

## **Demanding Innovation**

*articulating policies for demand-led research capacity building*

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### **Keynote Address**

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## **DEMANDING INNOVATIONS**

### **Research as a Process for Social Activism**

The question I have been asked to raise is:

How to make research more responsive to users?

Since the identity of users has not been disclosed, I would like to talk about how research can reach out to social activist and become a tool for social action.

I would like to pose this question in another way: How can the process of seeking knowledge involve the people whose lives we study, and how can the process of analyses become an instrument for social activism? Because it is through informed activism that we can hope to bring about social change.

We need to understand therefore:

How research agendas are developed ?

How research can be used?

How institutions can respond to, initiate and identify with the demand for socially committed research.

#### **I. Research: Developing Agendas**

If we look a little backwards, we can trace the changes that have taken place in research modalities.

In the sixties and seventies, demand was created by centralized planning for macro-level research. In post independence South Asia, the emphasis was on drafting five year plans for growth and prosperity. Governments produced data bases, national surveys, census, which were used by planning commissions or

intelligence agencies. Economics dominated the research agendas. But their theoretical development models did not always reflect social and political realities. The neglect of micro or local studies, or ignorance of cultural and social constraints or concerns left gaps in our understanding.

Research assumptions were often misplaced. For example, the promised prosperity of the green revolution had been grounded in many economic theses. It was only later that we found out that the green revolution was in itself the cause of growing disparities leading to social and political tensions. The expectations of economic research had been belied by social assessments.

Up to the sixties development research was dominated by economic indicators. In fact, research focused on a single track, with cost and benefit analyses being used as a major standard. Social science research that drew upon disciplines other than economics were marginalized in the earlier years of planning. This was mainly because planning itself was seen as an exclusive exercise to be undertaken by experts - economists or bureaucrats who knew the mathematics of building nations and economies. These experts generalized optimum solutions and did not take into account the reality of people's survival strategies, of the internal dynamics of social relations, in the community or the family.

Another missing element in the earlier research agendas was gender. Women's lives did not feature, as subjects of research. As a result women fell through the planning process. By the seventies, however, particularly after Mexico and Nairobi, and in preparation of it, women scholars began to examine the causes of systemic inequalities in gender relations, and related it to global changes, to modes of production or other structural factors. Some of their earlier research demonstrated that state policies and laws not only had ignored women's lives but had reinforced these inequalities. Their explorations into history, social and cultural studies have opened up new frontiers of knowledge. And the process of research led to a greater interaction between women's research and women's activism.

## **II. Research: Developing Institutional Capacity**

Government and universities or other academic institutions provided the main engine for research in the early days. This has in the last two decades been supplemented or substituted by the growth of research centres. Most of them have been trained in the US or UK, a few in the former USSR. Bureaucrats have taken time off to acquire higher degrees in the West and have come back to direct their own think tanks or consultancy firms. Because of their links with policy makers, they are in a position to push their research proposals. Some in house research capacity has also been developed by larger non-government organisations such as BRAC or Grameen Research Trust.

Much of the demand has been generated by government machineries as well as by donors. Management of research has almost become a business; and institutions have found it necessary to compete for tenders to undertake research commissioned by sponsors. This has eliminated the possibility of dialogue and discussion between the different actors – the users, participants, doers and the subjects of research. It has also deadened scholarly initiatives and innovations. Because of the nature of this demand, there has also been a politicization of research, with researchers responding to the directions of the sponsor rather than the needs of the community.

Commissioned research does not always add to public knowledge, since it is meant for the particular use of a sponsor. A consequence of this is duplication of reports, as each donor commissions a report on the immediate problem of concern. For instance, trafficking and migration have been the subjects of separate reports for different donors, without necessarily adding to the information base. Quick fixit responses from short term research has tended to look at symptoms rather than root causes. Reports or research findings are rarely disseminated amongst those who are most affected by these practices.

We need to question whether such indiscriminate commissioning of reports is incremental to our knowledge, and whether the analyses leads to a better understanding amongst those who are directly affected or those who are likely to use the research findings.

### **III. Changing the mode of research**

If research is to be a tool for social change, then we have to locate it in the reality of people's lives. A deeper social and political analyses, requires a more holistic approach, and must incorporate some intellectual and technical directions for alternatives. As knowledge builds self awareness, it enables us, as activists and researchers to analyse our situation and recognize our potential for making alternative choices.

In this respect the importance of a multi-disciplinary approach is that it provides a cutting edge. And it contributes to a more holistic understanding. Thus we have to be able and willing to recognize that there are diverse perspectives and different ways of approaching problems, from the perspective of the disenfranchised, the poor, women, workers, minorities and so on. There are also different perspectives reflecting concerns with the environment. Thus research on an agricultural topic cannot afford to overlook the relevance of the subject to women, to minorities or to children, since all groups are affected differently. Not can it ignore the consequences on the environment.

Research, to be of meaning, must also engage dynamically with those who become subjects of research, if it is to become a tool for social activism that will bring about change.

I would like to mention the implications of two recent research experiences:

In the last few years there have been frequent incidents of fire in garment export factories in Bangladesh. This has led to many casualties amongst women workers. Yet, neither the government nor the industry had shown much concern. We undertook to examine the observance of legal regulations. Our purpose was to press for industrial responsibility. We decided that we should involve workers to survey conditions at their work place. We explained to them how to conduct a survey in their own factories, and in all they surveyed 283 factories. As they carried out their questionnaire they were able to explain to other workers and to create greater awareness. Information collected through this process was also used to file a case against factories which had defaulted in applying the laws. The High Court gave a very positive judgment, which we hope to disseminate to workers and trade unions. The industry has yet to change its practice, but the workers have been able to strengthen their struggle with new information.

A second experience identified the need for a multi-sectoral approach in research to resist negative government policy or actions. In 1999, the government undertook a massive eviction of slums in Dhaka. A public interest litigation was filed which led to a favourable judgment from the Supreme Court. It ordered the government to desist from eviction unless alternative relocation was planned. While the judgment was a positive one, there was no back up by research into alternative schemes for rehabilitation and relocation. Even though this was a declared government policy, no steps had been taken to work out practical plans. In the absence of this kind of research, the government once again violated the judgment and evicted more slums in 2000 and 2001. The need for immediate, short term and long term research into economic, social, political and demographic implications of alternative housing schemes for slum dwellers could have been met by bringing together experts and residents, as well as drawing upon the experience of other countries.

More substantial research into the political economy, needs to contextualize the social, economic, cultural aspects. It needs to integrate perspectives that understand the implications of gender relations, of minority interests and concern.

Research findings that meet the demand for increasing knowledge or information, act as an important tool for change, by building self awareness or empowerment. This could strengthen coherent social activism, campaigns and advocacy. One follows the other.

#### **IV. Ethics of Research**

How then do we make research responsive and responsible?

Irrespective of whether it is in the area of science, technology or social science, research must have an ethical bases. It needs to have an ethical direction to addressing the concerns of the poor and the disenfranchised. It must target the social, political and economic inequalities, created by tradition, by national or regional politics and globalisation.

*Consultation:* Therefore, research dynamics should be consultative, enlarging the space for intellectual enquiry between:

- scholars, activists, researched communities and policy makers.
- Researchers or research in the region and amongst the diaspora or researchers outside the region,
- In collaboration with foreign institutes.

*Developing agendas:* The agendas should evolve in consultation with different actors, particularly players who will move the process of research to the use of knowledge. The involvement of the users is important at every stage, as is the community that is being researched.

The process of research should be to empower through awareness and participation, and this can be facilitated by building research capacity not only of the research organisations or researchers, but others who are engaged in the enquiry at different levels. Building capacity does not only mean technical capacity but an understanding of social issues as well as research methodologies.

*Presentation of research is important process:* A dynamic interaction between users and researchers has to contribute to a deeper understanding amongst both. The process of dissemination and presentation of research is of importance so that its findings are open and available to a larger section of people. The mode of presentation through oral or audio visual methods can be a challenge. Language translation is another problem in making research findings available to the larger population, who may or may not have acquired the formal education to participate in specialized discussions, but who may be able to share their own knowledge.

We use diverse sources, such as library archives, official documents, investigative reports, new technologies, field work for research. This may also be the source of inequalities in the South since these are not as easily available.

Knowledge and analyses is as much a political activity as a political campaign or a street rally. It must therefore use an open process, sharing with different actors in setting agendas, in the process of research and the use of research findings or analyses. Informed social activism is the precursor of policy change.