



# **Knowledge Democracy: Reclaiming Voices for All**

**by**

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Today, humanity is facing several dilemmas. Humanity has achieved unparalleled prosperity in the past fifty years; yet, one-fifth of all people live in poverty at less than \$1.25 a day. In the midst of plenty, there is entrenched poverty and scarcity; 40% of all children in the world are malnourished; more people have mobiles than access to toilets. Rapid economic growth has also been associated with growing environmental degradation. In some sense, the rapid economic growth is also resulting in greater disparities within countries and regions. The benefits of economic growth are not evenly available to all citizens. Growing disparities are also causing conflicts and tensions within countries. Just look at the Occupy Movements in Europe and North America.

The global terrain in this first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century is full of promises, as well as expectations. Economic and technical resources are now available to address problems of poverty, disease and malnutrition. Yet, MDGs are nowhere near being achieved<sup>i</sup>. There has been a widespread acceptance of democracy as a form of governance across the globe; yet, most citizens in these countries feel disaffected by the system of decision-making. Citizens across the world now demand a voice in decision-making, even when their elected representatives are engaged in governance.

In the midst of these dilemmas, the future of global economy is a race towards knowledge economies; as World Bank announced, advanced economies are now knowledge economies. There is growing commercialisation of knowledge, as a commodity, with intellectual property regimes to harvest financial benefits. Knowledge production is becoming highly competitive with business, media, think

tanks and civil society challenging the traditional hegemony of universities as the only recognised sites of knowledge production.

We have also entered a world where there are major power asymmetries in the knowledge enterprise. Global soft power is being increasingly exercised through google, yahoo, facebook and twitter; BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera shape views and minds of citizens around the world. Educational inequities in access have resulted in large numbers of primary literates and very few professionally prepared. Hegemony of English language is destroying mother-tongues around the world; with languages, world-views also disappear. A homogenised, singular world is being constructed, unable to celebrate and live with diversity.

It is in this context that there is an urgent need to rebuild knowledge societies. Knowledge societies are premised on acceptance of knowledge as a common public good; the knowledge commons are heritage of all humanity, to be its source of nourishment. In so doing, the diversity of knowledge forms and sources and modes have to be acknowledged and respected. Western medicine undermined local healing and herbal health practices a century ago; today, the Silicon Valley in California has maximum numbers of holistic healing and health centres anywhere in the world.

All human beings are capable of critical thinking; all attempt to make sense of their experiences; all carry memory chips of stored knowledge passed on from generations before; some may choose to ignore it; others may choose to deny it; and, some others may choose to rely on wikipedia today. But, tools for knowledge production are universally available to all humanity. What has caused discrimination

is perpetuation of instrumental rationality as the only epistemology. Humans get to know through thinking; yes, cognition and rational thinking is important. But, humans also know from acting and feeling; yet, acting upon the world (learning by doing) and feeling about the world (phenomenology of everyday life) have not been accepted as legitimate modes of knowing. This needs to change if knowledge democracy has to be established.

Universities can play an important role in promoting knowledge democracy. The core missions of a university are research, teaching and service. Research is about production of new knowledge; teaching is about dissemination of new knowledge to students (learners). Teachers teach, but only students learn; thus, the primary function of universities is to enable students to learn new knowledge. In most universities, service is viewed separately from teaching; service is voluntary, and is meant to 'help the poor communities', somehow.

It is high time that universities integrate their three missions---that service is integrated into research and teaching. Production of new knowledge and its learning by students is possible through engagements with communities; such an engagement may also produce socially relevant knowledge. It may open up the possibility that the learning by students is based on deeper understanding of their contexts and a respect for knowledge in communities.

It is this process of co-construction of knowledge that may enhance the contributions of universities as sites for practice of knowledge democracy. Universities thus can provide spaces and intellectual resources to complement and build on the enormous cultural and social capital of communities. UNESCO's recent declarations are

exhorting universities to re-examine their research and teaching practices in light of 'preparing the next generation of ethical global citizens'. If such citizens have the capacity to work in the diverse and contested terrains of knowledge democracy, they may build the commitment to face those dilemmas the humanity is confronted with.

Santos Sousa has argued that 'there is no social justice without cognitive justice'; knowledge democracy can support reclaiming the voices of all, in pursuit of cognitive and social justice. Many universities like UCT are encouraging 'engaged scholarship'; the purpose of such engagement is to deepen and broaden forces that work towards knowledge democracy in the coming decades.

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