Research for Change:

What is "research excellence" for civil society organizations and their academic partners?

A Report on the 2013 IDRC / Coady Canadian Learning Forum

November 12-13, 2013.

Coady International Institute,
St. Francis Xavier University,
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About the Coady International Institute

The **Coady International Institute** at St. Francis Xavier University is a world-renowned centre of excellence in community-based development and leadership education that collaborates with partners in Canada and the global South to reduce poverty and transform societies by strengthening local economies, building resilient communities, and promoting social accountability and good governance.

Through adult education programs, effective partnerships, and applicable research, the Coady Institute equips community leaders and their organizations with the knowledge and practical tools they need to bring about change.

About the International Development Research Centre

Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a Crown corporation that encourages, supports, and conducts research in the world's developing regions to apply new knowledge to economic and social improvement.

IDRC's Canadian Partnerships program links academic and practitioner communities in Canada and in developing countries to share knowledge, ideas, and skills that contribute to global equity, prosperity, and a sustainable environment.

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Preface from the Coady International Institute

by John Gaventa and Alison Mathie, Coady International Institute

"Research for Action", "Action Research", "Participatory/Collaborative Action Research", "participatory" and "multi-stakeholder" research are now common currency in the language of applied research. Broadly speaking, these types of research aim to incorporate the views of ordinary citizens and communities to allow them a role in building knowledge and in acting on that knowledge.

Over the last thirty years, we have seen many uses of these forms of research by or in support of the work of the civil society sector. For instance, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) itself has established a UNESCO Chair for Community Engaged Research, currently jointly held by Dr. Budd Hall at University of Victoria and Dr. Rajesh Tandon, of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) – both pioneers in this field. There is renewed discussion of the role of universities and research centres in supporting civil society organization (CSO) led and/or community-based research, of how research informs not only policy but also CSO activities and community groups in their own development at the local level. And, while universities engage more with communities, increasingly CSOs are pressed to strengthen their own research capacities and partnerships, in order to document their impact, inform their strategies, and support their attempts to influence others.

While the theme of university engagement with the community has seen a resurgence in recent years, it is one that that has been at the heart of the work of the Coady Institute and Saint Francis Xavier University (STFX) for almost a century. In 1918 in this rural province of Nova Scotia, Canada, Dr. Jimmy Tompkins, then a professor at STFX, wrote a series of articles entitled 'For the People'. He argued that our 'colleges must catch the spirit of service – service of the whole people in matters national, civic, educational and social.'[i] In 1920, STFX held its first 'People's School' for rural leaders, using participatory adult education methods to help address local economic and community development issues. By 1928, STFX had established an extension department, led by Dr. Moses Coady, reflecting its ongoing commitment to adult education and collective action.

From this beginning was born a movement for self-reliance based on principles of cooperation known as the Antigonish Movement, which rapidly spread across Canada. As it grew, the Antigonish movement also attracted international attention. In 1959, the University established the Coady International Institute, which has continued over more than five decades to work at the intersection of university and civil society and to promoting community driven knowledge, leadership and action for change.

Given this rich history, as well as the contemporary importance of the themes of this event, we were delighted to collaborate with IDRC to organize and host this forum on "Research for Change: What is 'research excellence' for civil society organizations and their academic partners?'

Preface from the International Development Research Centre

By Ann Weston, International Development Research Centre

The Canadian Partnerships Program of Canada's International Development Research Centre is pleased to have teamed up with the Coady International Institute to design, convene and animate a two-day dialogue on the meaning of research excellence for Canada's civil society organizations and their academic partners engaged in research for international development. How we define, support and evaluate such excellence is highly relevant to IDRC's mission and mandate. During the dialogue in Antigonish participants drew on particular action-research experiences and strategies used to aim for research excellence in terms of participation, capacity-building, rigour and influence. Collectively, all contributed to enrich a framework which has now set a new departure line for further conversations. This synthesis of the Forum's proceedings is intended to stimulate others to join in such discussions in Canada and elsewhere. It is particularly timely to do so when researchers and practitioners are seeking to collaborate more effectively with each other, with other actors and with their global South partners to advance positive change on important development issues.

1. Purpose and Objectives

Recently, Canada's **International Development Research Centre (IDRC)** has joined other research-supporting organizations in exploring how to assess research proposals and evaluate research results in terms of "research excellence".[ii] As Mendez writes,

> Attention to research excellence evaluation has increased in the last few years as governments in England, Australia, and other countries have started exploring ways to allocate research funds on the basis of the quality of research produced. However, what constitutes good quality research or research excellence has long been discussed; not only because of how it may inform funding, but also because of the role that research can play in society. …. But, if high quality research or research excellence is desirable, what do we mean by it? How do we identify research excellence?[iii]

In further reflecting on the literature on research excellence Méndez and others[iv] have noted that there is no one commonly accepted definition of what constitutes "research excellence" in general, and certainly no consensus on what this means when looking at research for sustainable development.

The question is even more acute when considering the complexities of conducting research with civil society organizations (CSOs) and communities. Over the past 30 years, CSOs, academics and community organizations have partnered to conduct research on important development issues facing local communities around the world. Through this experience, they have developed a toolbox of community-based, community-engaged, and participatory-action -research approaches that have proven effective in enabling learning, reflection and action for social change. However, the traditional approaches to assessing research excellence (e.g. bibliometrics) do not adequately convey the true importance and impact of research that is aimed more at promoting social change and less at publishing.

To explore these issues, the Canadian Partnerships program at IDRC invited the Coady International Institute to host a two-day Learning Forum with 40 participants from Canadian CSOs and academic institutions.[v]

The Learning Forum provided an opportunity to reflect upon our experiences of what constitutes "research excellence" in research conducted by and/or with civil society in support of sustainable development. It also afforded IDRC an opportunity to share and advance its ongoing work on research excellence, and to connect with Canadian researchers and development actors in Atlantic Canada.

The Learning Forum had four specific objectives:

1. **To learn** from the experiences of research conducted by or with civil society organizations in a wide variety of subjects;

2. **To consider** how community-based and community-engaged research can be supported and enhanced to achieve "excellence";

3. **To name** the capacities and partnerships needed to conduct effective research in this sector, and how these can be developed; and

4. **To synthesize** some guidelines and recommendations for researchers and research funding agencies on "excellence" in research involving CSOs and/or communities.

2. Designing the Learning Forum

Our understanding of research excellence for sustainable development, and in turn the design for the Learning Forum event itself, evolved through a dialogue between the organizers and the participants, and through reflecting on the literature in light of the participants' experience.

We began this inquiry by reviewing a selection of literature reviews on research excellence for sustainable development, including some previous research by the *Corporate Strategy and Evaluation Division* at IDRC, and secondary resources suggested by Coady. We also conducted an initial survey with past and current Canadian Partnership grant recipients and Coady affiliate organizations about their experience with community-based and engaged research.

The survey responses confirmed our literature review's conclusions that there was no commonly-agreed-upon framework for assessing excellence in research on sustainable development. Rather, there appeared to be three quite-distinct bodies of literature in which "research excellence" was understood to mean alternatively:

- Traditional, academic research quality (i.e., that tended to focus on methodological rigor, bibliometrics, and a narrow definition of research ethics);
- Research influence on policy and practice; and
- Community participation and empowerment.

To advance the conversation, we selected 18 initial criteria[vi] that illustrated the breadth of different understandings of research excellence. We then invited 27 survey respondents, representing a broad range of sectors, research topics and methods, to rate one of their recent research projects against the 18 criteria, in terms of how well their project exemplified that aspect of research excellence, and how relevant the criteria themselves were to their field. We then invited them to elaborate on how their project exemplified three of those criteria. Their responses revealed that the context and purpose of their research shaped how they understood research excellence, and even

how they weighted the criteria themselves. It also demonstrated that it would be difficult and perhaps even undesirable to impose a simple rubric of "research excellence" that did not account for the context of their work.

To explore this issue more deeply, we then asked 10 respondents to write longer reflection papers on how research excellence was demonstrated in their context and work, and to highlight some of the successes and challenges they encountered in conducting high quality research at the community level.

This process of dialogue encouraged us to abandon using a standard checklist of required criteria; instead, we proposed that "research excellence" should be understood more like a colour wheel with three overlapping categories of criteria:

- Quality
- Influence
- Participation

As in colour theory, all the "colours" or categories are important, and there are many shades of each colour or criteria that are equally important (See Figure 2). However, the context and purpose of the research must determine which of the research criteria (shades) are most relevant and necessary to convey the clearest, most accurate "full picture" of research excellence for that research project.
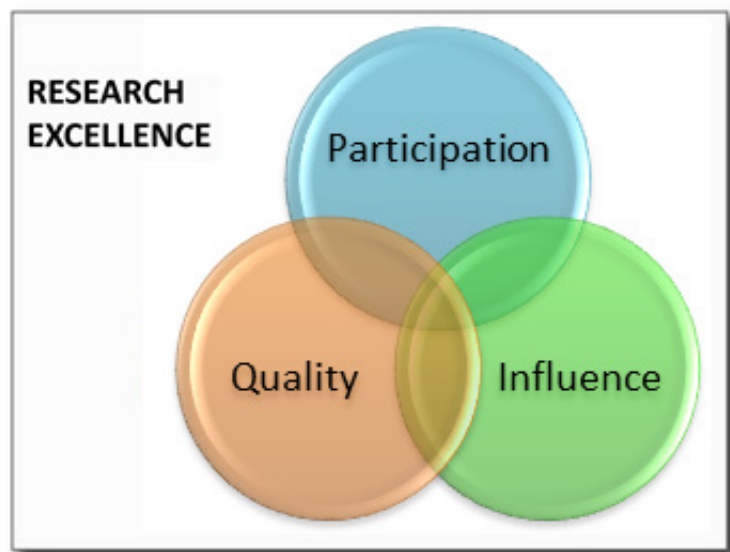

Figure 1 A provisional diagram of "Research Excellence" used to start the dialogue at the Learning Forum.

This metaphor provided the basis for the Learning Forum agenda and design, and while not perfect, this provisional framework served as a catalyst to encourage learning through dialogue, and a conceptual model that participants referred to and refined throughout the Learning Forum.

Figure 2: Three Categories of Research Excellence Criteria in the Provisional Framework

Participation

Quality

Influence

Participation	Quality	Influence
Relevance to needs of the community or other stakeholders	Comprehensiveness of literature review	Dissemination of results
Timeliness to the needs of the community or other stakeholders	Originality of research design, method and approach	Contribution to knowledge
Research process allows both researchers and participants to strengthen their knowledge and capacities	Quality of research design, method and approach	Impact on academic teaching and discourse
Involvement of stakeholders	Rigor of data analysis	Impact on policy
Quality of stakeholder participation	Attention to research ethics	Impact on practice
Researchers and participants in the research share responsibility for objectives, design, conclusions and outputs	Quality of research outputs	
The research partners continue to work together through dissemination, follow-up action or follow-up research.		

3. Learning Forum Agenda

Day 1: Wednesday, November 13

Opening Plenary

- **Welcome** from John Gaventa (Coady) and Ann Weston (IDRC)

- **Participant Introductions:** An interactive introduction exercise.

- **Context of the Learning Forum** (Dwayne Hodgson, facilitator)

- **Challenges for Achieving Research Excellence** (Luc Mougeot)

- **Self-Reflections on Research Excellence:** Participants named 3 criteria their project exemplified, 2 challenges they encountered and 1 new question they had.

Research Excellence 1: Participation

- **Panel Presentations** by:
    - **Richard Maclure,** University of Ottawa
    - **Solomon Legesse**, Oxfam Canada in Ethiopia and Brianne Peters, Coady International Institute
    - **Sherry Pictou,** Bay of Fundy Research Centre

Research Excellence 2: Quality

- A **"Talk Show"** hosted by John Gaventa with four guests:
    - **John Cameron**, Dalhousie University
    - **Bettina von Lieres**, Centre for Critical Development Studies at the University of Toronto
    - **Jonathan Langdon**, St. Francis Xavier
    - **Kendra Siekmans**, Healthbridge Canada

- **Small Group Discussions**
    - What challenges do you encounter in ensuring "research quality"?
    - How should we define "research quality" in research with communities and CSOs?

Research Excellence 3: Influence

- **World Café** with 6 tables hosted by:
    - **Brian Tomlinson**, AidWatch Canada, *Documenting Enabling Conditions for Civil Society Organizations*
    - **Sarah Paul Dalle**, USC, *Gender Equality Review of USC Canada's Seeds of Survival programme in Asia,*
    - **Joanna Ochocka, CCBR,** *Taking Culture Seriously in Community Mental Health*
    - **John Saxby, COEP,** *Documenting COEP's Programa Comunidades Semiárido.*
    - **Holly Catalfamo,** Niagara College, *Muheres Mil Impact Assessment*
    - **Amy Etherington** Corporate Strategy and Evaluation Division @ IDRC, *Assessing Research Quality and Excellence*

Public Event with Michael Edwards

- *Freedom, Friction and the Future of Knowledge for Social Change*
  120 people attended in person and up to 160 watched online. To read the full text of his presentation, see Appendix 2 and watch the video online.

Day 2: Thursday, November 14

Michael Edwards REmixed

- Michael followed up his evening presentation with three questions
    - Can we *really* redefine quality?
    - Can we be much more creative / effective communicators?
    - Is there a distinction between action research and informed action?

RE-envisioning

- The participants worked in small groups to edit the proposed research excellence framework to illustrate how they conceptualized Research Excellence.

Semi-Open Space

- Participants took part in one of four table-discussions:
    1. How to build capacity for achieving research excellence with CSOs?
    2. What partnerships do we need to support and/or develop to achieve research excellence?
    3. How should we assess excellence in research for sustainable development with CSOs and communities?
    4. What new ethical guidelines do we need?

Fishbowl with Coady Students:

- The Learning Forum participants met with students from Coady's International Diploma Program for a "fishbowl" sessions in two parts:
- Part 1: A 30-minute talk-show with six student "guests" from the Coady Diploma program[vii]:
- Part 2: We opened the discussion to other participants in the audience, provided that they exchanged seats with one of the 6 guests.

Reports

- Each group from the Semi-Open space session provided a short report back.

Response

- Luc Mougeot and Amy Etherington from IDRC provided a short response to what they had heard at the Learning Forum.

Closing:

- Alison Mathie from Coady and Ann Weston from IDRC thanked the organizers and the participants on behalf of the facilitation team.

4. Discussion of Research Excellence Criteria

The pre-Learning Forum assessments and reflection papers on the participants' research experience, along with the case-study presentations and group discussions at the Learning Forum, suggested that each of 18 of the proposed criteria were important to consider, when designing and conducting research, and when assessing how community-involved research meets the standards of excellence.

However, their reflections also illustrated how any discussion of "research excellence" needs to be framed by the specific context and the purpose of the research, which in turn determined which criteria were most relevant and operative. Moreover, their experiences illustrated that although there are sometimes challenges in meeting the competing demands of different criteria, these challenges can be seen – borrowing a phrase from Michael Edwards -- as productive "friction" that keeps the research rigorous, relevant and accountable.

A. Participation

Not surprisingly given the sectors and focus of the invited participants' research, participation and its component criteria were highly-valued in their assessments of what constitutes excellence in community research. In fact, participation was valued not only as a *means* of conducting the research (e.g. using participatory action research methods to obtain relevant findings), but also as an *end in itself;* meaningful participation is crucial to promoting changes in the community's political, social and economic situation. Indeed, many participants would argue that any research for sustainable development that does not provide for meaningful local participation that promotes transformative social change cannot really be considered "excellent".

High-quality participation in community research needs to be more than simply having local leaders on an advisory board, or recruiting local youth to collect data for the evaluation. As Langdon noted in his discussion of participatory action research in Ghana, *"community-engaged research has to involve community from the outset of research conversations, and not see it as something that is added in after the grant is received."* (p.14) Cameron concurs, arguing that:

> *"Genuine community participation requires that the communities involved in research projects must be involved in deciding the research questions in the first place, not simply participating in research projects that have already been designed by academics"* (p.10).

As much as possible, the Learning Forum participants concurred, local communities should be involved in forming the research questions so that the research agenda supports their local development agenda, and local actors should determine how the research outputs are utilized to maximize the impact on practice and policy. Having said that, the participants realized that conducting participatory research with communities

and CSOs requires balancing different agendas. For example, as Ochocka notes in her discussion of a mental health project with minority groups in Kitchener-Waterloo, the project sought to "*break down the barriers between the researchers and the researched, to balance community relevance with academic excellence and to combine knowledge production with action for social change to improve health and human welfare*" (p.5). However,

> "*The complexity of the project, the sensitive nature of the topic (mental health) as well as the range of stakeholders (including various minority groups in Canada) made participation challenging. The time available for various research processes was tight given its complexity and the unpredictability of relationship building in these contexts. People also came to the project with their own needs and expectations to be fulfilled. For example, ethno-cultural communities wanted to have a safe space to talk about problems and to see the new practice emerge; service providers wanted to learn specific knowledge and skills to be able to respond to ethno-cultural communities; academics wanted to develop papers and presentations related to the processes and outcomes of this research project; everyone wanted to see the influence on policies*" (p. 10).

Creating space for meaningful participation, however, requires researchers to invest time to create productive partnerships, and the quality and longevity of the relationships between outsiders and local communities is critical. Mathie, Peters and Legesse, when reflecting on ten years of Asset-Based Community Development work and research in Ethiopia, concluded that time is needed to build genuine relationships that transcend the divide between the researcher and the "researched" and to develop and institutionalize the right research processes and products. As they continue,

> "*….the on-going process of testing, debating, arguing, accepting failure and adapting for success is a process that is rarely acknowledged as an integral part of healthy development and research activity.   In order for people to feel comfortable arguing and debating, however, there must also be a conscious effort to build and maintain healthy and transparent relationships.*" (p. 13).

In this sense, the discussion encouraged us to think more broadly about the "timeliness" of the research project to include the "time-invested" in building collaborative relationships.

Meaningful participation can also be supported, Ochocka suggests, by creating an inclusive, project-management structure for shared responsibility and leadership in the project. For example, in CCBR's work, they intentionally emphasized research, training, knowledge mobilization and evaluation, and involvement of the ethno-racial communities in all phases of the research.

Our discussions of community participation in research also touched on the challenges of building local capacity while also producing high-quality research. Siekmans' reflection paper on bed net utilization research in Togo, for example, notes the challenges of producing the high-quality data needed to influence government policy and practice,

while also engaging with the community and building local capacity to conduct this research. Cameron, similarly, in reflecting on his experience in Bolivia, noted how building research capacity is integrated with building the capacity of local communities to advocate for change.

> *"The broader goal of 'research capacity building' in this project is to influence policy and practice related to Indigenous autonomy with evidence-based research. The 'theory' behind this project is that putting indigenous rights into practice in Bolivia requires stronger capacities for research and documentation. 'Research capacity' involves not only the strengthening of capacities to conduct research, but also a heightened awareness of what research needs to be conducted – and of observation and reflection as important parts of the research process – as well as the capacity to disseminate research in ways that actually influence policy and practice". (p. 9-10).*

The Learning Forum participants also affirmed the potential of community members to conduct meaningful research and challenged us to think about capacity building as a two-way process in which both researchers, and civil society organizations and communities strengthen their joint knowledge and capacities to make the collaboration more effective.

Participation, in the opinion of most of the participants at the Learning Forum, is more than an optional methodological consideration. Rather, as Langdon argues, the transformative potential of participatory research for change can be realized when:

- Those at the center of the research own the research design and implementation process;
- The elements of the research are ultimately useful to the group at the center of the research, even while there may be other elements important to academic circles; and
- The research is not just about extracting information ….but it's about changing power relations in ways defined by those at the heart of the research.

"Ultimately" as Langdon writes, "…*research is about sharing people's stories, and people using these stories to change the dynamics of power to work in more inclusive and egalitarian ways.*" (p. 11).

B. Quality

Often, research "quality" has consisted primarily of more traditional academic criteria like the comprehensiveness of the literature review, the originality of research design, the rigor of data analysis, the quality of research outputs, and research ethics. While our discussions in Antigonish affirmed these criteria as being critical to conducting good quality research with CSOs and communities, the participants suggested additional perspectives for assessing quality.

Pictou, for example, noted how the originality of their research with small-scale fishers lay in how they incorporated indigenous practices (e.g. talking circles, ceremonies and field visits with intertidal harvesters) as part of their approach to Participatory Action Research. These adaptations ensured that the methodology remained relevant and empowering for the local people; the new methods also provided an opportunity for intercultural learning with their international counterparts.

Ensuring rigour in the design and data collection process can also take on new meaning in community research. Healthbridge Canada's research on bed net utilization --- one of the more "technical" / science focused research projects at the Learning Forum --- illustrated some of the tensions between ensuring high-quality research design and outputs that were needed to influence government policy and practice (e.g. using Randomized Control Trials), while at the same time engaging with community members to develop complementary outcomes and indicators that make sense to local participants. Maclure, in contrast, was working primarily with qualitative and participatory research approaches. But he affirmed the need to triangulate the research findings to increase their rigor and, in turn, the research's influence.

Research for sustainable development can be most productive, but also challenging, when it involves collaboration between Northern and Southern academics, CSOs and community members. Several of the presenters and writers commented on the challenges of building and maintaining healthy, collaborative research partnerships. Gaventa and von Lieres, for example, noted how their collaborative approach transcended research and knowledge production, as well as North-South divides:

> *"We sought to co-construct knowledge across the network itself and between the researchers and the community stakeholders. As a result, one researcher said she began to understand collaboration itself 'as a political project', one that challenged the lines of power in the research-and-knowledge-production process. Others pointed out that in an international knowledge systems, Southern researchers often are mere spokes feeding into a northern knowledge hub. However, in this case, the collaboration and co-production across South-South lines was a way of challenging global inequalities" (p.4).*

And as Maclure notes:

> *" Despite the challenges and pitfalls, conducting collaborative North-South research offers real possibilities to strive for research excellence. Underlying North-South collaborative research is an acknowledgment that the cross-fertilization of knowledge and experience (i.e. across cultures, languages, and national boundaries, and across disciplines and professional domains) can greatly enrich the processes of knowledge accumulation and understanding"* (p.11)*.*

A key to successful collaboration is developing a shared overall conceptual framework. This is essential to supporting cohesive and rigorous data collection and analysis, as well as cross-context comparisons and learning.

Another key theme that emerged from our discussions was that community-based/ engaged research requires a broader understanding of ethics. This needs to go beyond the narrow "do no harm" approach of many university ethics boards that focuses on confidentiality and liability concerns. An ethics review should also include assessing how collaborative the research process is, how the research process will empower the community, and how it contributes to its decision making and knowledge-building.[viii]

Overall, there was a strong sentiment that we need to expand the understanding of what constitutes "quality" when it comes to assessing community-based and engaged research. Participation and influence are dimensions of growing importance in judging the quality of a research project. Indeed, the discussions suggest an emerging understanding that quality research is research that is empowering and puts community at the centre.

C. Influence

While there is merit in conducting pure research, the discussions at the Learning Forum affirmed the importance that research with communities and CSOs should influence not only the academic discussions, but also the policies and practices that frame local people's realities. To do this well, Michael Edwards argues, requires creative re-thinking of how we design, implement and communicate our research to achieve the maximum influence with the desired audiences.

For example, the traditional end-of-project academic outputs of publishing a paper in an academic journal or website may not always be the most effective means for achieving influence. Instead, researchers, CSOs and community members should utilize a diverse array of strategies to communicate the research findings and recommendations in order to resolve the tensions between scholarly recognition and having a practical impact locally. Whitman, Conradi and Holland's research on Children in Marine Piracy, for example, offered an example of how community-engaged research leads directly to developing actionable changes in practice, in this case for security agencies that interact with child soldiers at sea. The excellence of the research in this instance is reflected on how relevant and actionable the recommendations – in this case new Standard Operating Procedures -- are for the end users. As Cameron notes,

> *"Selecting appropriate forms of dissemination is … crucial to the success of any policy-oriented research project. This should not be surprising; however, the benchmarks of academic success continue to be publishing peer-reviewed articles and books and how often these are cited in other peer-reviewed publications. If producing research with real-world relevance is an actual goal of funding agencies, they must also look beyond peer-reviewed publications in deciding how to allocate research funding. Moreover, informal conversations with policy-makers are difficult to quantify as outputs in research reports are so often*

> *overlooked as important components of research projects that aim to impact policy and practice." (p. 10)*

Community-based and engaged research also challenges the notion of there being a linear relationship between research and change. As von Lieres and Gaventa write:

> *"In mainstream ways of thinking about the transmission of research to policy or public action, 'research utliziation' is a linear process that does not question the relationship of the researcher to those whose lives are being researched, or whose policies are being influenced. The assumed sequence is that a researcher produces high quality research that is communicated in professional journals to professional audiences, and which is then shared with various publics to bring about change [...] in our networks, this linear approach began to be challenged. In keeping with our more participatory research approaches, we began to see that the research process itself not only could produce knowledge, it could also simultaneously contribute to stimulating action, advocacy, and changes in policy, attitudes and beliefs." (p. 6).*

In participatory action research, the researcher also has an important role to play as facilitator of a collectively owned research agenda. Knowledge mobilization was a key focus of CCBR's research on community and mental health issues. Dissemination of results was an ongoing process throughout the research process – not just an output at the end of the research – and involved a number of in-person (e.g. conferences, roundtables for policy makers, theatre productions) and published components (e.g. peer-reviewed journals, research bulletins).

Several participants also challenged the conventional notion that research is only "impactful" if it influences governments and multilateral organizations. Langdon, for example, argues that "when research is owned by those at the center of the research, impact needs to be understood in relation to the change agendas they are working on" (p. 15). In a sense, as Luc Mougeot of IDRC's Canadian Partnerships noted, it is important to recognize the difference between knowledge creation and informed action, while understanding that the former is critical to making the latter possible.

D. Towards A New Understanding of "Research Quality"

In their evaluations of the Learning Forum, the participants shared how the discussions affirmed how the purpose of the research largely determines the extent to which each criteria of Research Excellence should be emphasised. The participants also affirmed the importance of understanding research excellence in a way that accounts for values and context, that stresses collaboration between academia and civil society, and that allows for the use of a range of methods to generate knowledge for social change.

The participants noted that the provisional framework for Research Excellence was very useful in reflecting on their experiences and in providing a working definition of research excellence. In this way, it served its intended purpose to synthesize our research into a

simple conceptual model, and to create a pedagogical space for dialogue amongst a very diverse group of participants, without imposing a rigid rubric or checklist of what constitutes Research Excellence.

However, the three-colour model did not work equality well for everyone, so on Day 2, the facilitation team adapted the program and invited the participants to work in groups to draw their own visual representation for "research excellence". The group task produced some lively discussions, and each table's diagrams illustrated different aspects of the concept (e.g. picturing research excellence as a rope with three strands wrapped around the core string of "purpose").

It also became apparent during the workshop that some participants had problems with the word "excellence" --- perhaps because "excellence" can be understood both as an indicator and as a target of quality that research should aspire to (i.e. research should be excellent, but it could also be merely good or poor). Instead, several participants advocated for using the term "research quality" with the understanding that quality is reflected in how the project addresses participation, methods or design and a broad understanding of influence.

While it would be incorrect to suggest that this Learning Forum produced the definitive framework for Research Excellence or Research Quality, we'd like to suggest a final synthesis diagram that reframes Research Excellence as "Research Quality" with four over-lapping categories that need to be considered in assessing research for sustainable development: Design, Influence, Participation, and Learning (see Figure 3: A Revised framework for "Research Quality").

In the end, while perhaps a subtle modification to our original framework, the addition of the fourth category of "learning" affirms Mathie, Peters and Legesse's recognition that the *learning process by which the knowledge is created* is just as important as the results, especially in action-research projects that value community engagement and change. As with the original proposed framework, all four categories are important, but the research purpose and context must define which of the "shades" or criteria are needed to provide an accurate picture of research quality.
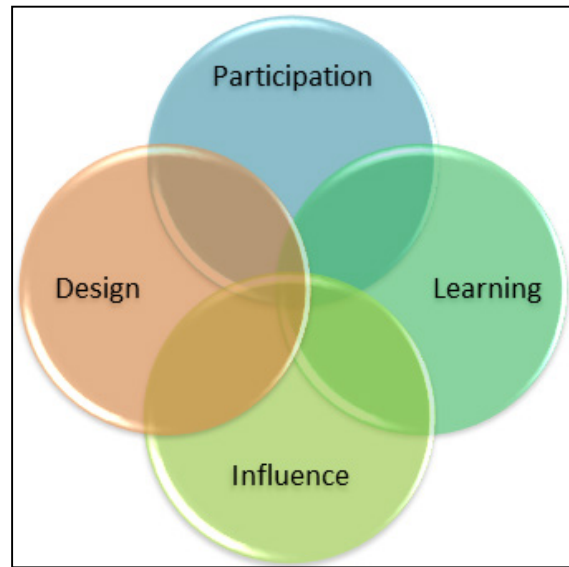
Figure 3: A Revised Framework for "Research Quality"

5. Continuing the Dialogue

This short report can only begin to convey the rich dialogue and peer learning that occurred throughout the different sessions at the 2013 Learning Forum. As Coady's John Gaventa noted in thanking IDRC at the end of Day 2, this was a critical opportunity to advance the discussion and affirm the value of community-based and -engaged research. However, the discussions at the Learning Forum affirmed a collective desire amongst the organizers and participants to strive for "quality" in all the research that they do, and to develop a multi-faceted understanding of what quality means for designing and conducting research with communities and CSOs.

The participants also recognized that this has implications for how we think about partnerships and capacity building, and they are eager to continue this dialogue through other venues with Coady and IDRC. Canadian Partnerships, for example, will continue to provide opportunities for funding for deeper reflection and development of these ideas, including providing guidance on the four categories of Research Quality to advance the discussions. This might include supporting the development of common standards for their fellowship and awards programs, or to support for continuing the conversation at the upcoming CASID conference in May 2014.

The discussions will also inform IDRC's Corporate Strategy and Evaluation Division's (CSED) wider project of drafting research excellence guidelines for assessing proposals, fellowships and awards and eventually in evaluating research projects. As CSED's Amy Etherington commented in her response at the end of Day 2, this learning forum provided an opportunity to do a "deep dive" into one type of research that IDRC supports, and confirmed that our understanding of "excellence" or "quality" needs to fit the purpose of the research. While not all the research that IDRC supports is necessarily community-based (CBR) or engaged (CER), IDRC can support the wider debate and legitimate CBR/CER approaches to research within funding circles.

Appendices

Appendix 1: List of Participants: Names and Organizations

Name	Organization
Eileen Alma	Coady International Institute
Doris Buss	Carleton University
John Cameron	Dalhousie University
Holly Catalfamo	Niagara College
Jean Christie	Food Security Policy Group
Carl Conradi	Child Soldiers
Sarah Dalle	USC
Michael Edwards	Future Positive
Amy Etheringon	International Development Research Centre
Fay Fletcher	University of Alberta
John Gaventa	Coady International Institute
Peter Gillespie	Halifax Initiative
Lucy Hargreaves	Aga Khan Foundation Canada
Dwayne Hodgson	Facilitator, learningcycle.ca
Jonathan Langdon	St. Francis-Xavier University
Solomon Legesse	Oxfam Canada
Edwin Maclellan	Cape Breton University
Richard Maclure	University of Ottawa
Loredana Marchetti	International Development Research Centre
Alison Mathie	Coady International Institute
Luc Mougeot	International Development Research Centre
Joanne Ochokha	Centre for Community Based Research
Sherry Pictou	Marine Resource Centre
Lauren Ravon	Oxfam Canada
Fraser Reilly-King	CCIC
John Saxby	COEP
Kendra Siekmans	Healthbridge
Eric Smith	International Development Research Centre
Liam Swiss	Memorial University of Newfoundland
Jean Symes	Interpares
Kevin Teather	UPEI
Claire Thompson	International Development Research Centre
Brian Tomlinson	AidWatch Canada
Bettina Von Lieres	Centre for Critical Development Studies, University of Toronto Scarborough
Ann Weston	International Development Research Centre

Appendix 2: Abstracts of Learning Forum Reflection Papers

Ten participants at the Learning Forum wrote papers reflecting on their experience of conducting research with communities through the lens of "research excellence".

Security Sector Interactions with Children in Marine Piracy

by Shelly Whitman, Carl Conradi and Sam Holland
Roméo Dallaire Child Soldier Initiative (www.childsoldiers.org)

A growing body of evidence suggests that children's recruitment into piratical activity is on the rise; however, most security sector actors (e.g. navies) continue to operate with little or no doctrinal guidance concerning how to interact with children at sea. This research project set out to:

1) determine the approximate prevalence of child maritime piracy off the coasts of East and West Africa;
2) identify the various factors that place children at elevated risk of recruitment by pirate gangs;
3) detail the methods by which adult pirates recruit children;
4) create a prescribed protocol for the ethical restraint, detention, interview and transfer of apprehended child pirates; and
5) uncover good practices that may have been developed *ad hoc* when security sector actors have been forced to engage with child pirates in the past.

The research findings will inform the Dallaire Initiative's advocacy for including child protection guidelines in key maritime doctrine.

Research excellence, in this case, was evident in the **relevance** of the research to the stakeholders, its **influence on practice** and **mutual benefit** for researchers and practitioners. But the researchers also encountered challenges due to the logistical and security situation, resistance to the research from community members who viewed child piracy as a legitimate form of community defence, and secrecy and lack of standardized reporting that made it challenging to obtain a broad quantitative and qualitative data set.

"Research excellence" in community health research in Togo

by Kendra Siekmans, HealthBridge Canada (www.healthbridge.ca)

Insecticide-treated bed nets (ITNs) are useful for effective malaria control but a consistent gap between net ownership and use has been observed. In this research project, Healthbridge Canada and its partners in Togo conducted a cluster randomized trial to evaluate the effectiveness of post-ITN campaign home visits by volunteers to enhance net hang-up and utilization. They found that households that received intervention visits, particularly the most recent intervention visit, had levels of use that were 5-10% higher than control households, while access was similar. Eight months post-campaign, ITN use by all individuals, children <5 y and women was 11.3 to 14.4 percentage points greater in the study arm that received all three intervention visits than in control communities. The results suggested that regular visits from community agents are useful in reinforcing key behaviour change communication (BCC) messages regarding the importance of using an ITN.

Siekman's paper reflects on the challenges of **maintaining scientific rigour** and **ensuring influence policy** and **practice**, while also optimizing **community engagement and capacity building.**

Taking Culture Seriously in Community Mental Health:
A community-university research initiative that moves research into action!
by Joanna Ochocka, Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR)
(www.communitybasedresearch.ca)
Taking Culture Seriously in Community Mental Health was a five-year research project that used
a participatory action research design that produced knowledge, mobilized knowledge and
mobilized communities for transformative change on mental health issues in Kitchener-Waterloo,
Ontario.

Ochocka's paper discusses how the project exemplified three elements of research excellence:
involvement of stakeholders, knowledge mobilization and impact on practice. The paper
discusses the inter-relationship between academic excellence and community relevance in PAR
research to address pressing social concerns**.** Finally, it discusses the researchers' role in
nurturing engagement.

Striving for Excellence in Collaborative Research in North-South Contexts:
by Richard Maclure, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa.
This paper reflects on the dynamics of research excellence in three research projects that the
author conducted in collaboration with civil-society organizations in the North and South:

1. an evaluation of an emergency-education program for displaced children in war-torn Sierra
   Leone with school principals and staff from Plan International;
2. a research project that focused on youth participation in NGO-sponsored community
   development activities in Senegal; and
3. a comparative study of youth social capital formation in three low-income neighbourhoods
   in the capital cities of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Canada.

Although different in focus and methods, the author discusses how all three projects were *striving
for research excellence* in terms of **developing a common conceptual framework to support
cohesive data collection and analysis, effective communication and coordination, and
shared ownership and stakeholder participation.**

The author also suggests some common characteristics that underlie research excellence,
including: grounding in theory and previous empirical studies; a sound but flexible research
design and methodology; fidelity to high ethical standards; an inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural
perspective; relevance of analysis for policy and practice; and effective dissemination of research
results.

Collective Research Focused on Change as Research Excellence
*by Jonathan Langdon, Assistant Professor, Development Studies Program and Adult Education
Department, St. Francis Xavier University*

Langdon's reflection on research conducted with and by the people of Ada in Ghana prioritizes
the transformative potential of research as the most important criteria of excellence. Specifically,
excellent research is exemplified when:
1. those at the center of the research own the research design and implementation process;
2. elements of the research are ultimately useful to the group at the center of the research,
   even while there may be other elements important to academic circles; and
3. research is not just about extracting information to know the world more fully; at its root,
   it's about changing power relations in ways defined by those at the heart of the research.

The International Small-Fisheries Learning Exchange: A People's PAR
by Sherry M. Pictou, Bay of Fundy Marine Resource Centre

Pictou reflects on how Participatory Action Research (PAR) constituted research excellence in the Bay of Fundy Marine Resource Centre's work to plan and implement the *International Small Scales Fisheries Learning Exchange* (ISSFLE), a policy-formation and capacity program for small-scale fishers. By using a PAR "spiral model" of action and reflection, the program evolved organically in response to the needs of a rich tapestry of relationships….The paper discusses the value of using a more political, critical participatory learning and action research approach (or People's PAR). The paper explores how three of the proposed research excellence criteria were particularly important:

1. the **relevance of the research to the needs of the community**,
2. the **timeliness** of the research vis-à-vis opportunities to participate in policy formation, and
3. the **originality** of the research in how indigenous practices like talking circles and ceremonies informed their approach to PAR and provided an opportunity for intercultural learning.

Testing an asset-based, community-driven development approach: 10 years of action research in Ethiopia
by Brianne Peters and Alison Mathie, Coady International Institute, and Solomon Legesse, Oxfam Canada in Ethiopia.

In 2003, graduates of the Coady Institute piloted an Asset-Based Community-Driven (ABCD) development approach in five communities in Ethiopia. Over ten years of collaboration, the project evolved and incorporated a number of new methods (e.g. Most Significant Change). In this project, research, learning, action and reflection were inter-connected as the participants uncovered new strengths, regrouped and initiated new activities. Over time, this innovation was complemented by a more formal evaluation process.

The authors note how three research excellence criteria were illustrated in this project:

1. **quality of research design** – in this case, a mixed methods design that took into account different stakeholder's decision-making needs;
2. **timeliness** to the needs of the community and other stakeholders – which are often different needs; and
3. **strengthening knowledge and other capacities**, but in ways that supported "downward" accountability (e.g. by taking systematic "time-outs" for reflection and dialogue) and that didn't rely on external experts.

Reflections on Excellence in Academic-Civil Society Research Collaboration on Indigenous Self-Governance in Bolivia
by John Cameron, Dalhousie University

This research-action project was designed by Fundación TIERRA, in response to constitutional and legal changes in Bolivia in 2009-10 that recognized the rights of Indigenous peoples to create systems of self-governance or autonomy, according to their own local norms of decision-making.

The paper discusses four relevant criteria for research excellence:

1. **strengthening the local research capacities** within the partner NGO;
2. **producing research outputs relevant to policy formation** at a variety of levels; (communities, NGOs, central government) and promoting the implementation of indigenous rights to self-governance;
3. producing **empirically and theoretically insightful academic research**; and
4. **engaging indigenous communities in the research** and **strengthening** their **research capacity**.

Mulheres Mil Impact Assessment: Building research capacity across nations
by Holly Catalfamo, Niagara Community College

The Mulheres Mil program began as a collaboration between Canada and Brazil to provide vulnerable women with life skills, education, and vocational training. Having met the initial goal to provide training to 1,000 women, the program was extended nation-wide with a goal of reaching 100,000 women by 2014.

The Mulheres Mil Impact Assessment (MMIA) project is developing research tools and methodology to allow Brazilian stakeholders to measure the impact of the Mulheres Mil program for the women and their families, the educational institutions and their staff, and the broader community. The paper outlines how the project demonstrated academic rigor, attention to ethics, contribution to knowledge, relevance to community needs, and impact on policy and practice, and collaboration.

Development Research Excellence in Transnational Research Collaborations
by Bettina von Lieres (Centre for Critical Development Studies, University of Toronto Scarborough) and John Gaventa (Coady International Institute, St. Francis Xavier University)

While in the past development research might have focused on particular projects or institutions, increasingly more research is conducted in wider research and knowledge networks, often with multiple partners, spanning countries, disciplines, policy and practice, and north and south. An important assumption behind this strategy is that complex global problems require complex global networks, which can produce knowledge for development that go beyond the insights of any particular perspective or actor. While the potential of such knowledge networks is great, little is known about which practices build and sustain research excellence in these complex research networks.

This reflection paper examines lessons-learned about research excellence in the *Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability*. Funded by DFID from 2000 – 2011, the Citizenship DRC involved over 60 researchers in 20 countries, with seven core institutional partners based in Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Mexico, Nigeria and South Africa. The paper discusses the following research excellence criteria:

- multiple forms of research outputs;
- strengthened of capacities on individuals, research institutions and networks;
- the sustainability of these individuals, research institutions and networks; and
- broader changes in policy, practice, discourse and attitudes to which the collaborative research has contributed.

It also recommends considering a number of additional criteria:
- how research contributes to change at multiple levels; and
- the degree to which the research project changes the researchers themselves, and creates capacities, networks and skills for ongoing contributions to research excellence

Appendix 3: Text of Presentation by Michael Edwards

Freedom, Friction and the Future
of Knowledge for Social Change

The following is the text of a speech given by Michael Edwards on November 12 at a public lecture at the Coady International Institute. Michael is a Distinguished Senior Fellow at Demos, and the editor of Transformation, an online journal of Open Democracy. You can find more of his work at http://www.futurepositive.org.

A video of his talk can be viewed at http://www.coady.stfx.ca/coady/events/edwards/

Thanks to all of you for coming here this afternoon and everyone else who's watching via the webcast. I'm here, like most of you I suspect, because I believe passionately that - far from being an add-on to the "real" work or something that's reserved for leisurely endeavours in libraries - the pursuit of knowledge is centrally related to the transformation of society.

But exactly how central - how knowledge and social change are connected to each other in concrete terms - is a hugely challenging question that I've been struggling with the whole of my working life - and I mean struggling: I'm not speaking here tonight as some kind of magician who can pull rabbits out of hats in order to solve the dilemmas we're discussing. But I do have some experience which I hope can be useful, and in the next 35 minutes I want to share with you some of the lessons I've learned and some thoughts on the challenges that lie ahead.

There are lots of pathways we could use to explore these relationships, but I've chosen one that seems especially topical right now, and that's the struggle between "freedom and friction" as I put it in my title. Because it seems to me that we currently enjoy an unprecedented amount of freedom to create knowledge and share it with others, often in new and exciting ways that are much more open, egalitarian, empowering and democratic. But at the same time, freedom is not an unalloyed good in relation to social change, because it can overwhelm us with information, and because it provides more opportunities for knowledge to be captured and manipulated by vested interests. And that's why we need friction as I call it, applied in the form of both rigor and democracy.

How we manage the inevitable tensions that exist between freedom and friction will, I think, determine the extent to which knowledge is or is not a liberating force in the future, a central foundation for building democratic societies or simply another asset whose control and ownership is superimposed on pre-existing patterns of inequality and power. So that's my central thesis. But before I go any further let me be clear what I mean when I use the phrase "knowledge for social change."

How do we know what we know? It's an interesting question isn't it – because we found it in Wikipedia maybe, or because someone we trust told us it was true, from a recognized expert or professor, because "you can't argue with the numbers" as the saying goes, or maybe more from our own experience and intuition. Do we really look for knowledge, or just for opinions that confirm what we already believe? Outside the science laboratory there is no objectively-verifiable, universal or unambiguous truth, so knowledge for social change is always something that has to be negotiated and struggled over. And in this process of negotiation hierarchies of knowledge are created that rank different forms according to their supposed usefulness and legitimacy, but if we're honest with each other we probably don't agree on the results they produce.

The one I use is fairly simple, though it's a closer to an ecosystem of complementary approaches to knowledge and knowing rather than a hierarchy, and it consists of four things that nestle inside of each other like a stack of Russian dolls: data, information, knowledge and wisdom. Data equals numbers, which are usually essential but only form the basis for a conversation about their meaning; information is data plus other inputs that constitute the raw material for knowledge production; knowledge is information that has been analysed, tested and processed in one way or another; and wisdom is the ability to utilize knowledge effectively in action.

It's difficult to develop a wise approach to social change without having at least some data that describe what is happening, but there are plenty of examples of data that aren't used very wisely – so in that sense wisdom is the highest form of knowledge because it contains all the others. Knowledge is a like a toolkit with lots of different tools that have to be used according to the circumstances. A hammer and a screwdriver are not in competition with each other, just as

randomized control trials and story-telling can be equally valuable and legitimate. What matters is how these different forms of knowledge fit together to form a comprehensive picture.

So much for knowledge, but what about knowledge for social change – what does that mean? For me it doesn't mean knowledge that one particular group happens to agree with, whether defined by politics, issues or identities - that would be far too parochial. Instead I think it means knowledge that animates the generalized forces of public debate, collective action and governance that combine to foster social change over long periods of time. "In democratic countries" said Alexis de Toqueville in the 1840s, "the knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge." He was talking about the knowledge (both theoretical and practical) that is necessary for successful collective action, but I think the same observation applies to different forms of knowledge that are required to equip people to participate effectively in democracy, community-building, social accountability, public policy debates or simply understanding who they are and what is going on around them as a precondition for successful social action – what's been described as "civic" or "public" knowledge. Knowledge of this kind doesn't automatically shift power relations or produce social change, but without it no social change is possible because the processes that underlie it would be irremediably weakened.

So, knowledge for social change consists of ecosystems of data, information, knowledge and wisdom that are used to animate the public sphere and support the agency of people who want to change the world for the better. Now that we've sorted that one out, let's move on to consider the struggle between freedom and friction that provides the context in which these processes are taking shape.

For anyone who's involved in the world of knowledge these are exciting times, and that's principally because we have more freedom than ever before to create, share and communicate with one another. Obviously the impact of the worldwide web and social media has been tremendously important here, and although information technologies have some ambiguous social and political effects, it's indisputable that they lower the costs and increase the speed, ease and reach of information exchange, enabling an unprecedented level of access to knowledge, assuming of course that you have an internet connection.

It's also true that experimentation is growing, with lots of new or different ways of producing and communicating knowledge without having to be restricted by conventional boundaries. Co-creation is much more common nowadays, made easier by techniques like data visualization and storytelling which require fewer credentials and less research training. In fact the production of knowledge is experiencing the same process of disintermediation that is common to other forms of production in the modern economy – meaning that large intermediary institutions like universities and think tanks are being challenged, and eventually may be replaced, by new kinds of knowledge organizations and brokers like distributed networks.

That's especially important at a time when higher education is moving towards a more corporate model that delivers highly specialized and highly profitable knowledge to other academics or on contract to governments and businesses on the one hand, and much more basic knowledge or information to students at the lowest cost possible on the other. In many parts of the world, the social change role of the university is being eroded, but one could argue that this trend is counterbalanced by the explosion of knowledge communities outside of formal education, especially as those communities tend to be populated and animated by a different knowledge culture, particularly among younger people who are less comfortable with traditional hierarchies of knowledge production or fixed standards of legitimacy – and that's great news for disadvantaged or marginalized communities.

Of course there are some threats to all this freedom and diversity and experimentation from some quarters – notably government censorship and surveillance, and because the infrastructure of communications (including social media and the web) is still owned by corporations - but it's very

difficult to block the emerging processes of knowledge production and sharing since they can simply move elsewhere.

So increasingly the message is clear: if you want to create knowledge then go ahead – you don't need to play by someone else's rules any longer. And believe me I know what an exciting prospect that is. I launched a new web magazine in July to tell the stories of people who are transforming their societies (www.opendemocracy.net/transformation): it was started for peanuts, it runs on a shoestring, it's totally open access and it's already reached over a quarter of a million readers in 115 countries in its first four months. So if you are not making the absolute most of the freedom that's now available to generate and communicate knowledge for social change, then it's time to get moving.

But, and it's a very significant "but," freedom is not an unalloyed good, and it doesn't by itself solve the problems of knowledge for social change, for two reasons. Firstly, it's increasingly difficult to make sense of information and channel it in the right directions when there's so much of it about. It's like drinking from the proverbial fire hose, so why make the problem even worse by generating more "water?" On pretty much every issue that's important (and here I'm being a bit provocative), it's not that we lack information or even knowledge about what we have to do; the problem is that the knowledge we do have is ignored or disputed.

But maybe that's inevitable: the more information we have and the lower the barriers to entry, the more accessible it is and the more filters we are going to need to check facts, scrutinize statements, make advocacy claims more transparent, balance different views, ensure that there are no missing voices or simply make more sense of all this stuff – to process and convert data and information into wisdom.

And because we have a volume problem we also have problems of speed and superficiality, because time is squeezed out, attention spans are shortening, and increasingly only short-form argumentation is prioritized. Welcome to the world of the ever-shorter executive summary, the mandatory op-ed as a substitute for the essay, and the front-loaded books that publishers now demand because they know that people will only read the first chapter, if they read anything at all. "Read less, know more" is the title of new series of short books from the Guardian. If you thought that getting your message across in 140 characters on twitter was tough, try the new generation of text apps like KakaoTalk and WeChat that are taking traffic away from Facebook – and if you don't know what the hell I'm talking about then grab someone under the age of 25 at the reception afterwards and ask them!

"Once I was scuba diver in a sea of words" writes one critic, "now I zip along the surface of knowledge like a guy on a jet ski." Who will have the time, commitment and courage to delve deeply into the world of knowledge for social change under such conditions, and what might we lose as a result? Speed and convenience don't lend themselves to the interrogation of assumed truths and uncontested facts.

Who needs an editor when everyone has a blog or can submit material to sites like Huffington Post that accept or reject it virtually unchanged? Who needs peer review when publishers and donors are more interested in controversy and KLOUT scores? Indeed, who needs a university, an institution that may end up as outmoded in the next century as the Encyclopedia Britannica is today?

The second problem with the unprecedented freedom we enjoy is that it creates more opportunities for knowledge to be used or manipulated for political, ideological or commercial ends, and not for social change. Those who celebrate freedom see an emerging "knowledge commons," but a "knowledge industry" might be more realistic. The playing field for knowledge production is never level, nor is it populated by people whose only goal is truth for its own sake - it's a battlefield of different interests that all use knowledge to advance their objectives, and therefore adapt it, twist it, and filter it to support their goals. Of course this includes you and me

(don't tell me you're immune to these tendencies since I'm certainly not). We all shy away from discordant information, especially when it contradicts our sacred cows about social change. But the art of thinking is supposed to be painful and difficult because our assumptions have to be exposed and tested.

Some of this manipulation is straightforwardly commercial – like paying to promote one of your posts on Facebook or what Wikipedia calls "non-neutral editing," or the email I received last week from something called the Banner Alzheimer's Institute that invited me to a briefing and promised to pay me $100 if I wrote a short blog post afterwards. It was only when I read the small print that I found out the Institute was linked to a drug company called Genetech which is pursuing trials of a new drug to treat Alzheimer's, and that my blog would be expected to extol its many virtues.

That's a small example of a much bigger problem that you'll know well if you work in a university in which only certain kinds of research attract commercial sponsorship, or if you work in a think tank that's funded by foundations or corporate donors who all have their own knowledge agendas. Increasingly we get the knowledge that someone, somewhere is willing to pay for.

But of course knowledge is also manipulated for political or ideological ends. Advocacy campaigns become obsessed with marketing a limited range of ideas instead of engaging with the public in a search for genuine understanding. Internet trolls and sock puppets (or users with assumed identities) post deliberately misleading commentary on articles. "Astro-turfing" is spreading – creating the false impression that your ideas have mass support. And of course many people who produce and disseminate knowledge are simply barefaced liars.

These problems aren't always due to deliberate misbehaviour. It may be that the same body of knowledge is simply read differently by different groups. That's what's happening in the USA around charter schools for example (private schools run on business lines in the public school system), where both pro- and anti-reform factions draw different conclusions from the same evidence base. Or take the example of so-called "golden rice" – genetically modified and vitamin enriched varieties that are seen as a saviour or a Trojan horse by researchers and activists who are measuring and evaluating them against different criteria.

At its most developed, the goal of overtly-politicized knowledge production is to dominate the entire intellectual environment in which decisions are made, from academic journal articles to op-eds in major newspapers, since that's the best way to embed the dominance of your ideas in the body politic and the popular imagination. Ultimately, opinion and ideology become fact or common sense – something that's already happening around the role of markets and privatization in the provision of public services, for example.

So, as a result of these two developments - information overload and the ease of manipulation - knowledge is increasingly a sphere in which a certain amount of oversight and accountability are actually essential to the goals of social change. And that's why friction is so important. Friction slows things down, it gets in the way of easy decision making by promoting participation, and it gives more people a voice in the knowledge production process. Like rocks in a stream, friction helps us to surface, discuss and negotiate different views and interpretations. The absence of friction might seem attractive when we want to create knowledge for social change, but it can actually privilege powerful interests that lurk in the background. So - paradoxically perhaps - friction in the form of restraints, rules and standards is needed to preserve freedom and independence in knowledge production, and to avoid this process from being dominated by vested interests.

So, how can friction be applied? I think there are two main ways – one is through the application of rigor, and the other is through the practice of democracy. These forces often pull in different directions, since rigor implies some degree of closure and hierarchy (or at least verticality), while democracy demands openness and equality (or at least horizontal connections), but both are important. You could say that these tensions are embedded in the nature of the work we are

doing, especially if like me you are a social scientist. That phrase trips off the tongue, but remember that it's made up from two separate and different words - the social and the scientific - that are woven around contrasting strands of DNA.

It may sound anachronistic to defend ideas about academic rigor in a conversation about knowledge for social change, but that's what I'm going to do, because rigor is crucial in unmasking ideology and self-interest in knowledge production: the painstaking parsing out of problems and solutions; the interrogation of costs and benefits as objectively as possible; the ability to identify the individual pieces of a puzzle and put them together in patterns that can inform decision-making; the skills of presenting different theories of change so that evidence can be re-evaluated from different perspectives; the depth of understanding that's built up by studying similar phenomena or regions over long periods of time; the potential for accountability that results from the deliberate distancing of oneself from a predetermined position; and the freedom, independence and sheer bloody-mindedness to stand apart from the crowd and shout out "no, this emperor has no clothes."

All these facets of rigor are vital to knowledge for social change, and they are one big reason why the involvement of academics and other trained researchers can be so important in research partnerships with communities and civil society organizations. Rigor isn't the exclusive property of the university of course, but it may well be easier to practice and protect there despite the trend towards corporatization I highlighted earlier. Of course this kind of friction can also work against social change – I mentioned censorship earlier but we should also recognize trends in philanthropy and foreign aid towards a more technocratic approach to knowledge production, even what one writer calls "quantiphilia" – the privileging of numbers as indicators of rigorous research. As donors and governments move more and more towards payment by results and value for money, how these concepts are measured and interpreted become crucial questions for the politics of knowledge, and that's one reason why we need another kind of friction that is rooted in democracy and participation, so that the definition and application of rigor itself can be contested.

Any definition of what is valuable or good or meaningful in knowledge for social change has to be democratically negotiated, since there are no universally accepted reference points or measurements. Such judgments always depend on context, position and culture, and they are based on the biased and partial perspectives and priorities of different individuals. "Research excellence," which is the title of the IDRC-funded Forum that is going on at the Coady Institute this week – could mean something quite narrow if defined in terms of traditional standards of academic rigor, or something very broad if defined to include other criteria including relevance to policy and action, participation and empowerment of those who are involved in the research process, and capacity development in the communities or NGOs concerned.

Structuring the coproduction of knowledge in more democratic or participatory terms is itself a useful form of friction, as anyone who has been involved in partnerships between researchers and communities or civil society groups will attest. Such relationships are rarely easy or comfortable because of differences in cultures, timescales, priorities, language, education and technical expertise. But that's a good thing, because friction of this kind generates innovation and added value for both sides.

My experience suggests that whenever you encounter such tensions then it's best to acknowledge them so that they can be addressed, not to ignore them or pretend they don't exist. In some situations they may be unbridgeable, so you go your separate ways. But more often than not (as the case studies from the IDRC forum suggest), such differences are manageable if you have good human relationships, flexibility on all sides, and a supportive context so that the sponsors of research and others are not breathing down your neck. When researchers and activists agree to accompany each-other over a substantial number of years so that trust and mutual understanding can develop, collaborative skills can be strengthened, and areas of common ground and disagreement discovered, aired and resolved (or not), most of these

problems seem to drift away. But maintaining this kind of continuity is important because the links between research and action or research and influence are usually non-linear and unpredictable. It may not be that final, official report that makes the difference, but an unplanned conversation that you had in the corridor of a government department, for example. So you have to be prepared to give things time and to go with the flow, and be willing to be uncomfortable in the gray zones, the ambiguous, neither one-thing-nor-another spaces in which knowledge for social change is co-created.

In conclusion, we have to make the best of both freedom and friction in order to make knowledge a more powerful force for social change. And that means three things. First, stretching our imaginations about the nature of knowledge production to take advantage of the freedom we have to invent new modalities and methods. Second, developing better ways of imposing friction around these efforts to safeguard knowledge for social change, rooted in both rigor and democracy. And third, forging new communities of practice, partnerships and knowledge networks that provide the infrastructure for these other two tasks.

The upshot is that those of us who are committed to this path face a never-ending balancing act between different demands and priorities – the equivalent of keeping lots of spinning plates in the air simultaneously and hoping that none of them crash to the ground. There is no perfect way of doing this - no text book or model project, no training course or magic bullet. To inhere within yourself all of the worlds of knowledge and action, freedom and friction, rigor and democracy, is immensely demanding at both the human and the methodological levels - which is why knowledge for social change requires continuous personal and political commitment. This is what lies ahead for those of us who seek to contribute to the transformation of society with our hands, our hearts and our heads conjoined. I wish you the best of luck in that endeavour, and thank you for listening.

Endnotes

i   Quoted in A.F. Laidlaw, 1961, The Campus and the Community: the global impact of the Antigonish Movement, Canada: Harvest House Limited, p. 63.

ii   Research excellence is a term that is widely used governments and universities to promote collaborative research programs on specific topics (e.g. the "Centres of Excellence" that have been formed to promote multi-disciplinary partnerships between academia, industry, government and not-for-profit organizations. For example, see http://www.nce-rce.gc.ca/NetworksCentres-CentresReseaux/NCE-RCE_eng.asp or the Network of Centres of Excellence http://www.nce-rce.gc.ca/ReportsPublications-RapportsPublications/NCE-RCE/ProgramGuide-GuideProgramme_eng.asp). However, the criteria that these centres use to define "excellence" are not always explicitly defined.

iii   Mendez, Ethel. "What's in Good?" Research report, International Development Research Centre, 2013. http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Documents/Lit-review-Final-English.pdf

iv See also :

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v A list of the Learning Forum participants can be found in Appendix 1.

vi These 18 provisional research excellence criteria were derived primarily from:
    Singh, Suneeta, Priyanka Dubey, Apurva Rastogi, and Daniel Vail. May 2013.
    Syed M. Ahmed, and Ann-Gel S. Palermo. June 2010.

vii The Coady Diploma students who participated in the fishbowl panel were:

- **Hermann Nare**, Fédération des Professionels agricoles du Burkina, Burkina Faso
- **Celine Ebere Osukwu**, Divine Foundation for Disabled Persons / Committee for Defence of Human Rights, Nigeria
- **Zuhra Aman**, Skills Training and Rehabilitation Society (STARS), Afghanistan
- **Serliah Nur**, State Islamic University Alauddin, Indonesia
- **Nur Kholis**, State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN) Indonesia, and
- **"Kuldeep SIngh,** India

The students discussed the following questions:

- What in your experience are examples of excellent research with communities? What are the "ingredients" of this "excellence"?
- What are the challenges of conducting research with local communities?
- What is your experience of working with external researchers? How can researchers from the Global South best partner with their counterparts from the North?
- What challenges or questions would you like to put to this group of Canadian Researchers?

viii CCIC has a code of ethics for development work that could be adapted for community-engaged and community-based research.