

KNOWLEDGE AND ENGAGEMENT

Building Capacity for the Next Generation of
Community Based Researchers



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CASE STUDY 16

Partners for Urban Knowledge Action and Research (PUKAR): Barefoot Researchers for Better Communities, India

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Introduction

PUKAR began in 2001 as an incubator of new urban knowledge production, anchored in the local yet shaped by the global processes. Ideated by Professor Arjun Appadurai and the late Professor Carol Breckenridge, PUKAR recognizes the centrality of a space for reflection, conversation and activism for fostering inclusive, sustainable urbanization processes and cities.

PUKAR began its engagement in Community Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) in 2005 with the Youth Fellowship Program (YFP). Drawing upon Professor Arjun Appadurai's essay "Right To Research" this fellowship, anchored in the principle of 'experiential learning' aims to *democratize knowledge, thus challenging the mode of knowledge creation, profiles of the creators and ownership of such knowledge*. PUKAR uses CBPAR as a tool for alternative pedagogy, advocacy for and interventions in the community and transformations. Its approach enables youth to become leaders and change-makers in their communities. PUKAR's past experience has informed us that this unique process of knowledge creation through multiple epistemologies and community based action-research from the lens of the youth has a strong transformative power for social change in the youth, their families, the communities and the society at large. The youth become critical thinkers, conscious and assertive citizens and leaders of their communities, thus enhancing the quality of life for themselves and their cities.

The conceptual framework of Youth Fellowship (YF) is based upon privileging indigenous knowledge located within each youth, and her community (asset based) helping them to build upon that knowledge and document the new knowledge in any format that *suits their capacity and creativity*. Therefore the youth while conducting the research is simultaneously the learner and a knowledge producer. The unique

part is that the research is posited in their neighbourhoods and anchored in their living experiences, thus creating distinctive knowledge about the city which is perhaps seldom possible in the high end, strongly academic, research based formal institutions.

PUKAR conducts research-action under three distinct rubrics using CBPAR with certain variations in the instrument.

1. Youth and Urban Knowledge Production
2. Urbanism: Spatial Utopia and Contested Realities
3. Healthy Cities and Wealthy Cities

Deep community engagement is the constant factor in all three rubrics but the intensity differs from program to program, it being strongest in health related programs. In each the focus is on marginalized city youth that cannot avail formal education systems on multiple accounts.

1. Youth and Urban Knowledge Production

A group of marginalized youth, supported by facilitators, resources persons, workshops, debates and dialogues are provided with research and communication skills and they conduct research over one year in their community. They partake in the research design based upon the needs assessment of the community and they collect the data. Armed with their research data, together they design, advocate, disseminate and implement change in their communities. These Barefoot Researchers (BRs) use the city itself as a learning lab to build new knowledge *without the intermediary of a formal structure of learning that tends to otherwise distance them from their contexts.* In this process, the youth get exposed to existing hierarchies and social, cultural and economic diversities of the world to which the learner/researcher belongs, thus enabling them to reflect upon themselves, challenge the prevalent wisdom to make arguments about their future and become problem-solvers for the future of their cities.

Financial Support: Supported by Sir Ratan Tata Trust from 2005-2013 (300 youth per year).

Currently supported by India Development Service Chicago and EdelGive Foundation (20 youth each, 2014-15).

2. Urbanism: Spatial Utopia and Contested Realities

PUKAR invites citizens to participate in the process of inquiry, knowledge production and documentation about the gentrification and redevelopment processes as well as issues related to *spatial and distributive justice.* This knowledge is circulated to wider audiences encouraging sustained debate about planning processes, policies

and practices, thus formulating an argument about *creating inclusive and sustainable smart cities*. The Mythologies of Mumbai was a six-year long project addressing many of these issues.

Financial Support: Ford Foundation: 2007 till 2015; Guggenheim Foundation: 2009-2010.

3. Healthy Cities and Wealthy Cities

Focuses on research related to the social determinants of urban health; mostly in the unrecognized slum of Kaula Bandar. The local teams of trained 20+ Barefoot Researchers collected critical data with full rigour presented their data to the policy makers and were responsible for bringing health camps to their slum. This was supported by door-to-door education about immunizations, diarrhea and Oral Rehydration Solution and awareness about TB and its spread in order to encourage people to seek immediate treatments and prevent spread. The health camp intervention *has increased the immunization rate in the community from 29% in 2009 to 90.7% in 2012*.¹

Financial Support: Rockefeller Foundation: 2009-2012; Cipla Foundation: 2015-Continuing



PUKAR Barefoot Researchers conducting survey and door-to-door education in slum. Photo provided by PUKAR.

¹ Subbaraman, R., O'Brien, J., Shitole, T., Shitole, S., Sawant, K., Bloom, D.E., & Patil-Deshmukh, A. (2012) Off the map: the health and social implications of being a non-notified slum. *Environment and Urbanization*. 24(2): October 2012. Available at: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed?cmd=search&term=Subbaraman%20R%5Bau%5D&dispmax=50>

CBPAR and social change: From PUKAR lens

PUKAR offers capacity building in CBPAR to youth who are based at various educational institutions or communities and the content of the *program is tweaked depending upon whether the youth are community based or college based*. For the cycle of July 2015-June 2016 we have four programs under the rubric of youth and urban knowledge production:

1. St Xavier's College, Mumbai: Mumbai University
2. Guru Nanak Khalsa College of Arts, Science & Commerce: Mumbai University
3. BMN College of Home Science: SNDT University
4. Four community based programs (two in collaboration with a community based organization) Under the other two rubrics, the following programs are currently operational:
 1. CBPAR in three tribal villages near Mumbai peri-urban areas related to Research on Internet access to rural poor: Total population approximately 6000 people
 2. CBPAR in one unrecognized slum of approximately 15,000 people, about TB and chest symptoms.



Capacity building of barefoot researchers

the four main pillars of the capacity building are:

1. Perspective building
2. Participation, group research and team work
3. Activity based pedagogy
4. Community engagement

1. Perspective building:

- i) Society
- ii) Self
- iii) Research techniques
- iv) Community engagement and leadership
 - i) Societal realities like caste, religion, gender, environment, India's pluralistic, multi-religious, multi-ethnic culture and issues of equity, social change and social justice are debated through multimedia presentations by experts.
 - ii) Personality building effort is focused on training youth to do self-reflection, communications, empathetic listening, peer learning, unlearning and co-creation of knowledge through activity based workshops by resource persons. Cultural confidence building that plays a *transformative role* is embedded in the project's structure.
 - iii) the study of research instruments as an alternative pedagogy is detailed and includes ethics, interviews, survey, case studies, focus group discussions, observations as well as photography, mapping and Right To Information (RTI). Data analysis, synthesis and interpretation form a significant aspect of developing critical thinking, analytic skills and problem solving skills.
 - iv) Workshops on community engagement and leadership building include active citizenship skills like learning to develop rapport with the community, being participatory, inclusive, learning social and political dynamics within groups and community and negotiating with them. Concepts of equality, equity and social justice are viewed from the lens of communities where the Barefoot Researchers are conducting their

projects. Disseminating research findings to the communities and local authorities leading to advocacy for and interventions in the community becomes a critical part of community engagement, *bringing about social change*.

2. Participation, group research and team work:

Participation of every individual at some levels remains the hallmark of this process.

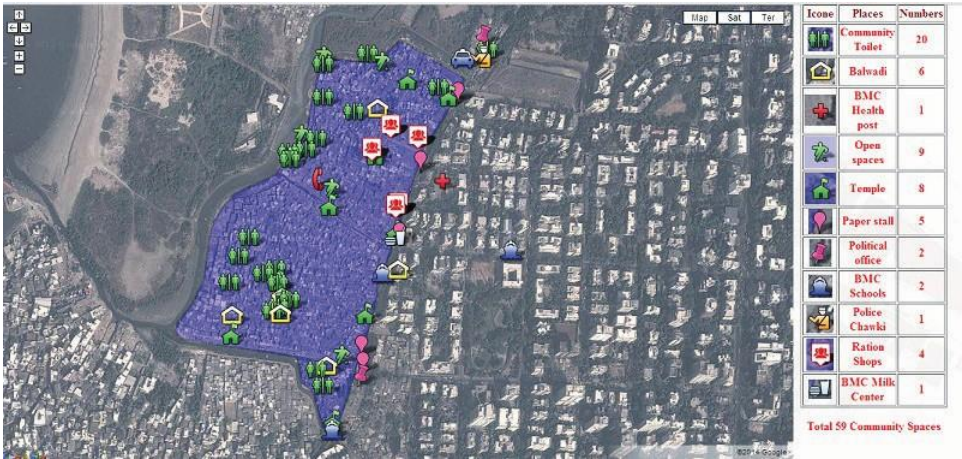
The idea of group research and teamwork is embedded in the multi-religious, multi-linguistic, pluralistic ethos and the historically significant syncretic and tolerant traditions of India. The group has to sustain itself despite diversity within the group and in between the groups, learn to respect diverse backgrounds, exposures and negotiate differences of opinion, so as to build consensus. These processes help inculcate values and a mindset required to sustain a strong 'inclusive, electoral, participatory democracy' in the nation, fostering skills like people engagement, conflict resolution and being inclusive in the process of decision making without excluding anyone.

3. Activity based pedagogy:

Believing strongly in the Paulo Freire methodology to treat the learner as a co-creator of knowledge, the instrument believes that each youth is a depository of indigenous knowledge and she is encouraged to build upon that knowledge through her research techniques and community engagement. Most training is workshops based and most issues are debated within the groups and in between the groups, thus creating the atmosphere of inquiry. Everyone is encouraged to partake in the debates in order to hear voices that are out of the normative or unheard. Youth is encouraged to raise questions about prevalent social practices, current policy executions, and cultural ethos that impact their lives, their decision-making capacities and those of their communities. What, Where, When, Why, Who and How remain important tools for fostering critical thinking capacities and problem solving skills in the youth. *This nurtures the real skills for building a voice of reason through people-engagement.*

Mapping forms an important tool of research and community engagement. Mapping and self-enumeration has the potential of becoming a strong source of power and moral force for the communities. "Mapping and self-enumeration are active, generative and self-defining practices that become part of political self-consciousness of these communities, reminding their members that their communities are greater than themselves," says Professor Appadurai.²

² Appadurai A. (2012). 'Why Enumeration Counts', Environment and Urbanization Volume 24, Number 2, October 2012.



Community Mapping Gazdar Bandh Slum (Santa Cruz West). Photo provided by PUKAR.

Other mediums like films, photography, theater, poetry, puppets, etc., are also used to create discussions about certain complex and fragmenting issues like caste, reservations, identity, etc.

4. Community engagement and leadership building:

Community engagement remains the most critical part of the pedagogy and the most difficult even though most of the youth hail from the communities. *Empathetic listening* becomes very critical for successful community engagement. Proper articulation of the intentions and objectives of the research, sincerity in approach and ethic of research remain valuable in building rapport with communities, and gaining their trust. Meetings and discussions in the community, advocacy, knowledge dissemination, creating an action plan based upon the results of research, taking that plan to the policy makers for bringing about changes in the communities form the essence of strong community engagement and leadership building process. The final goal of projects is to *make the community the real stakeholders in the decision-making processes related to the proposed social changes*.

Profiles of the barefoot researchers

Diversity remains the strength and the weakness of the program. Our barefoot researchers come from diverse backgrounds including students from vernacular and English medium colleges, occasionally professionals but majority of them (50-60% at any given time) are from deeply marginalized sectors like construction workers, transgender, brick kiln workers, rag pickers, Naka Kamgars, orphans, drop out girls from minority community ghettos, tribal and children of sex workers. Those who

Other important components of capacity building besides the four pillars

1. *Ethics in Research*

PUKAR ensures that each and every researcher undergoes a full day workshop on 'ethics in research'. The participants are taught the importance of asking questions in a sensitive, polite manner, importance of people's right to their own privacy and their right not to participate in any research, keeping critical information about the respondents' safe and keeping the identity of the respondents anonymous. They are taught ways to seek and record consents – oral, written, visually recorded or audio recorded.

2. *Facilitators, Trainers and Co-Travellers*

Facilitators and trainers are mostly the youth fellows who have been through the program themselves and hence understand the nuances of the program. They foster the concept of asset based, community based knowledge creation through experiential learning and to apply that knowledge for problem solving. Each one has received very specific training for this role through various capacity building workshops.

These facilitators need to be encouraging, patient, leading by example, and *catalyzing cross-pollination and co-creation of knowledge as well as co-learning*. They must possess the aptitude for research as pedagogy and to be able to connect the local issues chosen by the barefoot researchers to larger socio-political systems, urbanization and globalization that affect the systems. Ability to mentor barefoot researchers to engage with the community and to make them equal stakeholders requires a very specific set of abilities that facilitators bring to the program. Since the *facilitators mentor very impressionable youth* and as this is their first exposure to this kind of open, secular, space for many youth, the facilitator's job acquires a very critical position in the program. Profiles of facilitators can be found at: <http://pukar.org.in/about/people/project-team>.

3. *Resource People*

These include academicians, activists, practitioners, media people, and journalists. More information on resource persons can be accessed at: <http://pukar.org.in/about/people/project-team> and <http://pukar.org.in/resource-persons>.

are semi-illiterate use more visual instruments like photo-essays and audio-recorded interviews for their data collection. *This diversity creates the most fertile ground for cross-pollination of ideas and helps to break down many social barriers, thus bringing about social change.*



Ashish, a transgender leader, as resource person for the group working on masculinity. Photo provided by PUKAR.

Kishan Mantri: A story of everyday struggle and everyday victories, this photo essay made as part of PUKAR's YF program sums up migrant construction worker Kishan Mantri's dual life in the city. While he constructs luxurious and pristine buildings during the day, Kishan returns to his humble makeshift home in ftane in the evenings. Anchored in his very own contrasting everyday and fuelled by research skills and photography learnt as part of the fellowship program Kishan along with his group went behind the lens to create this self-reflective documentation. fte group's advocacy efforts bore fruit when their community managed to procure drinking water from the dishonest contractor using their learnt skills.

Suraiya Kazi: From being taunted for hailing from 'MiniPakistan' and compelled to contest her own notions of belonging, to now, bustling with confidence and unafraid of opinions, Suraiya, a youth fellow, spent one year in chronicling outsiders' perceptions of Mumbra. It was in an attempt to look beyond the common notions of this neighbourhood suburb of Mumbai as a "Muslim ghetto" – in lieu with the Bombay riots of 1992-93 – Suraiya and her friends conducted a series of interviews and discussions with the non-residents. Armed with skills and a more nuanced understanding taught at YF, Suraiya has now become secure in her own skin, and has developed strong arguments about her community when negotiating the city.

Skills students and learners must acquire

One of the most critical skills students/learners must acquire is the value of *participation*. CBPAR is essentially based upon the fundamental practice of making the community based people equal stakeholders in the process of research-action. PUKAR believes that *participation* and *inclusivity* are two 'MUST' attitudes necessary for community engagement and lasting social change.

Everyone is encouraged to participate at some level by contributing some aspect of the research action process, bringing her/his own skills to the process. Youth's understanding of different levels of participation is enhanced through activity where self-reflection, learning to ask questions and challenging the prevalent notions become important part of transformational processes. Learning to gather many different perspectives becomes important for developing astute decision-making capacity. Ability to accept lack of knowledge and use that as a motivation for erudition is important. *Accepting that different exposure, situations, identities and other things shape everyone's opinion becomes fulcrum for successful group dynamics and societal cohesions*. Taking risks, creating innovations, facing failures and learning from them is encouraged. Recognizing everyone's ability and utilizing it in the group process makes the process and the outcome richer. Inquiry and multiple points of views are accepted as a part of the system.

Conclusions and future actions

One limitation of the instrument remains embedded in the operationalization. If not operationalized with rigour, the data may not be as robust as is needed from a research perspective. Another limitation pertains to the interactions between the community youth and the respondents. At times caste and gender issues can play havoc between the researchers and the respondents and either can prevent interactions altogether or create difficult situations for everyone involved, thus impacting the data. That interaction can become difficult to manage and the granularity of information may be lost. One additional factor is the mobility of the urban poor. People from the informal settlements are often very mobile, related to seasons, work demands, dispossessions, evictions, etc. Approaching the middle class or upper echelons of society for any data collection is almost impossible in these days of increased gated communities and ghettoisation of the poorer communities in the urban sector.

One opportunity lies in strengthening the technique of CBPAR and giving it recognition and validity. It has the potential of *attracting youth to the sector by creating livelihood opportunities while simultaneously creating youth leadership for social change*.

We have started institutionalizing the program in some mainstream educational institutions in Mumbai where students have to pay part of the expenses for the course. We are deeply interested in spreading this program to all the mainstream educational institutions across the state of Maharashtra. This could be feasible only if there is recognition of the program from the University Grants Commission (UGC) that would give some sort of credit to students for this course. PUKAR also sees a role in training of trainers from across the states and to emerge as a training centre for CBPAR.

Key training materials

Readers, trainers, others who are interested in receiving the multiple training materials prepared by PUKAR are encouraged to write to us since we tweak the materials, the workshops, based upon the space where the youth are located. For example, community youth, college going youth, activist youth, rural based youth, etc. Please feel free to write to Dr Anita Patil-Deshmukh at anita@pukar.org.in; pukar@pukar.org.in.

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