

Community Based Participatory Research and Sustainable Development Goals



A Reflection Paper for the Canadian Commission for UNESCO
By Dr. Budd Hall and Dr. Rajesh Tandon
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About the Authors

Dr. Budd Hall

Dr. Budd Hall is the Co-Chair of the UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education and Professor of Community Development in the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria. Budd was the founding Director of the University of Victoria Office of Community-based Research and is a Senior Fellow in the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria. Former Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria, Budd has worked in Nigeria, Tanzania, Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Germany, Thailand, Yemen, Uganda, England, and the United States. He has done both theoretical and practical work for almost 40 years in various aspects of community-based adult education and learning and participatory research. Budd is a member of the International Adult Education Hall of Fame and was selected for the 2005 Canadian Bureau of International Education Innovation in International Education Award. He was granted an Honourary Doctorate by St. Francis Xavier University in 2011. His most recent books include *Learning and Education for a Better World: The Role of Social Movements* by Sense Publishing, *Knowledge, Democracy and Action: Community University Research Partnerships in Global Perspectives* by Manchester University Press, *World Report on Higher Education 5* by GUNi and Palgrave-Macmillan, *Teaching Learning Community Based Research* by the University of Toronto Press, and *Strengthening Community University Research Partnerships: Global Perspectives* by UVic and PRIA press. Budd is the husband of Dr. Darlene Clover, father of Dana and Shawn Hall, Grandfather of Quincy Pugh Hall, Leo Pugh Hall, and Ashton Edward Hall. He is also a poet.

Dr. Rajesh Tandon

Rajesh Tandon is an internationally acclaimed leader and practitioner of participatory research and development. He founded Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), a voluntary organization providing support to grassroots initiatives in South Asia and has been its Chief Functionary since 1982. He has recently been appointed Co-Chair of the prestigious UNESCO Chair on Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education. He has championed the cause of building organizations and capacities of the marginalized through their knowledge, learning and empowerment. He has contributed to the emergence of several local, national and international groups and initiatives to promote authentic and participatory development societies. He has authored more than 100 articles, a dozen books and numerous training manuals on democratic governance and management to NGOs, participatory research and people-centred development. For his distinguished work on gender issues, the Government of India honoured him with the prestigious Award in Social Justice in March, 2007. The University of Victoria, Canada, awarded Dr. Tandon the degree of Doctor of Laws (Honoris Causa) in June 2008. He is the first Indian to be inducted to the International Adult and Continuing Education (IACE) Hall of Fame (class of 2010).

**With inputs from Wafa Singh & Walter Lepore, who have worked closely with the UNESCO Chair in CBR*

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) universally adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as a beacon for socially, economically and ecologically sustainable development. Agenda 2030 establishes 17 Goals which are universally applicable for all countries of the worldⁱ. Within these globally agreed upon and universally applicable SDGs, many countries, including regions such as provinces and territories, have developed specific national and locally relevant benchmarks and indicators for achieving these commitments. Sustainable development in practice includes many efforts at defining the concept, establishing goals, creating indicators, and asserting values. Additionally, it also includes developing social movements, organizing institutions, crafting sustainability science and technology, and negotiating the grand compromise among those who are principally concerned with nature and environment, those who value economic development, and those who are dedicated to improving the human conditionⁱⁱ.

While these SDGs are broadly acceptable to all countries and peoples, and have been developed through an extensive consultative process to enable wider ownership; achievement of this ambitious agenda by 2030 faces several *capacity deficits*ⁱⁱⁱ:

- Ensuring sustained political support from leadership of governments at the national and sub-national levels. Political leadership in most democratically governed jurisdictions tends to take decisions in the short-term (3-4 years at most), with a view to win the next elections. This severely limits continuity of policies and programmes over the SDG timeframe.
- The investment of adequate resources in each country and region. In contemporary economic environment, it is uncertain if all countries, and the global community, would have adequate financing deployed towards all the SDGs.
- Institutional and human capacities affect the implementation of practical strategies for achievement of the SDGs in many countries. Most public institutions are designed to function in silos, pursuing narrow objectives. In contrast, most SDGs can only be achieved through simultaneous actions on several issues. For example, achievement of SDG 5— on gender equality—will not be possible without achievement of SDG 3 & 4. SDG 3 focuses on health, including women’s health, while SDG4 focuses on education, especially targeting girl’s education. Both these goals can only be achieved in many societies when patriarchal attitudes change to prevent violence against girls/women and to enable mobility^{iv}.
- Knowledge deficit could be argued as the most critical deficit confronting the achievement of the SDGs. Existing knowledge systems are founded on the principle of instrumental rationality. Modern science practiced over the past three centuries is posited on the premise that scientific knowledge can be used to control and mine nature and its huge resources^v. Alternative perspectives of knowledge are required to fill this knowledge deficit in ways that learning and collaboration are organically linked to generating locally relevant solutions for the SDGs^{vi}.

Higher education and its myriad of institutions, with an enormous amount of resources at their disposal (human, physical, digital) can also address the learning and collaboration deficit in the achievement of the SDGs. Sustainable development cannot be achieved anywhere in the world ‘*without the capacity-building contribution of an innovative higher education system*’^{vii}. This is the key message that came through the international consultation convened by Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) in 2013-15:

“The higher education sector’s efforts to prepare to respond to the post-2015 agenda require new thinking in terms of scale and modality. As national institutions addressing global challenges, universities need to be able to incorporate diverse demands and diverse stakeholders into their own agendas. Contributors also highlighted the need for change and adaptation within the sector^{viii}”.

Education is one of the key aspects of the SDGs, with SDG4 calling for the world to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ by 2030, while target 4.7 specifically calls for the ‘development of skills and knowledge for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles’. Further, Higher education forms an important part of other goals related to poverty (SDG1); health and well-being (SDG3); gender equality (SDG5) governance (SDG16); decent work and economic growth (SDG8); responsible consumption and production (SDG12); climate change (SDG13); and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16)^{ix}. Engaging with the SDGs can also benefit universities by helping them to demonstrate impact, increase demand for SDG-related education, build new partnerships, access new funding streams, and ‘define a university that is socially responsible, locally rooted and globally engaged’. Such a contribution from higher education institutions (HEI) is possible if higher education is viewed within the larger societal context, and not merely as educating for jobs and livelihoods.

Therefore, higher education will play a prominent role across most SDG priorities, which include an end to poverty and inequality, and scientific progress in areas such as climate change and economic growth, a major priority of developing countries. Peter J Wells, Chief of the Higher Education Division at UNESCO noted at the annual meeting of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation's International Quality Group or CIQG in Washington in early 2017 that ‘UNESCO already has begun to tap university expertise and cooperation as ‘incubators of solutions’ through its University Twinning and Networking initiative’^x.

Socially Responsible Higher Education

Much recent debates about higher education have focused upon quality, financing and student mobility. Larger question about the social relevance of higher education has only just begun to be raised afresh. A recently published report by the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI)^{xi} clearly argues:

“Social responsibility emerges as the need to reconsider the social relevance of universities in light of the encounter of the local with the global, regarding priorities, demands, impacts and knowledge needs in the context of globalization. The competitiveness of nations – as the only way to achieve progress – should be balanced with inclusive social development and sustainability of the entire global population.”

This question can only be addressed adequately if it is agreed that the overarching purpose of higher education is shared ‘public good’. HEIs and universities, therefore, are public institutions, contributing to public goods, irrespective of the nature of their financing. Treating higher education as a private good, to be

financed by the individual students benefitting from it, as economists have argued, is to severely curtail the real and potential contributions of higher education^{xii}. It has to be recognised that the purpose of higher education has to be defined in the contemporary societal context differently, independent of the means of resourcing a particular university or HEI. At the International Conference on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) hosted by GUNi in September 2017, Frederico Mayor, Former Director-General of UNESCO remarked, *'Universities have abandoned their previous commitment to educating future citizens. In this world where globalisation of indifference is growing, universities must prepare their students as citizens who practice and value freedom, equality and solidarity'*^{xiii}.

In many societies, regions and communities, HEIs are some of the most resourced institutions. They have enormous physical infrastructure (classrooms, labs, residences, office space, recreational facilities, etc.) which are far superior to anything available to local communities, or even local government agencies. And much of this infrastructure is underutilized, when viewed in a 24 hour per day lens. HEIs also have enormous digital capacity in hardware, software and human-ware. It has financial resources, endowments and revenue streams. Intellectual resources and capacities of HEIs are unparalleled in such locations and places. Most importantly, HEIs have youthful energy, commitment and hope, as is reflected in its students. Further, in promoting engagement with society, universities have expanded their service mission, in which students are encouraged to contribute to development of communities. However, core functions of teaching and research have remained cut off from such engagement. Engaged teaching and research can make universities contribute more directly to locally relevant and contextually appropriate SDGs.

A classic example of this is the Responsible Research & Innovation (RRI) initiative of the European Union. RRI is a key action of the *"Science with and for Society (SWAFS)"* programme of Horizon 2020 (H2020). The European Commission defines RRI as *'an approach that anticipates and assesses potential implications and societal expectations with regard to research and innovation, with the aim to foster the design of inclusive and sustainable research and innovation'*^{xiv}. It implies that societal actors (researchers, citizens, policy makers, business, third sector organisations, etc.) work together during the whole research and innovation process in order to better align both the process and its outcomes with the values, needs and expectations of society. Further, the 2014 Rome Declaration on RRI outlines where the focus of future initiatives should be placed. In particular, the declaration calls European institutions, member states, regional authorities and research and innovation performing organisations to focus on^{xv}:

- Building capacity for RRI through a variety of tools such as securing available resources and supporting global initiatives;
- Reviewing and adapting metrics by providing guidelines for the implementation and assessment of RRI;
- Implementing institutional changes that foster RRI in research and innovation performing organizations by reviewing their own procedures and practices to identify opportunities and obstacles, engaging civil society, developing and implementing strategies and guidelines, adapting curricula and providing training, and including RRI criteria in the evaluation and assessment of research staff.

Societally relevant higher education is applicable to everything that a university does---teaching, research, service. It is applicable to all disciplines and faculties, not just in extra-mural or extension departments. Also, HEIs – historically recognized as public institutions- have been the sites for knowledge production. In the context of the SDGs, when we realize the need for *'alternative perspectives of knowledge'* to fill the

knowledge deficit for achieving these; the ‘research’ function of HEIs gain much pertinence. However, the achievement of the SDGs requires an innovative approach towards the higher education missions, and the latter needs to be moulded in a way which helps achieve SDGs in the long run, particularly the research mission. In this light, being ‘engaged’ in a mutually beneficial way is important.

Increasing Expectations Towards Research

Innovation is regarded as being essential to the transformations of human activities that will allow the SDGs to be achieved^{xvi}. As we can no longer afford a business as usual approach, there is a widespread call for innovation from all sectors. Of particular importance are the increasing expectations from the field of research. In the context of the SDGs, research needs to contribute much more than what it has been doing traditionally. In addition to giving an understanding of phenomena, research is now perceived as being able to provide ‘*new solutions, through appreciating and incorporating alternative perspectives of knowledge*’. It has to be recognized that faced with the complexity of challenges and in the face of real-time SDG targets, civil society, politicians, donors and private actors have real and increasing expectations. To address these expectations, there is a need to strengthen the societal contribution of research, in various areas of socio-economic development. It is time to now bridge the gap between research and society, in ways in which the former can contribute towards the development outcomes of the latter. Lessons for this are available from the Science Shops model in Europe, which pursues research, based on research questions which emerge from the community. The RRI model too demonstrates how research can be used responsibly and innovatively to further development objectives.

Achievement of the SDGs will also require finding new solutions to various socio-economic challenges, and new knowledge will be essential towards this end. Universities can undertake partnerships with local communities and stakeholders to co-create such knowledge which is appropriate to local contexts and decision-makers. Co-creation of such knowledge is a pre-requisite to finding sustainable solutions. This in essence, lays the foundation of ‘engaged research’, which requires moving beyond traditional notions of top down research (dictated by academics), to a more collaborative/participative form of research, where research questions are framed in accordance with local community needs, and the research is designed in collaboration with the local stakeholders who are impacted by the particular problem (the research intends to address)^{xvii}. Practices in research which are engaged and responsible not only contribute to enhanced public accountability of HEIs, but also play a valuable role in addressing societal challenges and the development needs of a society/nation^{xviii}. High-quality, engaged university research in developmentally strategic areas can inform good policy, and can unearth solutions to key problems across all SDG focus areas^{xix}. Calls for this form of engaged research has played a critical role in establishing the validity and appropriateness of ‘Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR)’, as a tool, which has the potential to provide sustainable solutions to critical societal challenges, and thus contribute towards achieving the SDGs.

Community Based Participatory Research

Growing interest among academics and practitioners in finding new ways to study and address complex societal challenges has intersected in recent years with increasing community demands for research that is community based, rather than merely community-placed. The new focus on translational research to improve intervention outcomes within diverse cultures and contexts has also shone a spotlight on the potential of action-oriented and community-based approaches to research (CBPR)^{xx}. CBPR is an approach or orientation to conducting research, not a method. It provides a structure and mechanism for collaborative

and rigorous research, using well-established or emerging methods, with a community focus. CBPR challenges researchers to listen to, learn from, solicit and respect the contributions of, and share power, information, and credit for accomplishments with the groups that they are trying learn about and help^{xxi}. The W K Kellogg Foundation's Community Health Scholars Program (2001) define CBPR as

"a collaborative process that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change".

Together, with many related action research and participatory research traditions, CBPR turns upside down the more traditional applied research paradigm, in which the outside researcher largely determines the questions asked, the tools employed, interventions developed and the kind of results and outcomes documented and valued^{xxii}. In essence, CBPR is based on the following principles^{xxiii}:

- It is participatory
- It is cooperative, engaging community members and researchers in a joint process in which both contribute equally
- It is a co-learning process
- It involves system development and local community capacity building
- It is an empowering process through which participants can increase control over their lives
- It achieves a balance between research and action

CBPR: Engaging in Socially Responsible Research for Achieving SDGs

In order to achieve the SDGs, a societal transformation is necessary and all actors must be mobilized. Through CBPR, there is a need to encourage strengthening of the collaborations between researchers, communities and civil society promoting the societal contribution of research. CBPR can effectively contribute towards the *'development of new knowledge and insights on various societal challenges linked to SDGs, and play an important role in providing sustainable solutions for the same'*. Being community-based and involving the values of participation and research for co-learning and co-generation of knowledge, CBPR can be used for tackling local issues (such as water, sanitation, resource management, gender equality, etc.), and in the process, result in greater ownership of local problems as a step towards sustainable *'development'*, as compared to sustainable *'growth'*. Three practical ways can be readily adopted under CBPR, for making the latter contribute to an informed understanding on SDGs:

1. Frame locally usable research

Topics and questions for research abound; the key to effective local framing is *'stepping outside the boundary'* of HEIs to interact with local actors so that they become stake-holders in such research.

Students and faculty at HEIs may frame their research questions which may produce locally useful and actionable knowledge. Structured and regular interactions with local actors---district administration, local government, civil society, local business---may generate research questions that have relevance for achievement of SDGs locally.

For example, SDG9 is targeting resilient infrastructure and sustainable industrialization. Engineering faculty and students at HEI may study specific infrastructure gaps from a resilience lens in a city or district. Departments of energy, minerals and mining may find interesting research topics on green technologies for local industry. Students and faculty of economics and business may define their research to support small/medium businesses in that location to become resilient. Monitoring air quality and water treatment systems could be a very actionable research for teams of students and faculty.

2. Build knowledge in partnership

If a mutually beneficial partnership with local communities and institutions—business, government, civil society--- is built, research partnership may become supportive of new knowledge and its use.

HEIs may need to create boundary-spanning structures for realising cross-cutting partnerships^{xxiv}. However, when dealing with such partnerships, equally important is to be mindful of the existential power differentials among partners, their respective capacities and capabilities to contribute to the partnership, and its impacts on such collective efforts. A well thought out and calculated partnership, in turn increases the impact it has on the process as a whole.

For example, SDG11 focuses on improving the quality of urban life. HEIs can partner with municipalities to contribute new knowledge for improved urbanization and governance of urban services. Most cities lack capacity to generate and maintain habitation level data, especially where rapid migration is occurring. Several faculties –statistics, urban studies, planning, economics– can support such research. Studies of land use in urban areas and in-situ improvements in housing infrastructure may be carried out by faculty of architecture, geography, and engineering. Operations research faculty and students may undertake mobility analysis to provide insights into transportation design in cities. Once such partnerships are built, ongoing nurturance of relationships by HEIs may enable a wide variety of research opportunities for students and faculty in support of SDGs.

3. Learn new competencies

In order to be able to undertake such partnerships and locally relevant research, students and researchers at HEIs need to develop certain additional competencies.

Current training in research methodology in most universities does not prepare students to build partnerships. Not much attention is paid to attributes like critical thinking, conscientization and ethical orientation. Furthermore, training in research methodology does not teach how to integrate disciplinary interests with local research priorities. Students and their teachers do not know how to share their research findings with local stakeholders, other than in the form of a research papers written for a journal and/or a research conference^{xxv}.

It is possible to learn these competencies. Several innovative efforts have been going on in training of next generation of researchers in ‘community-based participatory research methodologies’^{xxvi}. Additionally, research training can include understanding of multiple forms and sources of knowledge in society, and skills required to learn from them, understanding on ethics and values in research, power dynamics in partnerships, development of self as a researcher, etc. Competencies in knowledge mobilisation can also be learnt, as several HEI systems have begun to emphasise^{xxvii}. Therefore, HEIs interested in contributing to the achievement of the SDGs through their research expertise may need to invest in learning new research competencies for both students and faculty. The box below outlines such an initiative, Knowledge for Change (K4C), launched by the UNESCO Co-Chairs in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, for training the next generation researchers in community based research.

Moving forward: Leveraging CBPR for Achieving the SDGs

Having understood the impacts and implication of CBPR in the process of sustainable development, it is now important to make efforts at forging an ecosystem where CBPR can be effectively and efficiently used for achieving the targets mentioned under the SDGs. The following are some suggested actions to take this direction:

- University/HEI leadership must encourage institution-wide appreciation of, and learning about, CBPR and its role in achieving the SDGs. Platforms of Vice-Chancellors and university presidents must put this urgently on their agenda.
- Higher Education Institutions need to create institutional structures to facilitate community-campus research partnerships.
- Higher Education Institutions need to address the culture of career advancement to assure that credit for community engaged activities are recognized for merit and promotional purposes.
- To enable a targeted approach under CBPR, universities should commit its resources for supporting learning, generating knowledge and empowering change that have wide ramifications on "keystone problems" (whose solution would have wide impacts), such as girls and women's education or the availability of clean water.
- National and provincial/regional ministries responsible for higher education policy and Higher Education Councils in all countries must encourage, mandate and resource such shifts towards linking research with the SDGs through CBPR, as part of the research function of universities.
- Associations of teachers, researchers and universities can play a mobilising role to generate demand for using CBPR as a tool for engaging with SDGs.
- Likewise, even students can become champions for furthering the cause of adopting CBPR approach for achieving the SDGs. This feeds into their social responsibility, and gives them an opportunity to practice active citizenship, and emerge as responsible citizens, by engaging in issues of societal concern, with an objective to provide sustainable solutions.
- International networks and associations of universities and their leaders can likewise promote the idea of using CBPR for achieving the SDGs. The International Association of Universities (IAU) is one such example. It has continuously reiterated the importance of higher education and research for sustainable development. A report^{xxviii} published by IAU in 2016 titled, ‘*Higher Education paving the way for sustainable development*’, bears testimony to this fact.
- UNESCO has a special role to play in this regard, in particular through its UNESCO Chairs Network. Its

regional and national associations and offices should also be proactively convening dialogues with universities for promoting the application of CBPR for achieving the SDGs.

- Granting agencies at the local, national and international levels need to provide funding opportunities to build CBPR capacities within the civil society sector.
- Finally, civil society needs to play a pro-active role in endorsing CBPR, an area of work close to it. Civil society practitioners need to bring in their expertise on CBPR into partnerships with universities, who can then leverage it to finding solutions to pressing local challenges linked to the SDGs.

Much has already been done, and much more still needs to be done if we want to see CBPR evolve into an integral approach under the research function of academia, and its use for achieving the SDGs. It calls for the coming together of all like-minded stakeholders to encourage, promote and champion the cause of CBPR, as a potent tool for sustainable development.

End Notes

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