Desire of economic returns*

Another problem faced by the college authorities were that the community wanted economic returns for whatever programs were organized for them. This also follows from the brunt of poverty they face, wherein, they eyed monetary returns/favours from any program that were initiated for them, keeping aside other benefits.

PRIA's Closing Comments:

- Although the concept of engaging with the community is at present, not being completely realized in North Bengal, there is certainly scope for doing things in a much better and organized way.
- Notwithstanding the limitations as faced from the side of the community, the colleges can make a start by first providing the basic education and information to the people, and then resorting to fulfilling their programs/interventions.
- Although there is no dearth of social/community development work being carried out, if it incorporates a better participation from the community's side, the efforts can be much worthwhile, and the corresponding results, better. This two way dialogue, once started much look to incorporate all aspects of engagement, starting from local's knowledge systematization & integration, to initiation of joint research projects, and finally to having them disseminate their knowledge to students, as seasoned local practitioners.
- However, this is undoubtedly going to be a difficult process, but a start needs to be made in a small way, and at all levels.