Jinka Sawaal, Unka Netrutva: Fronting people and communities in participatory research with young people

Alicia Tauro[1]

Abstract

Research is not a straight-forward, neutral process of gathering, analyzing and translating information into 'truth' or 'knowledge'. It is layered and loaded with much more. As the prominent scholar Foucault (1977) states, "Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint", highlighting the inseparable role of knowledge and 'truth' from power relations and discourses within societies, and that it is in fact constituted from it (apud HEWETT, 2004, p.3). Thus, research can be seen as a process of power struggle. Decolonizing research is thus an attempt to acknowledge, credit and validate the existence of multiple truths, ways of knowing and myriad ways of using the outcomes to impact communities. Participatory research is a key milestone to decolonizing research where the 'researched' become active participants in all steps of the process. While this is transformative, it also means that participatory research has power dynamics that are intrinsic to the collaborative process (MCDONALD, 2021). This paper attempts to highlight a model of participatory research with youth from urban poor communities in India, examining the critical elements of the process that make it distinctly empowering and challenging of mainstream processes, while also reflecting on the challenges and dilemmas that emerged from this process.

Keywords

Participatory research; Decolonizing methods; Youth; Urban poor communities.

Jinka Sawaal Unka Netrutva: O papel de liderança dos indivíduos e das comunidades em pesquisa participativa com jovens na Índia

Resumo

A pesquisa não é um processo direto e neutro de coletar, analisar e traduzir informações em "conhecimento". Como afirma o proeminente estudioso Foucault (1977), ao destacar o papel inseparável entre o conhecimento e a 'verdade' nas relações de poder e nos discursos (FOUCAULT apud HEWETT, 2004, p.3), "a verdade é uma produção deste mundo, a partir de múltiplas formas de coerção". A pesquisa decolonial é, portanto, uma tentativa de reconhecer, creditar e validar a existência de múltiplas verdades, conhecimentos e metodologias, visando impactar direta-

mente as comunidades. A pesquisa participativa pode ser definida como um marco na pesquisa com viés decolonial, em que os membros da comunidade estão envolvidos em processos colaborativos dinâmicos durante todos os estágios, desde a formulação, execução, análise e disseminação dos resultados (MCDONALD 2021). O presente artigo analisa um modelo de pesquisa participativa com jovens de comunidades urbanas pobres na Índia e reflete sobre os desafios e dilemas que emergiram durante a sua implementação.

Palavras-chave

Pesquisa participativa; Métodos Decoloniais; Jovens; Comunidades urbanas de baixa-renda.

Introduction

Jinka sawaal, unka netrutva means "solutions and approaches are best determined and led by those facing the problems themselves". This has been the foundational, driving philosophy of Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA), a non-profit set up in 1984 in India, that works with urban poor communities to build people's collectives and facilitate their empowerment to advocate for their rights. The City Caravan, a model developed by YUVA, facilitates a process of critical thinking and perspective-building among youth as protagonists and co-creators of inclusive and just cities.

According to the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2021), India has one of the world's youngest population with an average age of 29 years. Youth unemployment has been one of the biggest challenges for the country[2]. This often leaves youth from urban poor communities at an even greater disadvantaged to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. These young people often come from historically marginalized communities, where they have witnessed systemic violence such as displacement, forced evictions and daily struggles for basic amenities at very close quarters. Engaging in collectives for community development and inclusive city-building processes is

therefore a mandate for survival, and rarely an aspiration (though it might eventually become one) where they draw on their own experiences and histories of oppression and respond to ongoing struggles (SELVANATHAN et al., 2022, p. 137-138). Collectives are therefore, the strongest tools and means of resistance and resilience for marginalized communities to claim their identity, their rights and resist powerful actors such as state and corporations. When collectives become drivers and owners of research, they support their communities to produce evidence for advocacy as well as create knowledge that they are able to articulate and disseminate, further strengthening social movements for change. (TREMBLAY et al., 2018, p.2))

Processes like the City Caravan are critical steps to decolonizing knowledge and research by empowering collectives, community members and youth from marginalized groups to lead and own the process. It represents the embodiment and ownership of knowledge and a proclamation of the lived experiences by members of the community, thereby shaping a narrative that is different from the outsider 'victimization' and othering that often perpetuates stereotypes. (CARTER, 2004, p.1)

(a) City Caravan as a model for inspiring critical thinking among youth

As clearly outlined by the World Youth Report on the SDGs in 2020, despite many obstacles and challenges, young people are often the backbone to change processes. Their energies, creativities and willingness to see the world with a lens of hope is what fuels social transformation. The City Caravan brings together young people from different parts of the city, enabling them to create a space for co-learning through participatory, interactive sessions and experiential activities like city walks[3], with a curriculum focusing on outcomes in knowledge, perspectives, values, and skills. The themes range from urban development and governance structures to understanding gender, caste, informal livelihoods and workers in the city.

YUVA has been running City Caravans for the past 6 years now and has trained over 125 youth through seventh edition. Over the years, YUVA's City Caravan has undergone a series of changes to make it sharper and reflective of the needs of the young people in the city, bringing in newer dimensions in course content and thematics from urbanisation and migration to governance, livelihoods, identity intersectionality and exploring participatory theatre as a tool for change. There have also been changes in the training methodology- using the participatory framework, youth-led approaches, intergenerational dialogue and self-reflexivity processes. The City Caravan has been further expanded with the potential to scale to newer areas of work like climate justice, peace-building and constitutional rights and freedoms.

The sixth edition, in partnership with the International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood (CIESPI) in association with the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), University of Edinburgh (UoE), Fields of View, National Institute of Urban Affairs, had an important policy and action research component as an integral element to the training module. 20 young people from the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) in India engaged in the process, shared their lived experiences, thereby adding to the discussions and enriching them. They selected research topics based on their own experiences, the communities they belong to, their work or interest areas. Processes of data collection, analysis, documentation were undertaken leading up to a creative output that each of them designed and piloted in their field/community of study.

(b) City Caravan as an attempt to decolonizing research

Decolonizing research is an attempt to breakdown inherent power structures in the research process and beyond it. The City Caravan makes important contributions to not only decolonizing research but also in activating youth leadership for cities through unpacking

and breaking down power relationships between adults and youth through innovative training methodology, youth networks, a fundamental framework of constitutional values, and creative outputs by the young researchers.

Innovative Training Methodology

Attempts at decolonizing research focus on critically looking at the process in which or how research is done – its methodology. An important contribution to decolonizing methods is through the Ancestral Knowledge Systems (AKS) framework that looks at critical thinking, self-reflection and unwinding internalized colonization (SANDOVAL et al., 2016). City Caravan is a process of decolonization existing research methods through locally created structures.

The first innovative strategy is the participatory training methodology. The Indian education system inherited from the British is an apt reflection of Paulo Freire's theory of the banking system– where the teacher deposits knowledge to students who then lap it up, no questions asked. The City Caravan attempts to unpack this method by making the learning process two– way and discussion–based, thereby, disrupting the teacher–student dichotomy to a more facilitator–participant model. This is not to romanticize it by saying that during the course of the process power dynamics did not exist, but rather to deliberately shift to a more inclusive model of learning. Young people were pushed to ask critical questions, reflect on their own life trajectories– stories of migration, ancestral knowledge and their own worldviews– through providing a safe, non–judgmental space to think, express, challenge themselves and others. In the age of ample of (mis)information, knowing how to decipher and critically analyze information while also reflecting on one's own experiences is a 21st century skill.

A second element in the training methodology that grounded the process were the Talk–shows that brought in praxis experts, social activists with lived experiences, and those pioneering change at the

grassroots. It was the powerful exchange and dialogue with them that helped ground the understanding and learnings of the young people. The experts talked about how their lives were a testament to their communities and to society, who for generations, discriminated against them. Listening to the stories of sex workers, indigenous women, LGBTQIA activists, transgender leaders among others sent shivers down the spine of everyone in the room, leaving one deeply grateful, inspired and touched by their powerful transformation stories.

Another powerful element of the methodology was facilitating a process of self-reflexivity – where each researcher and adult facilitator reflect on their own life stories and trajectories, thereby allowing for open-sharing between all, and further attempting to level out any power struggles through personal stories. Through the activity of 'river of life' each person draws out their life as if it were a river taking its course, sometimes wavering sometimes flowing strongly, sometimes meeting rocks and big stones (life's hurdles) but finding a way around it. Each participant was then invited to share if they would like to, and eventually everyone shared their life journeys, found solidarity in each one's struggles and strengths, and left the space feeling lighter, inspired and deeply connected with each other. It created an emotionally-charged environment where each person, despite their differences, shared so many loves, fears and hopes in common. It built a community, a collective and a bond of solidarity.

Supportive youth networks

The City Caravan is not a stand-alone program. It was developed based on the needs of the larger youth collective and the city and feeds back into the youth network further catapulting and intensifying the outcomes of youth activism, making them long-term, far-reaching and sustainable. The collectives also act as a barricade for backlash that help the individual researchers gain strength and solidarity in the process of advocacy and dissemination of findings. In an award-winning case study showcased in the Azim Premji Uni-

versity Case Study Publication, the birth and journey of one of the strongest Mumbai-based youth collectives, Jaikishen (2020, p. 54-55) writes that collectives are also a way of assertion of youth citizenship and that in associating with them, young people are able to lead change at multiple levels in the context of urban realities in marginalized communities such as informality in housing, labour and a myriad of other issues and deprivations.

One of the main elements during the city caravan that contributed to a supportive and youth-centric environment was the Youth Expert Group (YEG). A group of young people elected by a larger youth constituency who serve as mentors in the process. Not only do they mentor the young people, but they also increase the accountability of adults, thereby, attempt to balance the power dynamic and ensure the process centers the needs and the voice of young people at best. Through the City Caravan, they were really the boots on the ground with the other young researchers- holding the process together, boosting morale, supporting and motivating their peers to follow through, as well as addressing any internal conflicts or issues that came up (GOTO et al., 2012).

Fundamental base of constitutional values

In times of growing division among people, mandatory standardization of knowledge, forced adherence to dominant cultures and a breakdown of democratic freedoms, the very values enshrined and upheld in the Constitution are under threat. According to Nuggehalli (2018, p. 73-74), young people are constantly manipulated by different powers to drive forward a vested political agenda. They are entangled in caste and religious politics, further taking them away from the critical questioning of the basic deprivations they face in their life. Those asking questions are mocked, threatened and even harmed so that they stop doing so. Against this backdrop, the City Caravan seeks to open up the discussion around values, discuss how we can live these out in

our lives to celebrate diversity, ensure freedom of speech, assembly, and that people's basic rights as citizens is safeguarded.

The Caravan helps foster this sense of citizenship and protagonism among young people, where they realize that they have the power to impact their environment and that social change can happen when they exercise their agency for purposeful action (NUGGEHALLI, 2018 p.78).

Creative outputs by young researchers

The youth researchers have produced non-traditional and creative outputs that perfectly align with the needs of their communities (FLICKER et al., 2014). They have created animated films, short movies, posters, street plays, poems, brochures that are easy to understand and convey the message in language that is accessible and local. The absence of academic jargon and use of vernacular languages makes it actually useful and effective to the communities directly to take forward their demands to the decision-makers for the betterment of their communities.

One of the youth researchers studied the impact of lack of adequate transportation services on livelihood where he found that many young people lose their earnings, are marked absent, they are humiliated and insulted in the office, and in some cases lose their jobs on account of inadequate public transport. They spend a large amount of their time travelling or planning their travel and are still negatively impacted. As his creative output, this researcher drafted an advocacy letter to the transport department demanding better services and increased frequency of buses. He also carried out a signature campaign to galvanize more people into taking action and joining the advocacy campaign.

Another young researcher examined the role of religious discrimination on people in the organized sector where she found that people from marginalized religious and caste minority groups experienced bullying, discrimination, fewer opportunities for promotion and growth on account of their religious identity. They also felt left out of social gatherings and informal meetups. This researcher wrote a powerful poem as her creative out-

put and recited the same at several youth gatherings to raise this issue and garner young people's support on the cause to set up a committee at the workplace that would ensure people are treated equally and with respect.

Another researcher made an animated film as his creative output to highlight the issues faced by microbusiness owners in a large and dense informal settlement in Mumbai, the barriers they face to accessing government schemes and welfare measures, and also made policy recommendations to the existing policy.

Reflections on the process:

a. Not a linear process: While making research more accessible to help youth from communities that have been historically marginalized own and conduct research, in no way has the process been linear. The project team was able to set out a larger framework and goals along with the formed Youth Expert Group (YEG) (as mentioned above) within which we were to operate, but while implementing, the process took its own turns as per young people's needs and concerns of examinations, illness in families, interest levels, communication gaps, lack of access to mobile phones and technology. We needed to continually alter the methods and strategies of engagement, provide constant support and mentoring, and also ensure repeated follow-ups and agreed upon timelines. This was certainly challenging and also led to periods of lags and gaps in the process.

b. Lack of access to literature in vernacular languages: English seems to be the overarching imperative for conducting a lit review on any topic or policy area. Limited access to local literature makes it hard to articulate and understand the larger canvas of work in the specific thematic. What was incredibly useful to young people were the blogs, articles, films and social media posts in Hindi or Marathi to help understand. In other cases, the YEG and adult facilitators helped by summarizing/translating both literature as well as the work of the young researchers.

c. The process is transformative and an important steppingstone in young people's personal trajectories as well as in collective action: The youth not only picked up important skills in research, policy-reading, critical thinking and analyzing but also many discovered their own potential, leadership qualities, and career pathways. Along with this, they also drew up an agenda for collective action on local issues through evidence-based research.

d. Navigating multiple dynamics as a research team: Along with age and inter-generational collaboration between adult facilitators, YEG and youth researchers, and wider project team of partners, other forms like social class, access to resources, ability (or privilege) to make time (with a lot of the youth working part-time and studying), privilege of higher education, access to language played an important role in shaping interaction, opportunities, and involvement in processes. However, the team bonding processes made each one respect more and share support and resources. Moreover, the YEG played an important role in reaching out to participants individually and working with them to ensure each was involved and process was as accessible to all as possible.

Conclusion

Decolonizing research with youth as co-partners is a challenging process, one that involves a lot of back and forth, undoing and redoing and is a long, meandering path. The outcomes have certainly been enriched and unique especially at the dissemination stage where youth could envision newer methods to get wider community involved while also sustaining and contributing to action on the findings. But it is not whether community/youth participation will enrich the process or not. The real question is are we ready to do the work to ensure that communities are restored their agency to assert, create and articulate knowledge in their own way, and not the standardized ways in which are the norm.

As a research community, it is our responsibility to ensure that people whose voices have been suppressed for centuries are given a fair chance to truly contribute with their knowledge and are not forced into the boxes and frameworks they hardly fit in or even relate to. The City Caravan is one such model that creatively makes space for research training, critical thinking and self-determination processes among urban poor youth who then pioneer initiatives to lead change in their communities. It is also a process that helps challenge power dynamics in intergenerational research processes as well as among diverse identities to ensure more equal research processes that can also convert into action making meaningful impact in communities.

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Notes

1   Project Lead at Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA), Mumbai, India, working with children and young people from urban poor communities in India. Orcid n° 0009-0001-3353-9737. E-mail: alicia.t@yuvaindia.org.

2   https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2022/02/21/the-mounting-challenge-of-you-th-unemployment-in-india/

3   https://medium.com/@yuvaonline/a-walk-in-the-city-ecffc263797d