

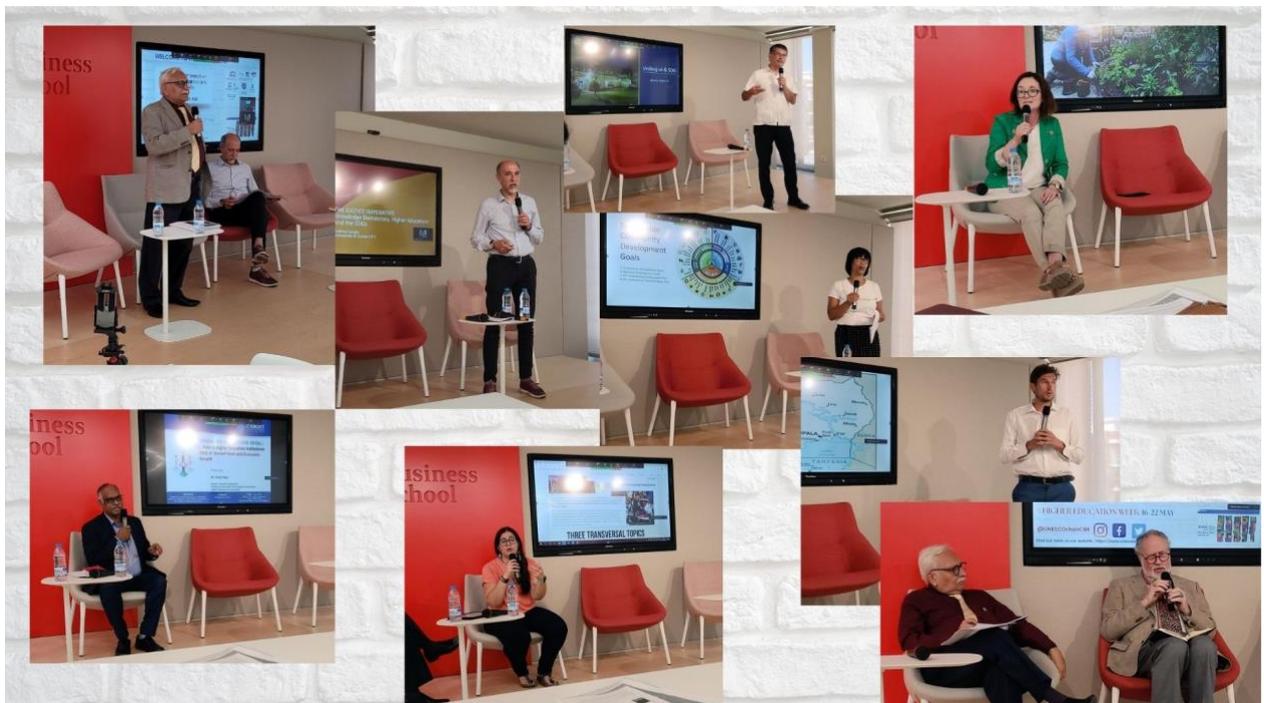
The Justice Imperative: Knowledge Democracy, Higher Education and the SDGs

May 16, 2022
9:30-11:30 am CEST, Barcelona

Hosted by

UNESCO Chair for Community-based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education

(During the Higher Education Week 2022 held in Barcelona)



Background

With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, UN Member States pledged to ensure “no one will be left behind” and to “endeavour to reach the furthest behind first”. To stimulate creative and imaginative thinking and ideas about how Higher Education (HE) can serve authentically sustainable development we must embrace truly inclusive thinking and practice. Realistically pursuing the “leave no one behind” motto implies genuinely listening to and acting side-by-side with those who are left behind.

The K4C – Knowledge for Change Consortium, led by the UNESCO Chair for Community-based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education was set up in 2018. Up to today some 23 local training hubs have been created in 14 countries of the Global South and the Excluded North to design and conduct educational programs to develop research capacities for the co-creation of knowledge through collective action by practitioners, community-based researchers, community groups and academics.

Since its launch, the K4C Consortium has focused on locally prioritised and contextually relevant SDGs in the location of each Hub. The Hubs are enacting knowledge co-generation and sharing by directly involving those who are typically left behind. The Chair brought the voices of some of them directly to participants at WHEC22. The session was conceived to stimulate a collective reflection about how HE teaching and research can creatively and effectively address SDGs through epistemic justice and inclusive practice, in diverse local contexts. The Policy Brief that our Chair and partners prepared on Higher Education and SDGs is attached [here](#).

Duration of the event: 2 Hours

Location of event: Hybrid mode, physical event took place in Barcelona

Moderators

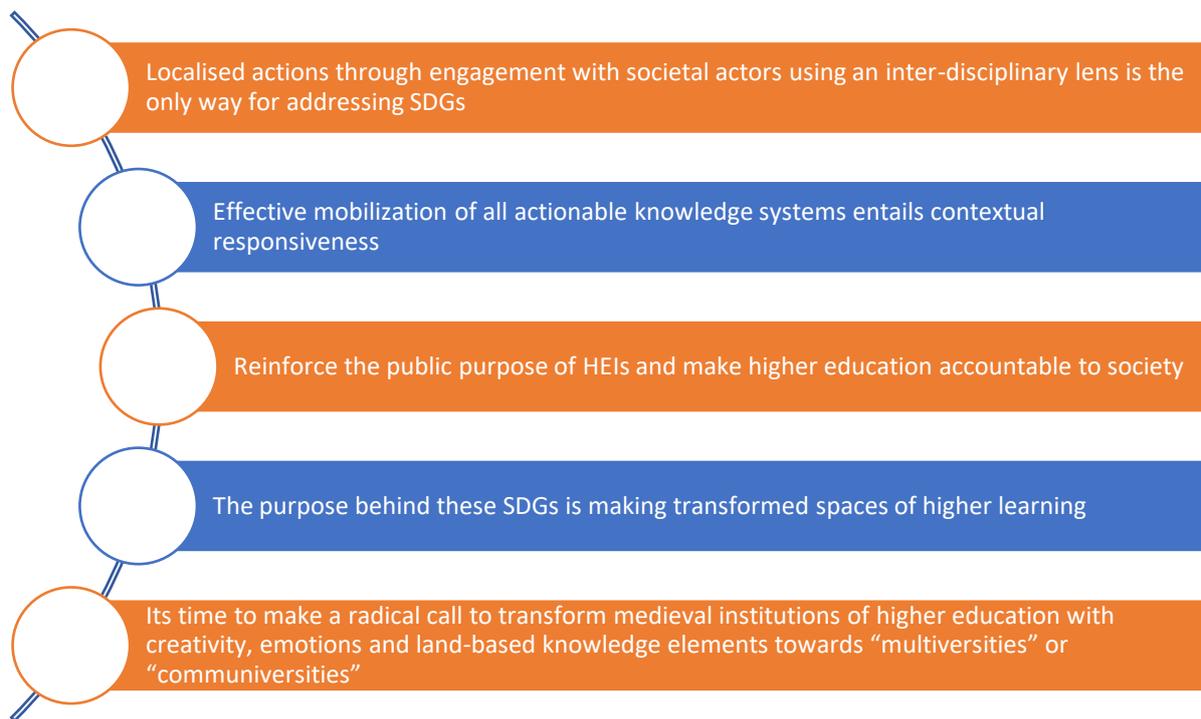
- **Rajesh Tandon**, Founder-President, Participatory Research in Asia and UNESCO Co-Chair, Community-based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education
- **Andrea Vargiu**, Professor of Sociology and of Methodology e techniques of social research at the University of Sassari, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Speakers

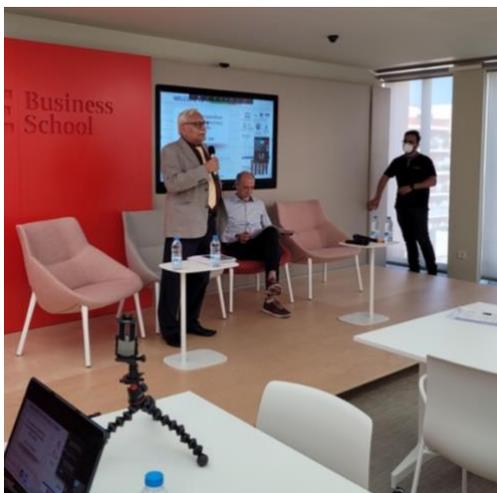
- **María José Minakata Quiroga (Majo)**, Coordinator of the University Social Service Program at Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City
- **Victor Paul**, Professor, Sociology and Social Work, School of Social Sciences, CHRIST University

- **René Oosthuizen**, Lecturer at Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) Division
- **Deirdre Ní Loingsigh**, Director of Aonad na Gaeilge, the Irish Language Centre, at the University of Limerick
- **Alfonso Reyes**, President, Universidad de Ibagué, Colombia
- **David Monk**, Lecturer, Gulu University, Uganda

Key messages



Opening the discussion



Rajesh Tandon opened the discussion by referring to Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of *Sarvodaya*, which means 'development of all'. Gandhi's concept of Sarvodaya is through *Antyodaya*, implying the welfare of all through the weakest of the society.

Relating to the concept of *Antyodaya*, with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, UN Member States pledged to ensure "no one will be left behind" and to "endeavour to reach the furthest behind first". Pursuing the "leave no one behind" motto implies genuinely listening to and acting side-by-side with those who are left behind.

We saw structural, systemic & perpetual exclusions heighten during pandemic including health inequalities and gender-based violence and discrimination amongst many others. The Independent Expert Group [Report](#) on Higher Education and the SDGs highlighted some of these key aspects, and the role that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can and should play in addressing these challenges.

In doing so, localised actions through engagement with societal actors through an inter-disciplinary lens is the only way that the 2030 Agenda can be implemented effectively. The vocabulary used in the Expert Group Report, including "the imperative of becoming open institutions, fostering epistemic dialogue and integrating diverse ways of knowing" is at the heart of what we call "knowledge democracy".

In 2009, the 2nd UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education was held, which led to the birth of this UNESCO Chair. Thereafter Dr. Hall and Dr. Tandon contributed as Guest Editors to the GUNi World [Report](#) 5 titled "Knowledge, Engagement and Higher Education: Contributing to Social Change", which reiterated the idea that there are multiple ways in which knowledge is practiced, and several sources of knowledge production beyond HEIs. This inspired the UNESCO Co-Chairs (Dr. Hall and Dr. Tandon) to establish the Knowledge for Change Global Consortium which was launched in 2017, for training next generation students and practitioners in Community based participatory research methodology for using locally prioritised SDGs for producing actionable knowledge.

Finally we have to reinforce the public purpose of HEIs and make higher education accountable to the society around which they function. In doing so they must focus on locally defined indicators of sustainability; frame locally actionable research questions; adapt methods that engage variety of stake-holders and nurture trusting relationships with partners.



Andrea Vargiu began his presentation by speaking about the work of the K4C Hubs being connected informally to some or the other SDGs. He contextualised the UN 2030 Agenda within the pandemic, and elucidated how despite Target 16.4 of SDG 16 stating that “by 2030, significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organized crime”, military expenditure has been on the rise. Speaking of concentration of wealth, 76% of the global wealth is concentrated in the hands of top 10% of the wealth groups. Given that SDGs are contested spaces that reflect these delicate situations, we must address them critically.

We must link the global 2030 Agenda with our local contexts and anchor SDGs to local civilians, NGOs, and locally based HEIs. The key aspects of our Policy Brief on repositioning higher education are in line with the aforesaid Expert Group Report. The key reorientations are:

- HE for the public good
“HE sector should be kept as independent as possible, with a mandate for research, education, and community engagement all geared towards the public good.” (UNESCO Independent Expert Group Report on Higher Education and Sustainability Report, p. 68)
- Socially inclusive HE
“A contemporary socially responsible system of higher education makes special efforts to embrace, value and facilitate diversity of perspectives, communities of experiences, as reflected in the student body, teaching and research staff, and societal engagement so promoted.” (Hall and Tandon 2021)
- Diversity of epistemologies and knowledge systems
“The dominant knowledge practices and institutions have been structured and implemented in such a way as to simultaneously privilege certain epistemic situated values [...] while being unjust or dismissive with regard to other, more relational and complex modes of knowledge.” (Policy Brief “Open Science Beyond Open Access: For and with communities, A step towards the decolonization of knowledge”, p. 10)
- Contextual responsiveness and place-based learning

Effective mobilization of all actionable knowledge systems entails contextual responsiveness. In HEIs, what is taught, what is researched and what is served derive purpose from being responsive to the context.

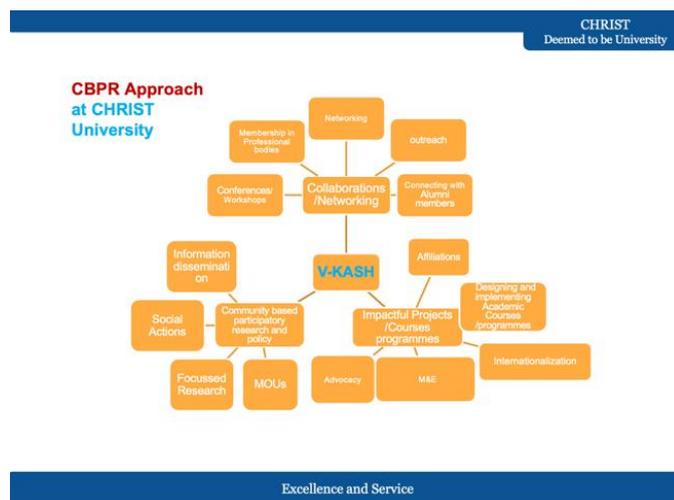
- Foster responsibility and autonomy through social accountability
“Social accountability is defined as an approach toward building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations that participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability.” (Malena et alii 2004)
- Ensure HE policy and strategy alignment across all system levels
“[Policy] implementation will require multiple initiatives and actions, which will have to be taken by multiple bodies in a synchronized and systematic manner.” (UNESCO Independent Expert Group Report on Higher Education and Sustainability Report, p.62)
- Abandon competition rhetoric and rankings
Global university rankings systematically establish and preserve the dominance of a tiny selection of elitist universities in the white majority global North. The articulation of ranking devices from global to local scale amplifies and validates inequalities throughout each level of the higher education system.
- Foster diversity through equitable partnership with societal actors and stakeholders’ engagement
Societal contexts within a country vary greatly; so do social actors. HEIs need to find ways to engage with such diversity of social actors in a mutually respectful manner, learning and teaching together. It is this alignment that will make HEIs contribute to achievements of SDGs in a sustainable manner.

María José began by giving a context of the conflicts and struggles that people in Mexico faced, especially during the pandemic. For instance gender-based violence increased in Mexico and to address this a march took place locally, which highlighted that 10 women are killed everyday for being women. Similarly looking at climate change 80% of the territory is in moderate to severe drought. Looking at indigenous communities, they have been disproportionately affected and their rights denied to them over the years.

At Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México, there are 36 undergraduate programs across three transversal themes: sustainability, interculturality and gender. The social action trajectory is from context to experience, then reflection, action and finally evaluation. The university has had a long tradition of community-based participatory research and is already connected with many community organisations, since it is heavily engaged in social action. The focus is on SDGs through a thematic approach; for instance with respect to social economy and sustainability, the economics department at the university has been working in collaboration with a co-op group including indigenous communities for making products such as honey or handmade artifacts. Apart from this, we have a strong focus on human rights,

social justice and peace. Finally we have incorporated social service as a compulsory course for students at the university.

Victor Paul began by highlighting that the CHRIST university hub has been focussing on SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth with local communities. To improve the economic status of the women and empower them, Centre for Social Action (CSA) CHRIST University, Bangalore-India, identified communities and implemented a livelihood projects. The Centre has been working with 6 villages of Hosakote, Bangalore Rural District. These areas are where women’s education is neglected and their participation in community life is minimal. Over the years, as the women belonging to these villages became aware of alternate micro-financing models, they began to form Self-Help Groups. In 2020, after using CBPR with these communities during the Mentor Training Program of the K4C Consortium, the researchers studied these women’s participation in local governance institutions and systems. The findings revealed that before SHG membership, they felt they had a monotonous life, they had to mute their voice on important decisions about their own lives, they lacked economic freedom. However after SHG membership, they found new hope, they felt their voices were heard and valued, and they had increased participation in local leadership roles.



Four key components of CBPR are linkages with community, NGOs and governance agencies, empowerment, social engagement, and participation. A strategic process for using CBPR approach involves Discovery (most needy areas and what needs to be done); Dream (Imagine what could be innovative); Design (what should be: building the ideal); Create/Deliver (What will be sustaining).



René Oosthuizen gave the context of Rhodes University where there is strong leadership support for community engagement. There is a decentralised structure for community engagement, where in each department has a community engagement representative. A four year accredited course is in the pipeline for community engagement. Speaking of the “soul of the university”, she eloquently stated “ask what are you good at, but also what are you good for?” It is important for HEIs to think about their responsibility towards their local communities and how is their work of any use to the local communities. Covid-19 was only a pandemic on top of another pandemic, since existing pandemic of inequalities was already there.

At Rhodes University, there is a service learning short course for teachers. The community engagement department at the university acts as a bridge between the university and society. Community engagement not only helps students learn and engage with different communities, but hugely builds their confidence. Similarly, volunteerism is highly emphasised at the university, which helps students gain new perspectives to the theoretical knowledge that they are exposed to. Recently, due to such intense engagement with local communities through several initiatives, Rhodes University won the Global Citizenship Award.

Deirdre Ní Loingsigh contextualised the Limerick Hub initiatives, which relate to SDG 3: Good Health. These are aligned with Ireland’s national policies on health. Learning, Languages and Culture, STEMM, and Sport and Health are the main themes around which the Hub programs are designed.

Particular emphasis on teaching and learning is anchored in The Community Wellness, Empowerment, Leadership and Life skills ([CWELL](#)) Program. The CWELL diploma is a unique academic programme that has been co-designed with local Limerick communities to address their community-identified needs. The CWELL diploma programme represents a long-term university commitment to supporting both individuals and communities in under-represented parts of Limerick.

There are important lessons to draw from K4C learnings, and most important of them is that because participants of these programs have a say in their design and execution, they are impacting the programs everyday and their voices are getting bolder. There are other initiatives as well, with young school going children such as “K4C for Kids”, that allows students to discover how to become researchers using CBPR principles.

Alfonso Reyes discussed how SDGs have set a global agenda, which can be managed at the local level mostly through behavioural changes. Every university has the duty to engage with SDGs. Universidad de Ibagué’s work is based on Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s work that elucidate three kinds of capabilities:

- Basic capacities
Intrinsic abilities determined by our biological makeup.
- Internal capacities (Education system)
They are intentionally developed through learning processes.
- Structural conditions to develop agency
It refers to adjustments of the social, economic, cultural and organizational context.

There are two pilot studies done by Universidad de Ibagué that are worth mentioning in this context. The first one is related to engaging local communities for building student housing near the university. The community developed a renovation model for housing, with the help of architectural department at the university. For financing the renovation, a loan was taken from a micro-credit institution. Once the housing was executed, the students who lived there would pay rental fees which would go towards the payment of the loan. 186 families and 200 students were reached out to through this project.

The second study relates to building a network of family dining facilities. The students from the university again worked with local communities to establish the dining facilities. The university gave tickets for accessing the facilities. In order to fund this project, rooms were taken at the university which were rented out to local companies and the funds from the room rentals paid by these companies would go towards funding the family dining facilities. 500 students have benefited from this project.

Using these examples, the model to develop local capabilities involves setting a context by a regional university where beneficiaries have expectations of a role to play in relation to the university’s work; the university in turn builds capacities of other agents who can use these capabilities to help the local beneficiaries.



David Monk spoke of the Gulu K4C Hub linked to Gulu University that uses the approach of transdisciplinarity with an emphasis on arts based enquiry. Gulu university works at the grassroots with local communities towards community transformation in the context of SDG 6: Clean water and sanitation, SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth, SDG 10: Reduced inequalities and SDG 11: Sustainable cities. One initiative at Gulu University related to youth entrepreneurial solutions to waste management. In this program, a participatory action research program was set up with 8 youth from vulnerable communities, who used photovoice to document waste management and other issues relevant to them.

Thereafter the youth conducted a transect walk to understand what kind of business opportunities existed for youth groups. So the questions revolved around “how can we clean this up”, but also “how can we make this into an employment opportunity?” After designing their pitches on several environmental issues, they pitched their ideas to funders at an entrepreneurial solutions event organised by the university. All youth groups received some sort of funding or mentorship by industry leaders by the end of the event.

Closing Remarks by Budd Hall



Budd Hall concluded the session with some remarks about SDGs’ role in Higher Education. SDGs are relatively meaningless; what is the purpose behind these SDGs is important, referring to transformed spaces of higher learning. HEIs need to reimagine their values and

their capacities to grapple with global inequalities. Its time to make a radical call to transform medieval institutions of higher education with the help of imagination and creativity, emotions and land-based knowledge elements of the transformed “multiversity” or “communiversity”.

The medieval systems of higher education have created an unequal world. We have the right to a new utopia after so many years of being denied the right to new forms of learning, new categories of teachers, of being told that quality can be measured through rankings. We have been denied the right to reimagine a global ecosystem. It is time to release our imagination, and access our right to a new utopia.

Then we have to think about whose knowledge counts; about the power of multiple epistemologies, the culture within indigenous languages and systems. In addition, we have not spoken enough on the aspect of deprivation of people’s livelihoods, which was heightened during the pandemic globally. As we discuss engagement with society, we must keep in mind that it is not a technique, but a permanent way of being. Finally the idea of the “soul” of the university relates to a deeper understanding of ourselves, and to realise that we are all living beings and that all life is connected. The “soul” is the attachment to all living beings. We must find a way to feel ourselves by finding and refining our original languages, looking at multiple epistemologies for driving the way we live. This is a moment when these questions are being asked, when these ways of understanding ourselves are being reimaged. This is a radical and revolutionary time and we are all part of this movement together.
