The Imperative of CBPR

DECODE Internal Reflections,

1st- 5th December 2025

PRIA, New Delhi, India

This section of the DECODE Internal Reflections was moderated by Dr Rajesh Tandon who invited the participants to break into smaller groups that were linguistically divided. These groups engaged in focused discussions on the similarities and differences across the DECODE case studies, the central role of CBPR in building and strengthening alternative knowledge systems, and effective ways of disseminating the project's learnings to diverse audiences.

Dr. Tandon reiterated that a fundamental challenge arises in how communities authenticate and scale their knowledge. What criteria determine that a collective body of practice or wisdom constitutes legitimate 'knowledge'? Furthermore, the 'scale of knowledge' must also be interrogated beyond its economic value, especially when that value is measured solely through the lens of capitalistic expansion.

He further argued that the current unregulated, expansionist model of development often leads to detrimental social and environmental consequences. Thus, an alternative vision of development is required- one that prioritizes contextual understanding. In practise, this means that every case study and development project must be evaluated based on its unique local characteristics, social fabric, and ecological constraints, rather than a universal, profit-driven template.

Central to this alternative vision, he noted, is a robust critique of profit maximization as the sole or primary goal of economic activity as unwavering focus on profit often externalises costs onto society and the environment, leading to exploitation and inequality.

It was in this context that collectivization, which emphasizes shared ownership, cooperation, and community

Group Discussion on the importance of CBPR and the similarities and differences across DECODE Case Studies

welfare, was discussed- as a powerful counterpoint to market economies. However, the inherent 'temptation and need' to engage with the wider market remains ever-present, driven by necessities like resource access, trade, and technological integration. Therefore, a key area

of policy and governance must focus on designing effective mechanisms to prevent the inevitable tendency toward overexploitation that arises when market forces are left unchecked. This might involve robust regulation, community oversight structures, ethical investment mandates, and economic models that inherently factor in social and environmental costs.

Building on these reflections, Dr. Tandon observed that the central question guiding the discussion should be: How does CBPR effectively influence and shape public policy on climate change? He emphasized that addressing this question requires a deliberate approach of dissecting the problem- breaking a large, complex inquiry into smaller, more manageable components.

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Accordingly, the working groups focused on unpacking the overarching question into smaller, researchable segments.

This strategy enabled more targeted interventions and clearer pathways through which CBPR can inform and influence policy.

The focus areas identified by the participants included the following:

- Identifying specific local vulnerabilities to climate impacts

- Documenting community-led adaptation strategies

- Analyzing barriers to meaningful community engagement in policy formulation

- Understanding the mechanisms through which CBPR findings can be translated into actionable policy-relevant research

While engaging with the aforementioned themes, participants further synthesised several key ideas. Foremost among these was the foundational importance of localized evidence**.** There was unanimous agreement that policymakers are often plagued with abstract or generalised data that can obscure lived realities. In contrast, CBPR generates rich, contextualised, and actionable local evidence that captures the immediate, human-scale impacts of climate change, thereby enabling policies that are more responsive, relevant, and effective.

Central to this discussion was a critical re-examination of the traditional "researcher–researchee" relationship. Participants emphasized that meaningful community involvement throughout the research process is not only empowering for communities but also essential for building trust and legitimacy between researchers and community members. It was strongly asserted that research must move away from being conducted *on* communities and instead be carried out *by* and *with* them. Such a shift is imperative for ensuring that policies

informed by research are grounded in lived experience and are more likely to be successfully implemented and sustained.

This changes the narrative of research substantially, as it shifts the focus from communities as purely victims, to communities as vital partners and knowledge producers in climate adaptation.

Group Discussion about the best way to communicate DECODE findings

Furthermore, the importance of research ownership was also explored. It became evident that the most compelling and influential research projects were those where the community members themselves were the primary investigators and documentarians. The value of research work changes when the affected population designs the study, collects the data, and interprets the findings. This ensures relevance and accuracy from the ground up. Moreover, the act of documentation by community members legitimizes their experience as robust evidence, providing narrative that quantitative data alone often lacks.

There was also a strong consensus on the need to both preserve local knowledge and actively share it beyond the community. Participants stressed that Indigenous and local knowledge systems must be placed at the forefront of discussions on nature, sustainability, and development, rather than treated as supplementary or peripheral. Centering these knowledge forms was seen as essential to advancing more just, relevant, and sustainable pathways for the future.

Building upon this, a foundational theme that emerged strongly from the discussions was the concept of territory, understood not merely as a physical or geographical boundary, but as a space deeply intertwined with identity, culture, and livelihood. Participants emphasised that how a community perceives and relates to its own territory is central to understanding its knowledge systems, practices, and ways of life. This perspective underscored the importance of grounding research and knowledge production in community-defined understandings of place.

Throughout the discussions, particular emphasis was placed on the critical role of youth in the preservation of nature and traditional practices. Participants underscored the broader need to translate and systematize knowledge in ways that ensure its meaningful transmission to future generations. Thus, bringing youth and elders together was seen as a vital mechanism for intergenerational knowledge transfer, reinforcing continuity and resilience. Importantly,

the discussions affirmed unequivocally that the primary knowledge holders are the communities themselves.

A significant portion of the discussion critically examined the role of Western academia in the processes of "validating" research and knowledge. The very notion of validation was subjected to scrutiny, with participants questioning the power relations embedded within dominant academic systems. Key questions emerged: How does Western academia come to legitimise certain forms of knowledge while marginalising others? What epistemic biases are reproduced through prevailing hierarchies of credibility, and who benefits from these structures of validation?

The discussion further explored how community relationships to land, time, and money fundamentally challenge conventional validation frameworks. Participants noted that Indigenous and community knowledge systems are often relational, cyclical, spiritual, and embedded in lived practice- dimensions that traditional academic validation paradigms are neither designed nor equipped to fully grasp. As a result, such paradigms frequently render these knowledges as "insufficient," "anecdotal," or "unscientific," not because they lack rigor, but because the criteria used to validate them are fundamentally misaligned. This mismatch enables the commodification and extraction of Indigenous knowledge for external academic, policy, or market gain, while stripping it of context, meaning, and ownership.

The responsibility of Western academics was therefore foregrounded, particularly in relation to how validation practices contribute to the commercialization of knowledge and the reproduction of epistemic injustice. Participants called for a shift toward genuine reciprocity, ethical accountability, and co-governance of knowledge processes. This critique extended to institutional governance itself, urging academic systems to expand and redefine the meaning of "validity" so that it can accommodate multiple epistemologies, lived experiences, and worldviews- rather than continuing to privilege narrowly defined Western scientific norms that are, in many contexts, no longer adequate.

Furthermore, the participants also critically examined the role of external actors, noting that governments and other stakeholders often engage with community knowledge only at selective moments- typically to validate or invalidate community efforts- within rigid institutional constraints of time, scale, and place. Such episodic interventions were seen as deeply limiting and often misaligned with the lived realities of communities. To counter this, the discussions underlined the imperative for the development of strategic partnerships that prevent community knowledge from being summarily dismissed, and for fostering systems of mutual respect between communities and governmental and academic stakeholders, in which knowledge can evolve collaboratively and over time.

Dr. Tandon further weighed in on an examination of knowledge systems, community empowerment, and the interplay with Western academic structures and governance following the discussions. His ideas coalesced around several interconnected themes, emphasizing the need for a paradigm shift in how knowledge is valued, shared, and preserved.

Consequently, the discussions strongly favoured a shift toward holistic and transdisciplinary knowledge systems. This approach recognizes knowledge not as fragmented or siloed, but as deeply interconnected. Communion with nature was articulated as a fundamental prerequisite for truly understanding knowledge, particularly in Indigenous and community-based contexts. The idea of the mutuality of knowledge was central to these reflections- asserting that all knowledge systems must be respected and valued on equal terms. Participants sought common ground across epistemologies, identifying relationships- between people, land, and ecosystems- as the universal foundation of knowledge transmission and community well-being.

In summation, the discussions affirmed the legitimacy of diverse research methods, including visual, oral, and audio forms. Fundamentally, it was concluded that the socio-ecologies of knowledge systems must be understood as inherently contextual; they cannot be meaningfully interpreted outside the specific environments, relationships, and lived experiences from which they emerge.