

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS A WAY FORWARD FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL SOCIETIES

Ms Wafa Singh
&
Dr. Rajesh Tandon

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UNESCO Chair on Community-based Research and
Social Responsibility in Higher Education
(www.unescochair-cbrsr.org facebook: @UNESCOchairCBR)

Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)
42, Tughlakabad Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 062
Phone: 29960931-33, 29956908, Fax: (91-11) 29955183
Email: wafa.singh@pria.org; rajesh.tandon@pria.org, Website: www.pria.org

Abstract

With over 70% of the Indian population residing in villages, it can be said that it is the ‘villages, where the heart of India resides’. Despite such a large rural population, the unsustainable socio-economic conditions plaguing our rural societies, even after 70 years of independence, is nothing short of a distress situation. This calls for immediate actions for improving rural conditions, and for this to happen, higher education, historically recognized as ‘public institutions’, needs to step in. With the sea of knowledge and resources at its disposal, it can ably pursue the agenda of sustainable development of rural societies. One of the potent tools for making this happen is ‘*community engagement*’. The core purpose of such engagement is to serve mutual interests of universities and communities alike. In practice, this can be executed in several ways such as engaged scholarship practices like service-learning, community based participatory research etc., with the initiatives focused on specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the rural context. This paper makes the case for such engagement for ensuring the creation of sustainable and self-reliant rural societies.

Keywords: rural, higher education, community engagement, Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

In the words of our late father of the nation, Shri Mahatma Gandhi; ‘*real India lives in its villages*’. However, even after 70 years of independence, this gets verified by the socio-economic data of 2011, which said that almost 73% of Indian households were in rural areas; of which nearly 26% of rural India is poor, compared to a meagre 13.7% in urban areas (Mukunthan, 2015). While this has been the reality for some decades now, the result well reflects on the poor socio-economic data of rural India, when we compare the socio-economic development from rural and urban perspectives exclusively. Some stark realities worth mentioning in this context are:

- *The contribution of agriculture and allied services to the GDP of the nation has reduced considerably from 51.88% in 1950 to 13.94% in 2013. The World Bank data on value added by agriculture (% of GDP) data seems to reiterate this fact by indicating the drop from 42.56% in 1960 to a meagre 16.95% in 2014 (Mukunthan, 2015).*

- *Accordingly to rural development statistics 2015-16, nearly 50% of Indian farmers are indebted (NIRDPR, 2016).*
- *Nearly 82% of the rural households lack basic amenities (Dholakia, 2016).*
- *Nearly 86% of all the medical visits in India are made by rural people with majority still travelling more than 100 km to avail health care facilities (Singh & Badaya, 2014)*
- *Nearly 85 per cent of rural female workers are either illiterate or educated up to primary level only (NIRDPR, 2016).*

The data above is enough evidence to understand the plight of contemporary rural India. Not only is this reality undesirable; it is also unsustainable. It is time we get our act together to improve the living conditions of the majority of our country's population, not only for benefitting the rural people, but also for the holistic development of our nation.

The United Nations (UN) envisioned the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs,) in 2015, with respect to social, economic and ecological goals to be met by 2030. As a result, global and national debates focused their attention on '*important societal institutions*' that can carry out and execute this agenda. It is here that our universities and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) step in as critical actors. The role of HEIs has been historically recognized as a public good, with unique social responsibilities in producing knowledge for societal development and sustainability (Hok Ka Ma & Tandon, 2014, p. 196). The recently published 'Higher Education in the 6' world report, titled '*Towards a Socially Responsible University: Balancing the Global' (2017), with the Local'* (a Global University for Network in Innovation (GUNi) publication), 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.....The competitiveness of nations should be balanced with inclusive social development and sustainability of the entire global population (Grau et. al., 2017, p. 41)".

Further, the higher education missions of teaching, research & service, and the first two in particular; can effectively contribute to furthering rural development agendas. As part of

socially responsible educative practice, teaching and research functions at universities can be modified to be more ‘engaged, participative, dialogical’ and in tune with realities in practical life. In terms of teaching, new, critical reflexive learning systems can be incorporated. This entails interaction of the students with the curriculum, and the world outside the university. This can involve analysis, critiques of rural development policies, relating to rural economy, social sector protection etc, such as the *National Rural Health Mission (NRHM)*, *National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)*, etc. This will help student’s link theoretical concepts of developmental planning with the practical realities in rural settings.

Research can be used to study locally relevant issues. Research topics can be framed in consultation with local stakeholders around key issues, such as that under *Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)*. As part of their dissertation, students can explore the role of women literacy & empowerment in relation to achievement of SBM goals; the synergies/schism between governmental approach towards SBM and people’s personal attitudes towards sanitation, etc. As part of service; service-learning can be a very effective tool. An example of this can be, students studying micro-finance in universities, can help rural communities gain financial security by sharing tips on micro-financing and supporting in making feasible investments in small schemes and local business enterprises.

Therefore, the recent societal challenges posing barriers for development agenda, particularly in rural India, have challenged HEIs to co-create knowledge through development of partnerships with external stakeholders for addressing socio-economic challenges. This has necessitated the re-emphasis on the principles of ‘*mutually beneficial and respectful community engagement*’ as priority area in the higher education framework.

Conceptual framework

Community engagement implies relationships between the universities and communities, which is mutually beneficial for both parties and adopts a bidirectional flow of information between the two. It deviates from the normal outreach/extension functions, to an approach which is more participative and committed to the creation and sharing of knowledge (UNESCO Chair, 2015a). In this view, universities move from the agenda from of simply increasing the general education of the population and the output of scientific research, towards a model in which university education and research should work towards specific economic and social objectives, by means of co-creating and exchanging knowledge and by

sharing resources, skills and processes with the public good in mind (Escrigas et. al., 2014, p. xxxv). It can also be integrated into the higher education missions, for achieving the desired objectives. The six forms of community engagement are: *linking learning with community service, linking research with community knowledge, knowledge sharing with the community, devising new curriculum and courses, including practitioners as teachers, and social innovation by students* (Tandon, 2014, p. 9). In essence, a successful community engagement is built on certain key ideas, such as understanding the relevance of knowledge production, who produces it? And how is it disseminated; secondly, acknowledgement of different and popular knowledge forms through establishing collaborations between universities and external stakeholders such as civil society organizations, etc., and thirdly, respecting the traditional knowledge systems so that the divide between the 'elite' universities and 'common' communities can be bridged. Therefore, in order to practice critical community engagement, an understanding of historical perspectives and an empathetic view of current social realities of village communities and marginalized groups is essential (Shaw & Crowther, 2017, p. 2).

Some of the global literature also reflects on certain very important perspectives on community engagement. A study conducted by Barbara Holland & Judith Ramaley from the University of Western Sydney and Winona State University respectively, reflected on the various approaches to engagement. They listed down a routine approach, a strategic approach and a transformative approach. While the routine approach to change & engagement is undertaken when the issue is simple and solutions are well-known; a strategic approach is useful when the issue at hand needs more planning and coordination; and finally, a transformative approach is undertaken when the issue is complex and requires new ways of working together. Further, it is also possible to use a combination of these approaches may encourage robust, new and innovative ways in which universities and communities can come together for effecting successful community engagement.

Application of community engagement, particularly in rural settings is a potential opportunity to address critical socio-economic challenges in rural areas. The benefits and the resources that the process brings along, can suitably address areas of social, economic and ecological rural development, if applied strategically. Its ability to integrate itself in the higher education missions of teaching, research and service, further expands the possibilities of using community engagement as a tool for rural development. By way of being participative, the

process also provides an opportunity for the stakeholders (rural communities, students, faculty, civil society organizations etc.) to become one unit, in efforts to promote meaningful changes in the lives of rural communities. Not only is community engagement a mutually beneficial agenda, it can also be a useful tool in the achievement of SDGs. It can link rural development agendas (with respect to rural economy, infrastructure, basic amenities, women empowerment, rural entrepreneurship etc.) to SDG targets along with aligning higher education with SDG planning and implementation.

Statement of objectives

In light of the aforementioned literature review, this review paper attempts to achieve some of the following objectives:

- Develop an understanding of community engagement in rural settings in India.
- Review the different kinds of engagement that can be initiated with rural communities, which is mutually beneficial to both the stakeholders (universities & communities).
- Reflect on the emerging lessons and the ways forward for the future.

Methodology

The UNESCO Chair has been well aware of the importance of application of community engagement in rural settings. Through its various projects and initiatives, it has tried to collate all such experiences or practices into its records, so that the same can be put together and developed as a review paper. This paper is precisely the result of this effort, and the experiences documented are taken up from basically three sources: (a) a study we undertook in India, titled ‘Strengthening Community Engagement in Higher Education’, sponsored by the British Council, India; (b) review of the academic publications in this context, and (c) experiences shared by our colleagues regarding the social outreach activities they are engaging in, at their respective universities (this is a part of the development of a FICCI occasional paper on ‘Social Outreach in Higher Education’, and will be presented at the upcoming FICCI Higher Education Summit in November 2017).

Several efforts in this direction are underway across various HEIs in the country. The section below provides a crisp summary of some of such efforts:

Successful examples of rural community engagement

Upgrading rural infrastructure & providing sustainable livelihoods

Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Guwahati

The Rural Technology Action Group-North East (RUTAG-NE), which is a student facilitated social action group under the Department of Mechanical Engineering at IIT-Guwahati, aims to enhance and upgrade rural systems for boosting rural economy. It provides Research & Development (R&D) solutions to technical problems in rural sectors. Considering the time consuming and tedious task of the traditional process of Eri Silk production, in which the local communities engage in; by the communities; RUTAG-NE developed a machine which could complete a day's work in an hour. Further, by engaging artisans and communities, it has successfully set up a pilot project on production of plain Muga silk fabric with power looms at the Export Promotion Industrial Park in Amingaon, Guwahati. Also, in order to ease the problem of high transportation cost for the farmers in Goalpara region (which hosts the Darrangiri banana market, the largest banana market in Asia), RUTAG-NE has developed a robust, user-friendly modified bicycle for carting more banana bunches. This in turn, resulted in savings of Rs. 150 per day (UNESCO Chair, 2015b).

Boosting agricultural productivity & rural economy

North Bengal University (NBU), Siliguri

The Department of Biotechnology at NBU, through its various agri-based initiatives, engages with the local rural community for knowledge exchange and dissemination of best practices in the agricultural sector. The Centre of Floriculture and Agri-Business Management (COFAM) has been the key in furthering such practices. It engages with the local communities for strengthening the latter's capacities in floriculture and agriculture. It seeks to use the indigenous local knowledge and expertise of the farmer communities in the plantation of various types of crop varieties. COFAM also supports the community by helping them find a market for their products and earn a sustainable living. This has resulted not only in the expansion of knowledge about local agricultural practices on part of COFAM; the communities too, have experienced a sea change by way of secure and sustainable livelihoods. New technologies combined with academic expertise and traditional knowledge, resulted in increased agricultural returns (UNESCO Chair, 2015b).

Promoting rural entrepreneurship among women

University of Petroleum & Energy Studies (UPES), Dehradun

Through the 'rural women technology park project' UPES aimed to bring economic independence among rural women and awareness about the environmental sustainability. Three technology components of this project included: (i) Recycling of waste paper; (ii) Identification & & cultivation of Medicinal & Aromatic Plant (MAP) Species, and (iii) Information & Communication Technology (ICT) assisted art & craft design. All three initiatives were aimed at enhancing livelihoods, promoting self-sustainability among rural women and their empowerment, through establishment of self help groups. While initially the groups were assisted in the form of capacity building training, collation of resources, raw materials etc, and the end objective was to make them self-reliant so that they could ultimately take up the process on their own.

Bringing about rural innovations & promoting women empowerment

National Institute of Engineering, Mysore: Centre for Appropriating Rural Technology

This initiative, which was carried out in collaboration with the National Institute of Engineering, Mysore, was instrumental in utilizing the technical knowledge of professional engineers to improve the efficiency of rural practices and return them to the community (Pant & Thekkudan, p. 102). Using the tools of Community Based Research (CBR), this collaboration helped in the process of developing low cost water lifting mechanisms, low cost electricity generation and production of indigenous hollow bricks from old tyres. Inspired by the same, rural women also developed improve 'chulhas' which utilizes community waste. This is being patented in the name of the women (Pant & Thekkudan, p. 102).

Emerging lessons

Several lessons emerge from the aforementioned account of applying community engagement in rural settings. Some of them are:

- *Sustainable development calls for a collaborative effort*

The SDGs touch base on a full circle of social, economic and ecological development. This form of a development cannot be a prerogative of a single institution. It requires a collaborative effort by all societal institutions, which should come together and work towards shared objectives and common goals. With the kind of complex realities we are faced with,

especially in the context of our rural societies, a joint effort for dealing with all the challenges becomes essential. Therefore, all key societal institutions and stakeholders like governments, civil society, higher education, panchayats, gram sabhas, district administration and the communities themselves, need to join each other for achieving the shared objectives of sustainable development.

- *Contribution of HEIs to rural development*

With their historical recognition as public institutions serving public good, HEIs now have responsibilities to fulfil towards the very society they are part of; in particular the deprived and marginalized rural communities. This social responsibility function of HEIs calls on them to work towards ensuring rural development, through ways and means by which the academic fraternity can use their knowledge for the benefit of rural communities. They need to enter into partnerships of mutual trust and respect with rural local stakeholders and engage with them for executing rural development agendas. This also requires re-orienting the higher education missions of teaching, research and service to become more ‘engaged, in-sync with, and relevant to the current social realities’.

- *Community engagement as a tool for achieving sustainable outcomes in rural societies*

In the context of higher education, one of the most potent tools for ensuring rural development is community engagement. By differing from ‘forced outreach/extension’, it creates opportunities for innovation, in a way that rural engagement can be carried out where its most needed, rather than age-old prescriptions of sanitation drives, blood donation camps etc. With an eye on SDG targets, community engagement in rural areas can be strategically planned around key issues like economic development, environmental conservation, women empowerment, water & sanitation, rural education, rural infrastructure etc. Each of these can be taken up in the form of service-learning assignments, community based research initiatives, new courses at universities, socially innovative projects etc.

- *Rural community engagement: A win-win situation!*

Community engagement in rural settings has the potential to yield benefits like never before. When the academia commits its knowledge and other resources for benefitting the rural communities, it results in academic knowledge traversing physical barriers to mingle with popular knowledge in real-life to benefit all those who are involved. This also helps university perform its social responsibility functions, while making the process of learning

relevant and meaningful to the students. The rural communities on the other hand engages in this process not as a beneficiary, but as active participants and emerges as a self-reliant group, in-charge and responsible for their livelihoods and overall development. The stakeholder institutions like government, civil society and local self governing bodies also find a purpose for their existence as all of them share the common vision of ensuring people's development.

Ways forward

Rural community engagement undoubtedly, opens up several possibilities & opportunities for enhancing developmental processes. However, it does need support from several quarters. The current complexities and challenges call on HEIs as public institutions to change their mode of functioning into being more 'inclusive, engaged and participative'. A useful way to do it is to reorient its missions. Teaching needs to be based on problem-oriented methods, while research needs to be socially relevant and undertaken in partnerships with local societal actors. The service mission should help students develop an understanding of 'active citizenship' and empathy, and how they can contribute towards making the society a better place. Engaged scholarship practices like service-learning, community based participatory research, community university research partnerships, should be made an integral part of the academic curriculum. These practices can be used to further development processes of rural communities by using various academic disciplines to target socio-economic development challenges in rural areas. Universities therefore have an important responsibility to reach out to different kinds and sources of knowledge so that practice-based and theory based knowledge can be integrated to facilitate the learning process of students. Among the other sources of knowledge, important ones are the local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). With the kind of practice-based experience they bring along, they can actually help universities 'engage' with communities in the real sense of the word; much different from the 'extension' activities they normally engage in.

Government as an actor in this context is often viewed from the lens of policy developments in higher education, which are favourable towards or tend to facilitate the practice of community engagement in higher education. The impact that a favourable higher education policy has on a particular initiative/intervention is uncontested. The policy sector plays a crucial role in providing that critical push, which makes an academic practice 'accepted, acknowledged and respected' at HEIs. Community engagement in Indian academia, still a

novel practice, needs policy backing in order to be implemented in academic discourses with conviction. An effort in this direction was taken by the 12th Five Year Plan, which argued: '*In the face of growing isolation of HEIs from the society, there is a need for renewed effort for HEIs for genuinely engaging with the community, conduct socially relevant research and education and foster social responsibility amongst students as part of their core mission*'. As a result, the University Grants Commission (UGC) launched the Scheme on '*Establishing Centres for Fostering Social Responsibility & Community Engagement (CFSRCE)*'. This scheme advocated for 'interdisciplinary engagements under village adoption programs and promoting practical learning & problem solving abilities among students through direct engagement with the community'. Among other national policy instruments, which have taken a favorable stance in this aspect is the *Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA)*, launched by the Government of India in late 2014. UBA is inspired by the vision of 'transforming rural development processes through leveraging resources of higher education'.

Holistic rural development is an umbrella perspective, which involves myriad approaches and aspects of lived realities of the rural people. It involves huge challenges, and the biggest of them is ensuring the sustainability of developmental efforts. The reason for the failure of many governmental developmental programs has been its 'top-down' nature, which views rural communities as beneficiaries. It is here that rural community engagement offers an effective alternative. With its participatory and engaged stance, the end objective is not to force unnecessary agendas on rural communities in the name of development; but work with them towards shared objectives, after understanding their needs and the challenges they face. A major thrust in the process is to make the communities self-reliant, so that they can themselves be the torch-bearers of their own development!

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