Democratization of Knowledge: Conceptions, Rationales and Opportunities

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Conceptual Background

The current landscape of knowledge creation, preservation, extension, dissemination, and application calls for empowering all actors within a social system including the grassroots communities. Empowering all the actors entails knowledge democratization, which deals with transforming the very framework of knowledge production, availability, and its access. This requires examining how knowledge is created and disseminated in societies, how authority and economic growth emerge from it, and what influence knowledge has over power relationships among the actors wherein diversity, plurality, justice, peace, free and inclusive participations and equality prevail (Innerarity, [nd.]; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002; Gurteen, 1999; Hauschild, Licht & Stein, 2001).

Democratization of knowledge is imbedded within Community Based Research (CBR). CBR is informed by a number of critical disciplines and areas of research emanating from the liberatory, critical traditions and emancipatory origins of participatory research which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the developing world (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). CBR involves a commitment to the social good, and entails institutions such as universities as agents of democracy whereby research is owned by community groups with or without the

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involvement of a university (Matthews, 2010; Tandon et al., 2016). The intents of CBR are, therefore, vivid in the techniques and philosophy of Participatory Action-Research (PAR). PAR is dynamic, enduring and goes beyond usual institutional boundaries in development. In PAR, researchers create a knowledge society, which is a consulting society whereby knowledge is decentralized, and people have adequate cognitive competencies and access to information required and utilized (Schützeichel & Brüsemeister, 2004, cited in Innerarity, [nd.]).

Many activists have the notion that participatory research practices in the fields of adult education, literacy, health care, women's empowerment, ethnic and/or tribal development have demonstrated contributions in terms of valuing people's knowledge, refining capacities, appropriating knowledge, and liberating the mind. For instance, Gandhi and Tagore were important historical activist intellectuals who helped inspire the development of participatory research approaches through their own commitments to adult education and action for social change (Tandon et al., 2016). The new generation of academics also argue that PAR is important for popularly recuperating or creating 'people's knowledge' systems that were long suppressed by dominant knowledge systems (Gaventa, 2006). By the 1980s, PAR was linked to alternative ideas about 'development'. Its central tenet was advancing the notion that if development was for the people, then as primary stakeholders in the development processes, people themselves should represent their case in the stage of knowledge generation as well as of its use. Such line of thought, along with the movements in Latin America, Tanzania and India; and the critical feminist and critical race scholarship, gradually led to questioning the top-down design of development policy and have become important sources of a rigorous theoretical disassembly of objectivity in research, or the researcher-as-expert (Pant, 2014; Harding, 1987, in Tandon et al., 2016).

Overall, the efforts by the activists and the ensuing movements have resulted in changes in the meanings of both participation, and

development respectively from effective and efficient ways of delivery of development to ownership, and from service delivery to means of empowerment and governance with noticeable rationales.

Rationales for Democratization of Knowledge

The rationales for democratization of knowledge are inherent within the principles of democracy- dealing with "the principle of equality of rights, opportunity, and treatment, or the practice of this principle" (Collins English Dictionary). From this point of view, democratization of knowledge is sought for fighting against knowledge monopoly inherent in neoliberal global capitalism, the 'banking' concept of education, and the mythicizing practices of the dominant elites and 'intellectual colonialism' that disconnects intellectual pursuits from the practical concerns of everyday life of the knowledge producers, knowledge users and participants for democratic legitimacy (Freire, 1993).

By implication, knowledge is no longer dressed in its traditional garb of authority, but rather: 1) it is increasingly less an exclusive product of the experts and more the result of a social construct, and 2) it has a greater consciousness of its own limitations and that it inevitably comes with a growing non-knowledge (Innerarity, [nd.]).

Apart from (and supplementing) the above is the fact that our age is witnessing calls for universities to become more sensitive to the interests and needs of their surrounding communities and to the communities they serve and/or study by way of directing their attention towards larger, more humane ends and producing knowledge that is useful, meaningful and relevant. This has come to be termed as community engagement dealing with collaboration between higher education institutions and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutual beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.

Recent movements, therefore, pressurize universities to produce more relevant and responsive knowledge that the communities can easily access and make use. This can be a reality by engaging, supporting, and empowering the communities outside the universities. There is, however, an outcry about the relevance of the knowledge being produced by universities in Africa. As Matthews (2010) indicates, concerns about the relevance of the knowledge being produced by universities are familiar to those working in African studies where there have long been debates about the relevance of the knowledge produced by Africanists leading to the much-discussed disruption of the 1969 Montreal meeting of the African Studies Association (ASA). Matthews asserts that there are multifaceted reasons for the concern of the relevance of African studies. Although much has changed over the years, Matthews (2010) has cited, among others, the following facets synthesizing from different sources:

- Western-based scholarship on Africa is more attuned to the dictates of the Western academy than to the needs and interests of Africans;
- There are allegations that African universities and intellectuals are alienated from African communities and so fail to achieve relevance even though they typically place more value on relevance than do non-African universities and intellectuals; and
- The concepts and theories used to study Africa are drawn from non-African experiences and fail to be helpful in understanding Africa.

This implies that very little conscious efforts have been made to center on African people's interests and to understand African explanations of their own experiences. Many Africanists are also criticized for producing knowledge that is ambiguous, detrimental, and are catalysts in furthering Eurocentric outlooks that have low or no use for those being studied.

In the same vein, Mkandawire (1997) argues that knowledge generated in African Studies has profound political effects, and that in the history of African Studies, many of those political effects have been negative for Africa. As Mkandawire puts it:

> Too often in our history the quest for knowledge of Africa has been motivated by forces or arguments that were not for the promotion of human understanding let alone the welfare of the Africans [knowledge about Africa served] to reinforce preconceived prejudices, or [to master] instruments of domination of our societies… (27).

Equally, there are critics against the views about "relevant-" and "irrelevant-" knowledge, calling for an explicit political commitment beyond intellectual ones. There is a need to decide the relevance of knowledge in relation to its target population who would be beneficiaries and/or who would be affected by the knowledge produced and utilized. By all means, however, knowledge production through research can no longer be a domain for academics in their 'ivory tower' or 'blue-sky' knowledge, which is practically isolated from- and does not affect- the surrounding society (Matthews, 2010:10).

Inasmuch as knowledge produced at universities has repercussions on the communities outside and the society at large, universities should produce relevant and responsive knowledge that serves the interests of all, and that contributes for peace, justice, equality, and liberty of the citizens. In Fals-Borda and Rahman's (1991) views, education and knowledge for real life contexts are key to emancipation that stands as catalyst for social change to happen from the grassroots.

The concerns about the relevance of the knowledge universities produce also imply their visions and missions dealing respectively with their pictures of the future and the reasons for their existence. Universities are duty bound to teach, conduct research, and engage in any sort of community services and constructive criticism as part of

their civic roles and social responsibilities. In doing so, they are expected to advance a culture of learning, value and commitment towards creating social capital, and to preparing students to the world of work, life and competitiveness by exploiting available opportunities.

Opportunities for Democratization of Knowledge

Our age has been witnessing a heightened interest for knowledge democracy. The interests for knowledge democracy have come with the emerging political commitment- globally, nationally, regionally, and locally. For instance, concerns for political commitment have been witnessed in many of the African studies' literature targeting the production of African knowledge to expose and eliminate the exploitation, oppression, and marginalization of the continent and its peoples. This is a revitalized recognition as part of the politics of knowledge, entailing the need for empowerment and commitment to social justice so that the knowledge could be relevant, responsive, and competent to deal with the challenging times and conditions of black people in the whole world (Matthews, 2010).

The growing recognition of the politics of knowledge can, therefore, be an opportunity for democratization of knowledge in production and utilization. It should, therefore, be noted that knowledge can never be politically neutral, and consequently all knowledge and its production have political effects, and inherently unavoidable political processes- entailing the need for producing knowledge that will have different political effects on people with very different political ideologies and agenda. By implication, any attempt to make knowledge relevant to a particular societal group requires that critical attention be given to the knowledge itself, to reveal the underpinning political philosophy and perspectives informing the particular body of knowledge for people and by people.

 A further review of extant literature also shows that our time is a favorable scene for advancement of the knowledge democratization

movements. We are living in a dynamic world characterized by interconnectedness, entrepreneurial ventures, technology-dependent, and a shared common sense of purpose cognizant of economic, cultural, political, technological, social and institutional environmental variables. Recognition of such a world calls for challenging the power imbalance and deep-rooted outlooks constituting knowledge production and utilization, practices of indoctrination, the mythicizing practices of the dominant elite, the domain for academics in their ivory towers, and isolation of knowledge production from users. Such thinking has a power to consider different level stakeholders in planning, implementing, and assessing knowledge production and utilization endeavors. As a result, there are opportunities for networks whereby policy makers and advisers, local and international companies, consultants, think-tank and brokers are showing interest in advancing answerability, rule of law, and community engagement movements leading to deliver relevant results as part of accountability purposes for the bucks and for the bungs.

The heightened need for participatory research has also created awareness of the ways in which people get involved in knowledge production as opposed to the practices that dictated or limited knowledge by existing power structures. This, along with the political activism accompanying the social movements of the 1960s and the 1970s, sparked off a variety of participatory research projects by North American social scientists. John Gaventa, for instance, investigated political and economic oppression in Appalachian communities and grassroots efforts to challenge the status quo (Pant, 2014; Fals Borda, 1987, in Tandon et al., 2016).

The movements and the ensuing thoughts, therefore, have resulted in searching for approaches to research that is primarily concerned with producing knowledge that is useful and relevant to the specific and larger communities. This calls for empowering the knowledge producers and users including the marginalized populations through knowledge co-production (Tandon et al., 2016).

The cumulative effect of the movements and the thoughts have advanced community engagement thoughts and practices pushing universities to open their doors to the external communities to engage in knowledge production and also help communities to access, engage and make use of relevant knowledge and skills at their disposals. Concomitantly, the former term *application* has been replaced by *engagement*. Whereas the notion of *application* signifies that knowledge is produced somewhere (such as at universities) and goes for application somewhere (such as at communities), the idea of engagement suggests that university-community collaboration ought not to simply entail the application of expert knowledge produced at universities, but rather that universities and community members ought to collaborate in a way that allows for mutual and mutually beneficial influence (Matthews, 2010).

Our world is also witnessing expansion of higher education institutions, the move of globalization, and the wider recognition of democratic rights stipulated in constitutions of countries. For instance, FDRE (1995, Article 29) has stipulated seven points under the heading: *Right of Thought, Opinion and Expression*. Of the points therein, the *right for freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, and access to information of public interest (pp. 9-10)* are relevant to the case in point. Moreover, the document presents:

> In the interest of the free flow of information, ideas and opinions which are essential to the functioning of a democratic order, the press shall, as an institution, enjoy legal protection to ensure its operational independence and its capacity to entertain diverse opinions (p.10).

These constitutional provisions, in one way or another, pave fertile grounds to enhance democratization of knowledge in Ethiopia in particular and contribute to that of other parts of the world in general.

Implications

This short communication has discussed ideas and perspectives on the backgrounds, rationales, and available opportunities for knowledge democratization. The discussions made entail that knowledge democratization calls for transforming knowledge production framework; and creating avenues that enhance the learning knowledge, attitudes, and skills of the researched, the participants, and the wider knowledge uses in a pragmatic and in line with the views advanced within post-positivist paradigm. Knowledge should be viewed as something that can be constructed rather than predictably proved as positivist paradigm espouses. It is, therefore, possible to drive three implications from the discussions made so far.

- The fact that knowledge democratization is inherent within the principles of democracy calls for fighting against the traditions that disconnect knowledge production from use. Knowledge producers (such as universities) are, therefore, expected to stand answerable and be more responsive to the interests and needs of the parties involved in and/or affected by the knowledge they produce.
- The fact that internal and external factors stand as favorable grounds for democratization of knowledge indicates that there are emerging commitments (political as well as professional) to social justice for empowering pertinent stakeholders who are affected by the knowledge produced and utilized. This calls for eliminating possibilities of exploitation, oppression, marginalization, and indoctrination of people, and connect knowledge production to users.
- Overall, a long journey is awaiting us to un-grip knowledge out of its traditional garb of authority that disconnects the processes of knowledge production from users, and to create a social construct whereby the different parties become aware and are committed to coproduce relevant and responsive knowledge.

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