# Transforming Knowledge for Futures of Humanity

## *Dr. Rajesh Tandon[1]*



"Knowledge is a garden, if it is not cultivated, it cannot be harvested. Many different plants make the garden beautiful and useful to humanity"; emphasizing the rich history of African knowledge systems, epistemologies and contributions, President Sahle-Work Zewde (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia) also deplored the colonial domination by western science that justified slavery, racism and apartheid in Africa. "Africa's indigenous knowledge has the power to inspire global solidarity and contribute to the creation of a just and equitable global system", she invited delegates to explore pathways towards the same.[2]

Thus began UNESCO conference on "Transforming Knowledge for Africa's Future" in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), September 30 - October 2, 2024. Organized jointly with African Union and

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[1] Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Founder-President of PRIA and Co-Chair of UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, organized several sessions at the '*Transforming Knowledge for Africa's Future*' (International Forum of UNESCO Chairs and Partners, convened by the African Union Commission and UNESCO), held at Addis Ababa, during September 30 – October 02, 2024.

[2] UNESCO (2024). Transforming Knowledge for Africa's Future, International Forum of UNESCO Chairs and Partners convened by the African Union Commission and UNESCO, September 30 – October 02, 2024.
https://www.unesco.org/en/transforming-knowledge-africas-future

International Forum of UNESCO Chairs, the deliberations by nearly 300 delegates (two-thirds from Africa) began to articulate a new consensus about knowledge and sustainable development.

The seeds of this conference emerged from the debates during the international conference to mark 30th anniversary of UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs held in Paris November 3-4, 2022. In his opening address, African intellectual Professor Achille Mbembe spoke about the need for recognizing diversity of knowledge and valuing knowledge commons for sustainable futures[3]. Summarizing the deliberations at this conference, Sobhi Tawil, Director of the Future of Learning and Innovation Division, UNESCO, appealed:

"Established dominant models of knowledge generation, validation, distribution, and ultimately use, cannot possibly respond to the intersecting multi-dimensional crises we face today"[4].

The Addis conference was designed to focus on exploration of meanings for transforming knowledge, especially for Africa's future, but inevitably linked to global futures. Its focus was explained:

"Knowledge is key to radically changing course towards a more just and sustainable future... Acknowledging, valuing and mobilizing diverse ways of knowing...has implications for research"[5].

Three strands of conversations deepened the meaning and practice of 'Transforming Knowledge'.

**First** strand focused on understanding the perspectives of 'knowledge ecologies'[6]: "*The knowledge systems that served the colonizers' interests were considered by them to be superior and universal in their application and scope, whilst colonizers often delegitimized the knowledge systems of the colonized as being provincial and based on superstitious beliefs rather than on 'objective' truth.*"

This perspective implies that western cannons and definitions of knowledge, research and science have promoted 'monoculture' of research. This calls for understanding diverse knowledge cultures and systems, beyond the academic[7]. The stories of diverse knowledge systems were passionately illustrated during the conference. Professor Helene Timpoko of Ivory Coast argued how agriculture, land management and water systems in western regions of sub-Saharan Africa continue to be sustainable utilizing local indigenous knowledge. Professor

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[3] Mbembe, A. (2023). Pathways of Tomorrow: Contribution to Thinking Commensurate with the Planet. UNESCO Working Paper 32.

[4] UNESCO (2022). Transforming Knowledge for Just and Sustainable Futures. International conference to mark 30th anniversary of the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme.

[5] UNESCO (2024). Transforming Knowledge for Africa's Future, September 30 – October 02, 2024.

[6] Tikly, L. (2024). **Transforming Knowledge and Research for Just and Sustainable Futures: Towards a New Social Imaginary for Higher Education**. UNESCO Education Research and Foresight Working Paper 33, pp. 03. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000390388

[7] Lepore, W., Hall, B. & Tandon, R. (2024). **Bridging Knowledge Cultures: Rebalancing Power in the Co-Construction of Knowledge**. Brill. https://brill.com/display/title/69418?language=en

Alice Lamwaka of Uganda described rejuvenation and systematization of indigenous knowledge about herbal medicine with Acholi-speaking women of Gulu region.

A related strand of conversation was 'decolonizing' knowledge. Much of higher education system in Africa (as elsewhere) is modeled after European (and American) system. Disciplines, curriculum and pedagogy are all borrowed and implanted. Research and teaching in such institutions is disconnected from the local African society. Thus, decolonization of knowledge requires critical review of concepts and theories of each domain and discipline of knowledge.

Deep reflections during the conference began to clarify that 'decolonizing' is not merely a cognitive, intellectual exercise. As forcefully articulated by Professor Catherine Odora-Hoppers (Gulu University, Uganda), decolonizing entails personal, emotional and normative renewal for each of us to appreciate diverse ecologies of knowledge. At the centre of local community and indigenous knowledge is the understanding of diverse cultures and languages. Africa has nearly 2000+ languages, many of them disappearing rapidly. Language is the expression of indigenous knowledge embedded in local culture which has spiritual and normative perspectives of such local indigenous communities. Hence, Wangoola Wangoola, a Busoga elder from Uganda, spoke about working with 'mother-tongue scholars'. This journey of decolonizing personal renewal, including immersion in local language and culture, is as relevant for African scholars as for non-Africans.

The **second** stream of reflections centered around perspectives around open science recommendations[8]. It became clear that much of the focus in operationalization of Open Science is limited to open access and open infrastructure. Hardly any serious efforts are being made in Africa, or elsewhere, to operationalize the other two strands.....public engagement and dialogue with multiple knowledge systems. As Ismail Rofols[9] argued, digital storage is seen as universal solution for both open access and open infrastructure. This approach is blind, and hence discriminatory, to large parts of Africa, and indeed the global south, where major obstacles to affordable, continuous and high-capacity digital internet continue to perpetuate digital divide. A positive development in this regard is the recent UN-led 'Global Digital Compact' universally endorsed by all states as a part of the 'Pact of the Future'.

The conference also was an exciting space for sharing of innovative ways in which digital technology is being harnessed to support systematization of African indigenous knowledge. Professor Heike from Namibia is promoting pluriversal co-design of digital technology with indigenous communities such that their own world-views shape the solutions. In a world driven and controlled by universal tech-apps and invisible tech designers, including AI, it is

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[8] UNESCO (2021). **Recommendation on Open Science**.
https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379949

[9] Rafols, I., Meijer, I. & Molas-Gallart, J. (2024). **Monitoring Open Science as Transformative Change: Towards a Systematic Framework**. *Research on Research, Policy & Culture*.
https://f1000research.com/articles/13-320/v1

important that control over technology is effectively shared with local, indigenous communities.

The **third** stream in the conference began with exploration of the history of knowledge partnerships in Africa. Recalling the legacy of external control partnerships need to transcend previously practiced 'mercenary, missionary or mining' approaches to collaboration, as illustrated by Professor Moira Faul (Switzerland). Building fair over research agendas, methodologies and funding, Professor George Openjuru (Uganda) argued for a reversal of research partnerships, starting from the agenda of local communities. Such and equitable research partnerships in Africa, and elsewhere in global south or excluded north, have been a subject of much intellectual contestation. While the rhetoric of mutually beneficial partnerships and co-construction of knowledge have been endlessly propounded, the practice continues to show unequal power relationships[10]. Several innovative practices of co-construction of knowledge in respectful partnerships with local actors were also shared. Alois, a Masai Elder from Tanzania, described how knowledge partnerships in their communities are land- & place-based, including 'nature' as a living collaborator. African Centre for training of next generation of participatory researchers illustrated innovative knowledge-for-Change (K4C) curriculum and pedagogy by David Monk (Uganda) and Rene Oosthuizen (South Africa).

Reflections on rebalancing power in research partnerships during the conference reiterated well established principles of 'fair & equitable partnerships'[11]. While understanding ecologies of knowledge is pre-requisite for such fair and equitable partnerships, more critical is the renewal of institutional structures at all levels. Research culture, systems and protocols at university level need overhaul; likewise, guidelines, templates and decision structures in national and global research funding institutions need to be radically redesigned to support equity. Thus, urgent actions need to be undertaken within African institutions, as well as from outside.

Primarily comprising of academics, I missed participation of practitioners, community and indigenous leaders in the debates during the conference. I also hope that such conversations on transforming knowledge need be curated in other regions as well, especially Asia and Latin America. It was heartening to find reaffirmation of our Chair's framework of Knowledge Democracy[12] in the debates and recommendations in the conference.

Concrete actions alone, not mere recommendations, would shift the course for humanity.

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[10] Lepore, W., Hall, B. & Tandon, R. (2024). **Bridging Knowledge Cultures: Rebalancing Power in the Co-Construction of Knowledge**. Brill. https://brill.com/display/title/69418?language=en

[11] **'Promoting Fair and Equitable Research Partnerships to respond to Global Challenges'**, collaborative research report prepared by Christian Aid, INTRAC, Praxis and UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, funded by UK Research and Innivation, 2018.
https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/fair-and-equitable-partnerships_research-report-public-1.pdf

[12] Hall, B. & Tandon, R. (2021). **Socially Responsible Higher Education: International Perspectives on Knowledge Democracy**. Brill. https://brill.com/edcollbook-oa/title/59847?language=en

As Stefania Giannini, Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO, stated in the conference:

"*We now face an existential choice between continuing on an unsustainable path or radically changing course. To do this, we must change the way we define, produce and use knowledge systems, if we are to shape alternative futures for Africa and for humanity.*"