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## **Original Research**

# **Strengthening Knowledge Democracy Through Tripartite Collaboration among the Universities, the Schools, and the Communities: Insights From a Participatory Action Research Project in Nepal**

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## **Abstract**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) represents an esteemed methodology within the realm of Social Science Research. Renowned for its capacity to foster cooperative learning and holistic advancement, PAR exhibits the potential to facilitate practical interventions tailored to specific contexts. Furthermore, it affords the opportunity for community-level research experiences to assume a pivotal role within the academic requisites of university researchers. To this background, this reflective inquiry embarks upon an exploration of the undertakings of a doctoral candidate and research supervisors who engaged in PAR as a means to engender collaboration among educational institutions, including schools and universities, in collaboration with the overseas community. The overarching objective of this PAR endeavor was the enhancement of educational quality through recognition and self-administration of innovative pedagogical approaches initiated within the school setting at the basic and secondary school levels. While championing the democratization of knowledge through collaborative ventures, we encountered manifold contextual factors hampering the complete realization of autonomy. These

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hindrances encompass cultural norms ingrained within both the school and university environments, in addition to conflicting societal expectations.

*Keywords:* knowledge democracy, participatory action research, acknowledgment and autonomy, educational enhancement, tripartite collaboration

## **Background**

Collaboration for the purpose of democratizing knowledge stands as a fundamental hallmark that distinguishes Participatory Action Research (PAR) from prevailing research paradigms. Scholarly inquiries (Hall & Tandon, 2017; Solvason et al., 2018) have offered PAR as an effective approach for challenging the notions concerning the relationship between researchers and the researched, as well as the detachment between academic institutions and local communities. Presently, the potential of PAR in fostering collaboration between universities and communities has garnered substantial attention from both research scholars and development practitioners. Scholarship in this domain (e.g., Arhar et al., 2013; Bevins & Price, 2014; Edwards-Groves et al., 2016) portrays diverse contextual frameworks for group partnerships and collaborative endeavors within the PAR undertakings. In accordance with the concept of an 'expanded methodological imagination' (Fine, 2018), partnership models can span from brief external support arrangements to enduring internal assistance structures. Furthermore, such partnerships may be geared towards pragmatic objectives entailing practical interventions, or transformative aspirations involving knowledge co-creation and advocacy pursuits. In either scenario, the democratization of knowledge holds pivotal significance (Hall, 2011; Hall & Tandon, 2017). Notably, Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991) previously advanced the idea of democratic knowledge construction through collaborative practice and praxis, identifying its efficacy within the realms of social movements, education, and sustainability. In a distinct investigation, Kerney et al. (2013) presented a pair of case studies—one from South Africa and the other from Australia—that furnished empirical evidence underscoring the efficacy of PAR in nurturing the capacities of collaborators, particularly academic researchers, and community members. This capacity-building facilitated their meaningful involvement in social initiatives and the co-creation of knowledge to drive consequential educational and societal transformations.

Given the inherent nature of PAR as a collaborative developmental process, the strategy of interlinking principles of democracy with practical implementations (Hall & Tondon, 2015) has frequently demonstrated efficacy in facilitating the democratization of knowledge formation. In recent times, several scholarly investigations, exemplified by Atins et al. (2018), Stern (2019), and Meredith and Quiroz-Niño (2021), have presented empirical evidences wherein models driven by PAR have proven instrumental in nurturing synergistic partnerships between communities and academia. These collaborations have eloquently cultivated an environment conducive to knowledge democratization, thereby leading to substantial enhancements in the socio-professional spheres of underprivileged communities. Furthermore, a limited number of introspective narratives concerning the democratic milieu shared between researchers and subjects within the sphere of PAR have appeared (e.g., Edwards-Groves & Kemmis, 2015; Rowell et al., 2015). These narratives delve into the empowerment and transformative participation, bringing into light the roles and procedures within such collaborative ventures of action-oriented research. These accounts advocate pathways through which researchers affiliated with universities collaborate alongside educational stakeholders to initiate PAR endeavors aimed at both democratic knowledge creation and educational betterment. Notwithstanding these contributions, the extant literature exhibits gaps pertaining to multifaceted dynamics encompassing power hierarchies and divergent interests inherent in the discourse of democratizing knowledge through collaborative praxis. Questions that delve into the expansion of such collaborative endeavors remain insufficiently explored in academic discourse.

The convergence of the academic research realm, characterized as the 'scientific' domain, with the pragmatic realm of community development initiatives, denoted as the 'practical' sphere, presents an intricate challenge. Frequently, complications emerge due to the blurry description of roles within the collaborating entities (Arhar, 2013; Kerney et al., 2013). Numerous factors govern the efficacy of collaboration, rendering it either a fruitful endeavor or a superficial concept within the realm of knowledge construction and advancement. Among these factors, scholarly investigations posit that the acknowledgment, self-governance, and shared ownership of developmental undertakings among all participating entities assume paramount importance in the promotion of knowledge democracy (Olin et al., 2021). In a related vein, other researchers within this domain (e.g., Meredith & Quiroz-Niño, 2021) underscore the

preeminence of empowerment and the sustainability of projects initiated through collaborative efforts. These elements, facilitated through introspection and conscientization (Franz, 2005), are envisaged to foster an inclusive democratic milieu conducive to transformative learning.

In line with this perspective, the current inquiry delves into a PAR initiative within a public school in Nepal. This investigation elucidates the manifestation and evolution of recognition and autonomy, both in their presence and absence, among the participating entities. Furthermore, it probes into how these constituents contribute to the realization of knowledge democracy within the context of the project. The findings and discussions of this study serve as a valuable point of reference for other developmental collaborators aspiring to enhance public schools through a tripartite alliance involving the university, the school, and the community.

Divided into three sections, the initial segment of this article expounds upon the theoretical underpinnings of Participatory Action Research's collaborative essence. Within this section, a foundational explanation of PAR is presented, accompanied by a conceptual exploration of its potential in fueling collaborative synergies among diverse stakeholders, thereby enhancing practical applications. This conceptual foundation lays the groundwork for a theoretical framework, outlining the pivotal requisites of recognition and autonomy for all entities engaged in collaboration. These requisites, essential for fostering effective collaboration, pave the way for the democratization of knowledge dissemination in transformative endeavors. Moving into the second segment, a comprehensive introduction to the project is furnished, encompassing the collaborative participants, the overarching aims, and the inherent characteristics of the specific case. Subsequently, the third section delves into an introspective exposition of instances where the principles of knowledge democracy manifest within the PAR project. This introspective analysis is succeeded by a theoretical discourse expounding upon the encountered instances, particularly focusing on the dimensions of recognition and autonomy as experienced by the collaborative entities.

### **Collaborative Learning and Development in PAR**

In the conventional academic paradigm, particularly within the positivist research framework, a researcher is traditionally defined as an expert who assumes a role of inherent value-neutrality and detached observation. The primary aim is to establish an

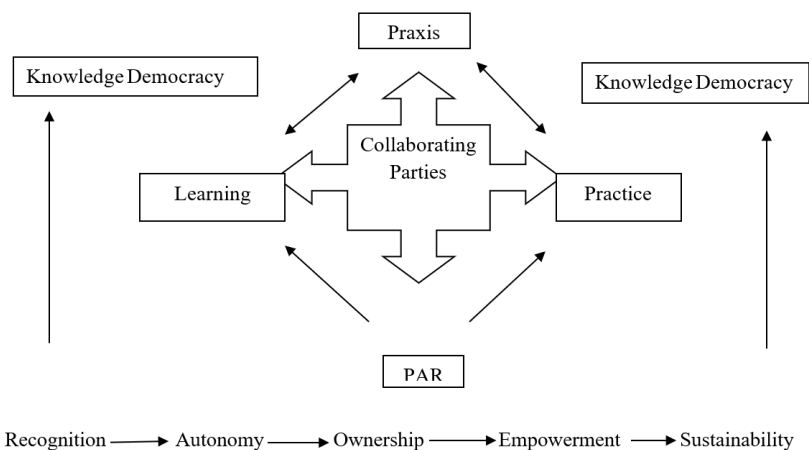
'objective truth' pertaining to the studied phenomenon. This approach, characterized by its unilateral, uniform, and linear methodology for generating what is deemed 'valid knowledge' (Taylor et al., 2012), has historically favored certain 'academic elites'. However, it has repeatedly sidelined and disregarded the lived experiences of participants and the contextual spaces of the subject under investigation (Cook et al, 2019). Operating within this undemocratic research framework, researchers have historically occupied the exclusive position of knowledge producers. This role not only involved making claims about the 'other', but also offered the authority to 'legitimize' perspectives derived from the research. In response to this backdrop, PAR emerged as a departure from perceiving research methods as mere technical procedures. It assumed a role as a potent instrument for fostering collaboration and democratizing knowledge, drawing insights from constructivism, pragmatism, and critical transformation. PAR critically challenged the established hierarchies between the researcher and the researched (Dickson & Green, 2001), showcasing the potential for democratizing knowledge through active collaboration between these roles. In doing so, PAR acknowledged the significance of deliberate choices concerning the manner, location, and participants involved in knowledge creation. Functioning on the principle of equitable engagement among diverse stakeholders, PAR seeks to contribute to the advancement of human circumstances through iterative cycles of collective action and contemplation (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016). Within this framework, each participant's contribution is acknowledged, autonomy is upheld, and ownership is ensured. These collaborative endeavors among varied interest groups, when aligned with transformative objectives of proactive engagement, change, and advocacy (Luitel & Taylor, 2019), gradually evolve into a praxis-like form.

The term 'participatory' within the realm of PAR holds significant importance in fostering collaborative engagement among partnering entities towards practical matters. PAR distinguishes itself from conventional action research by virtue of its inherent collaborative nature. In contrast to general action research endeavors, PAR endeavors to involve all relevant stakeholders throughout nearly every phase of the research process. In doing so, participants collaboratively strive to develop pragmatic resolutions for shared concerns and issues (Groves & Kemmis, 2015). Acknowledging the inclusive merits associated with knowledge acquisition and practical application, projects rooted in PAR are fundamentally constructed upon interdependent and

cooperative relationships amongst partnering entities. These action-reflection engagements not only brings about tangible changes in societal dynamics or specific social phenomena but also gives rise to altered perspectives within the participants themselves. These transformative shifts, according to Meredith and Quiroz-Niño (2021), occur at personal, interpersonal, and collective levels. As articulated by Edwards-Groves and Kemmis (2015), the collaborative execution of democratic actions and the concurrent construction of knowledge, when coupled with the underpinning transformative motivation for change and advocacy, culminate in what can be termed as collaborative praxis. This mode of collaborative practice and praxis inherent in PAR, with the intention of reviving collaborative potency, empowers learners—namely, the PAR researcher and co-researchers (alongside all involved partners)—to cultivate a heightened awareness of their agency to reshape society and their individual realities. This sentiment aligns with the perspectives presented by Dickson and Green (2001) as well as Solvason et al. (2018). Figure 1 presented below illustrates the trajectory of collaborative learning and advancement within the framework of PAR. Here, the collaborative agency of diverse participating entities harmoniously converges within a dialectical interplay involving learning, practical application, and praxis. This construct, as delineated by Ledwith and Springett (2010), operates through the tenets of knowledge democracy, aiming to establish due recognition, autonomy, and ownership among all participating partners.

### **Figure 1**

*Collaborative Learning and Development of Collaborating Parties in PAR*



The essential objective of PAR in catalyzing synergistic endeavors among diverse sectors, including private institutions, governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, and local entities, could potentially center upon the facilitation of collaborative learning and knowledge democratization. This is particularly evident in the context of university-community partnerships, where individuals such as research-oriented university students, their research mentors, and community stakeholders might embark upon collaborative learning paradigm. Examples of this approach can be found in the works of Franz (2005) and Bevins and Price (2014), where stakeholders actively participate in introspective professional exploration and deliberative exchanges. These interactive processes encompass a sequence of dialogues concerning educational matters, mutual learning experiences and execution, all underpinned by a reflective underpinning.

### **Collaboration as/for Knowledge Democracy**

Hall and Tondon (2015) explain the concept of knowledge democracy through the lens of three interconnected dimensions, namely: (1) acknowledgment of diverse epistemologies, (2) validation of varied manifestations of knowledge during their creation and representation, and (3) the realization of knowledge's potential as a catalyst for equitable and socially just actions. These dimensions underscore the significance of recognizing and granting autonomy to various groups as foundational principles for fostering knowledge democracy. Within collaborative partnerships, the transformative agenda of collectively constructing knowledge and institutional advancement assumes a pivotal role. The efficacy of this agenda can be assessed by evaluating the extent of knowledge democracy achieved through the recognition and autonomy afforded to participants (Cook et al., 2019; Dickson & Green, 2001; Stern, 2019). When stakeholders from divergent sectors and contextual backgrounds converge for a shared purpose, inherent dissimilarities in their cognitive approaches and behavioral tendencies naturally emerge. These distinctions in perspectives can give rise to challenges related to power dynamics and epistemic variations, potentially impeding the equitable appreciation of each other's contributions (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016). In such contexts, the issue of power dynamics and epistemic differences can hinder the mutual valuing of each participant's input.

Ricoeur (2005) underscores the centrality of recognition in collaborative research paradigms like PAR, outlining three distinct forms of recognition: purpose-based recognition, self-recognition, and mutual recognition. Elaborating on these forms, Alin et al. (2021) expound that purpose-based recognition serves to unify collaborators around shared objectives, thus shaping the project's meaningful aims and directions. Self-recognition empowers individuals to introspectively engage with their contextual realities, values, and viewpoints, enabling them to advocate for their unique perspectives. Mutual recognition, in contrast, enables collaborators to embrace multiplicity and shared perspectives. These three manifestations of recognition, in various capacities, contribute to the establishment of autonomy, which can be observed through individual autonomy, group autonomy, and the creation of an autonomous learning environment (Lee & Friedrich, 2007). Traditionally, autonomy denotes independent cognitive and operational agency, free from external impositions.

Conversely, Mackenzie (2008) introduces the concept of relational autonomy, asserting its vitalness in democratizing knowledge. In the context of contemporary ecological and systems-oriented frameworks, relational autonomy underscores the role of recognizing interconnections in collaborative endeavors. Oshana (2006) interprets this form of autonomy not as inherent individual traits, but as a product of social relations. The interplay of recognition and autonomy serves as the bedrock for fostering ownership of socially just actions and democratic knowledge construction within collaborative initiatives. Both McDonald (2008) and Hamza et al. (2015) conceptualize ownership as an intimate sentiment among collaborating partners, signifying their collective stake in change initiatives. This sentiment necessitates negotiation and consensus-building as pivotal to upholding knowledge democracy throughout the project. In light of the theoretical foundations of recognition and autonomy as cornerstones of knowledge democracy, this study investigates the emergence and development of knowledge democracy within a participatory action research project in Nepal. This investigation is conducted through a tripartite collaboration involving the university, the school, and the community.

### **Tripartite Collaboration for School Improvement: A Case From Nepal**

The primary objective acknowledged by most Nepali universities pertains to the generation of knowledge that contributes substantively to theoretical frameworks.



Consequently, the discourse surrounding the potentialities of practitioner research, particularly within the domains of humanities, social sciences, and education, remains inadequately addressed (Sharma & Batala, 2016). This circumstance is characterized by a twofold aspect. Firstly, the financial allocation towards research and developmental endeavors within institutions of higher education is notably deficient and lacks a solid institutional foundation within the Nepali context (Bhatta, 2012; Sharma & Batala, 2016; Wagle et al., 2023a; Wagle et al, 2023b). Secondly, the progression of university structures encounters persistent obstacles in terms of maintaining, servicing, and modernizing infrastructural facilities. These challenges supersede the commitment to the advancement and execution of academic curricula (Asian Development Bank, 2015).

In the year 2017, the Rupantaran project, funded by the Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development (NORHED), introduced a PAR project, which is extensively examined within this paper. The project's central premise involved the conceptualization of enhancing educational institutions through the implementation of PAR. This methodological approach marked a departure from established academic research conventions within both Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University of Nepal. While action research had gained traction as a prevalent methodological choice among university-affiliated researchers, and despite the popularity of PAR in various development sectors, the integration of PAR as a requisite academic pursuit had not been practiced within the university context. Consequently, the discussions and deliberations during workshops and seminars related to the Rupantaran project frequently revolved around the inherently active and cooperative nature of PAR, diverging from the conventionally impartial and theoretical constructs often embraced by academics in the university setting.

The essential underpinning of the initiative was constituted by a partnership involving multiple entities. Consequently, the discourse frequently delved extensively into the initial inquiry: what encompasses PAR in the realm of academic investigation? This query was coupled with the intricate ethical and methodological quandary of ensuring the acknowledgment, independence, and proprietary rights of the entities involved in collaboration. Right from its inception, the Rupantaran project found it imperative to exercise caution regarding diverse strategies aimed at fortifying

collaboration among distinct stakeholders, including the funding agency (Norhed), the trio of university partners (comprising two from Nepal representing the global south, and one from Norway representing the global north), a range of interest groups, research scholars, and educational stakeholders within the community. In order to achieve this objective, prior to delving into the core agenda of scrutinizing the procedures, possibilities, and obstacles inherent in establishing acknowledgment, autonomy, and ownership within the trilateral collaborative practices and practical application of PAR, the subsequent paragraphs elucidate the essence of the Rupantaran project and expound upon its unique collaborative framework.

### **Rupantaran Project**

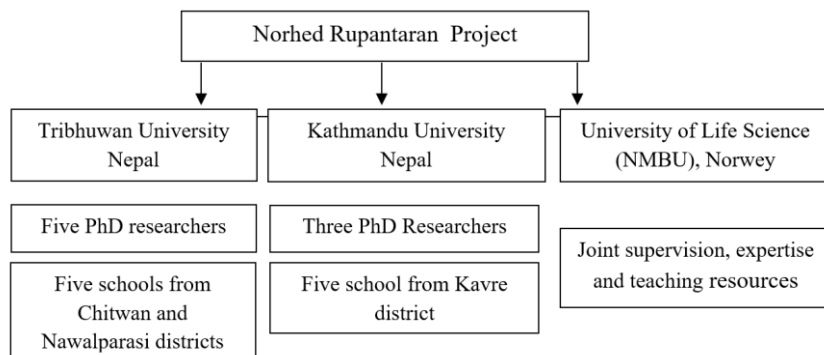
Rupantaran, denoting 'transformation', constitutes a project in Nepal that derived its funding from Norhed. The endeavor entailed a collaborative initiative among three universities representing the global north and south spheres. This consortium involved Tribhuvan University (TU) and Kathmandu University (KU) of Nepal in conjunction with the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) from Norway. The fundamental objective of this partnership revolved around the utilization of innovative, participatory, and rights-centered methodologies to enhance the educational and learning outcomes of primary school students. This was to be achieved through community empowerment, promotion of gender equality, and sustainable enhancements. The multidisciplinary enterprise was structured around discrete yet intricately interconnected themes, specifically encompassing education, health outcomes, and prospects pertaining to livelihood.

Within this domain, a cohort of eight doctoral candidates and additional master's degree students from TU and KU, Nepal, had been instrumental in facilitating the PAR project. This initiative was operationalized across ten distinct educational institutions spanning three diverse districts, namely Kavre, Chitwan, and Nawalparasi, within the nation (refer to Figure 2). The PAR intervention arranged by the research team from TU was inaugurated in five discrete schools situated across the Chitwan and Nawalparasi districts. Alongside, among the five meticulously selected schools within the Dapcha community of Kavre district, the PAR team hailing from KU (comprising the authors of the present work in their capacity as Ph.D. research-degree candidates alongside their research supervisors) designated Shree Janahit School as the 'leader'

institution. This selection was predicated upon a project model wherein, in collaboration with the school community and members of the local populace, initial improvements are implemented within the 'leader' school. Subsequently, the acquired experiences and insights were disseminated to the remaining four 'reference' schools situated within the same community. Consequently, the noteworthy transformations realized within the 'leader' school were envisaged to be effectively diffused to the neighboring 'reference' schools within the communal milieu.

### ***'Rupantaran' Model of Collaboration***

In pursuit of this objective, the Rupantaran initiative commenced its operations, characterized by a distinctive model of collaboration. Notably, TU, the preeminent academic institution in Nepal, assumed the role of a contracting partner. Its Faculty of Education played a pivotal role in spearheading the project, particularly focusing on aspects related to the environment, health, and sanitation. Likewise, KU, another esteemed Nepalese partner in this endeavor, operating through its School of Education (KUSOED), undertook the responsibility for facets concerning transformative education and ICTs. Collaborating closely with local schools, KU facilitated action-oriented research endeavors aimed at fostering pedagogical practices attuned to the specific context. Concurrently, the consortium of partners affiliated with NMBU, the second oldest university in Norway, contributed to the initiative by furnishing joint supervision, specialized expertise, and educational materials centered around innovative and contextually relevant pedagogic methodologies. These resources encompassed domains spanning health education, sustainable development, participatory science education, social entrepreneurship, and personal growth. Moreover, this consortium fostered a conducive environment for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge between NMBU and its collaborators, facilitating a bidirectional learning paradigm encompassing both North-South and South-South trajectories.

**Table 2***Collaboration Model of Norhed Rupantaran Project*

In terms of structure, a consortium comprising three affiliated universities united their efforts to pursue the shared objective of advancing public education standards within Nepal. Two universities based in Nepal forged collaborations with a respective leading school situated in distinct locales, resulting in a pairing of two universities with two leader schools. These leader schools subsequently engaged in cooperative ventures with reference schools located within their respective communities. To ensure community representation and active involvement, PAR advisory committees grounded in the community were established across all three administrative districts. These committees were responsible for articulating the perspectives of the community and engaging in the participatory process. Furthermore, students pursuing research-oriented degrees from both partnering universities engaged in ongoing collaboration with their fellow researchers. Simultaneously, they undertook the facilitation of individualized PAR sub-projects to fulfill their academic requisites. Over the initial phase of the project, noteworthy enhancements in the educational landscape were documented. In response, researchers affiliated with the participating universities commenced the dissemination of experiential knowledge gained from the leader schools to an additional set of four reference schools situated in close proximity.

Due to the ongoing operational status of the project, this research paper is constrained to an examination of collaborative efforts among educational institutions (schools and universities) and the community. The scope of this study is limited to the initial three-year period (2017-2020) since the project's inception. Furthermore, the

authors of this paper assume dual roles as Ph.D. research-degree students and research supervisors at KU. Consequently, a substantial portion of the empirical basis for this investigation emanates from introspective assessments concerning the endeavors undertaken by KU's representatives at Janahit School in the Kavre region within the aforementioned initial three-year timeframe. In a comparable vein, aligned with the same set of objectives, TU instigated analogous undertakings within public schools situated in the Chitwan and Nawalparasi districts. Insights from both cohorts were periodically shared during collaborative workshops and seminars. Furthermore, the NMBU consortium exhibited active involvement through yearly assemblies, workshops, and cooperative ventures.

### ***Evidence Generation and Interpretation***

This paper undertakes an examination of the substantiated data pertaining to the acknowledgment, self-governance, and ownership attributes exhibited by collaborative entities. In the context of this study, collaborative entities specifically denote the tripartite collaboration inherent in PAR involving educational institutions, schools, and communities in the pursuit of enhancing public schools. The empirical 'data' presented in this work emanates from the firsthand experiential observations and reflections of a Ph.D. researcher affiliated with KU. Researcher serves as the primary author of this paper and recounts insights developed over the initial three-year phase of the project. The supervising researchers, positioned as the secondary authors representing the global North and the global South, supplements the discourse with their reflective observations. The accumulation of substantiating material was conducted through various channels encompassing the duration of and post workshops. These channels encompass: (1) a foundational four-day workshop involving research students and educators/administrators from Janahit school; (2) a two-day concluding workshop wherein research students engaged with the Janahit school community; and (3) Workshops designated for project stakeholders' assessments. Further reinforcing evidence was procured from deliberations taking place during the monthly pedagogical assemblies at the school premises. Additionally, evidence was derived from three discrete community-oriented PAR committee meetings convened beyond the school surroundings. Also, the evidence encompasses the primary author's field notes and reflective journal entries spanning the three-year project phase.

The workshops and faculty meetings conducted during the phases of needs assessment underwent audio recording, and occasionally, video recording. Subsequently, these recordings were transcribed to expedite the analytical process. Employing an inductive approach, an examination of recurring themes was undertaken across diverse strands of evidence. The pivotal experiential insights and contemplations, as documented in field notes, field narratives, and journal entries, underwent a process of coding and systematic categorization. Through an iterative progression driven by the focal point of the study, the identified themes (namely, recognition, autonomy, and ownership) underwent continual refinement, leading to the construction of more comprehensive conceptual groupings. In the discussion segment of this manuscript, the elucidation of the derived themes is undertaken within the context of their interrelation with pertinent theoretical foundations pertaining to the notion of knowledge democracy.

### **Major Observations**

From this point forward, the present article expounds upon the principal observations concerning the manifestation of collaborative entities' contributions, relational autonomy, and collective ownership within the context of the Rupantaran PAR Project in Nepal. It also examines the ways in which the aforementioned elements were either present or lacking, and their respective impacts on the enhancement of knowledge democracy. Furthermore, the paper elucidates the instances of ethically intricate situations that are unique to the context, the intricate web of conflicting interests, as well as the patterns of continuity and resistance observed within change-oriented endeavors aimed at improving schools. The article categorizes these observations into three distinct sub-themes, which should not be misconstrued as hierarchical in nature. These sub-themes are: (1) Collaborative Entity One - The Universities, (2) Collaborative Entity Two - The Local Community, and (3) Collaborative Entity Three - The Schools. In the present study, the university encompass entities such as the University Research Committees, Research Supervisors hailing from TU, KU, NMBU, alongside Ph.D. researchers affiliated with KU. The Local Community is composed of parents, villagers, and community advisors residing in the area of the Janahit School's location. Similarly, the school category encompasses the Headteacher, teaching staff, the School Management Committee (SMC), and the student body of the school. In summation, the observations made within this study

serve to identify specific conditions that were either present or absent, exerting influences that either weakened or fortified the democratic dissemination of knowledge within the intricate framework of multi-group, cross-profession collaborations that constitute the Rupantaran Project.

### **Collaborating Party One, the Universities**

The Rupantaran team, comprised of members from three distinct universities, exhibited both inter and intra-institutional facets. This collaborative cohort possessed a diverse composition, encompassing individuals hailing from varying disciplinary and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the cooperative involvement of Nepalese universities alongside a Norwegian institution granted a heightened prominence in the realm of democratizing knowledge generation, within the framework of global North-South dynamics. The implementation of PAR encountered initial challenges in gaining establishment within the context of academic research pursuits in Nepalese universities. In this regard, the familiarity of numerous faculties from the NMBU with PAR proved invaluable. Their pivotal role as co-supervisors significantly facilitated the emerging stages of embedding PAR within the university itself, as well as within the surrounding community and educational institutions. In addition, the representatives from NMBU acquired firsthand insights into the local conditions through community visits, in-school workshops, as well as through comprehensive dialogues and meetings.

During a workshop aimed at reviewing the collaborative project between partners, a professor affiliated with NMBU expressed the enlightening nature of experiencing locales that significantly deviated from their own national context. The professor noted the value of exchanging experiences and mutual learning amongst participants. On certain occasions, these experiences led to shared contemplation. As an illustration, during visits to Chitwan and Kavre, representatives from NMBU were warmly received by the local schools, with garlands crafted from flowers. The positive reception was met with appreciation; however, individuals who had previously engaged in similar initiatives in Tanzania and various African nations displayed a degree of caution regarding potential consequences- acknowledging its favorable nature, but also raising awareness about the potential high expectations and the responsibility to meet those expectatations. Amidst a brief pause, the Norwegian professor added a reflective notion about the existence of conflicting expectations that might extend beyond the defined

scope of the project. This commentary triggered a period of reflection among many attendees. It provoked consideration of the expectations held by rural communities in the Global South toward projects financed by entities situated in the Global North. The underlying reasons for these expectations were questioned. The inquiry revolved around whether such expectations, if present, contribute to the advancement of knowledge democracy. Evidently, a comprehension of the prevailing power dynamics shaping the partnership was deemed necessary in order to discern the concerns at hand. It was hypothesized that the party possessing greater autonomy in terms of financial management and dissemination within the collaborative endeavor assumed a relatively dominant role.

The dynamics of power relations were visible even within the domain of university partnerships. The project proposal and budgetary framework were formulated by the university partners. This could plausibly account for the heightened vigilance exhibited by the university partners in comparison to the school and community counterparts. Consequently, the university partners appeared to assume a greater level of accountability towards the funding entities. Conversely, the community advisors and the school representatives possessed limited insights into the allocation of project funds, resulting in their reduced autonomy to generate specific plans independently. This disparity was exemplified during a presentation at the CARN-ALARA conference in 2019 held in Croatia, where the principal author of this paper raised a pertinent query. The author inquired about the paradox of labeling the endeavor as a participatory project, considering that solely the university partners undertook the formulation of the project proposal and budgetary provisions, without involving or at the very least consulting the other collaborative stakeholders, namely the schools and communities. The implication of such an approach on the recognition, autonomy, and ownership of the marginalized cohorts was brought into question. At that juncture, a faculty member from NMBU, who was present among the audience during the conference, and who had actively contributed to the creation of the project proposal and budgetary framework, candidly responded. The member acknowledged the presenter's observation as a comprehensive concern of PAR. The project in question had imparted a valuable lesson, emphasizing the imperative to incorporate the engagement of all collaborating entities while devising similar initiatives in the future. Evidently, this continuous



process of evolving self-awareness and mutual acknowledgement signified the occurrence of transformative learning within the collaborative cohorts.

Simultaneously enhancing the school environment, teachers' instructional methodologies, school curriculum, and students' educational outcomes, the collaborative reflections stemming from PAR initiatives played a pivotal role in fostering agency for social engagement and knowledge development among student-researchers. However, alongside the benefits, certain procedural complexities and a lack of independence encountered by Ph.D. researchers within the project were of significant concern. Adhering to a conventionally structured research process, the university mandated that PAR researchers defend their research proposals beforehand, prior to their thorough understanding of the school and community context. This approach heightened the likelihood of researchers entering the field with preconceived notions regarding the 'what,' 'how,' and 'where' of the PAR undertaking. The prescribed university guidelines and procedures, which offered limited autonomy for the adaptable execution of contextually relevant PAR activities, seemingly hindered the democratization of knowledge. This constraint was also evident in the realm of knowledge dissemination. For instance, the principal author of this paper recounted his experiences during a project review meeting, highlighting-

Engaging with local and rural indigenous communities follows a non-linear, bidirectional trajectory. Things doesn't go as expected. The practitioner researchers' actions often defy conventional logic and at times appear irrational. Unfortunately, numerous reputable journals do not readily acknowledge articles encompassing such rhizomatic processes.

This observation pointed to an additional constraint concerning the broader recognition of distinct context-driven epistemologies. Consequently, despite the well-intentioned project objectives such as sustainability, empowerment, ownership, and collaborative autonomy in driving transformative initiatives, in numerous instances, the team of practitioner-researchers engaged in the PAR initiative found themselves reliant on non-participatory, pre-established frameworks inherent in the dominant academic paradigm set by the university and associated knowledge authorities. This reliance had the potential to limit the democratization of knowledge. Counterbalancing these limitations, the approach adopted by the NMBU team of refraining from excessive

intervention, along with the persistent encouragement from the research supervisor based in Nepal to incorporate local wisdom traditions and community knowledge heritage, consistently fostered innovative and inclusive approaches to knowledge construction

### **Collaborating Party Two, the Community**

During the initial phases of school selection, a local leader assumed an active role in familiarizing the university partners with both the community and the school. Evidently, genuine intentions of the gatekeeper in enhancing the quality of the public school through collaborative efforts with the university and PhD researchers served as a catalyst, stimulating both the school stakeholders and the community members towards cooperative action. Alternatively, this phenomenon could also be perceived as the community's acknowledgment of the university and research students as a dependable wellspring of resources for school betterment. Within the context of Nepali villages, it is customary for inhabitants to extend profound affection and respect to their visitors. Nevertheless, the establishment of a foundation of trust may necessitate a considerable amount of time. In light of this, prior to embarking on PAR endeavors within the school, the students pursuing research degrees allocated nearly eight months to thoroughly acquaint themselves with the community, thereby cultivating an intimate familiarity with its cultural and human dimensions. The informal dialogues that unfolded while walking up and down the hill, and the exchanges over tea at local tea shops were especially instrumental in apprehending the community's experiential realm, encompassing their aspirations, recollections, and desires. Arguably, this endeavor by the researchers could be construed as an endeavor to acknowledge the essence of rural existence.

The process of establishing mutual recognition underwent various challenges and fluctuations. To illustrate, the extended involvement of researchers within the community to foster relationships resulted in skepticism among many villagers. Frequently, comments from the community such as "Months have passed, yet no progress has been made at the school" and "When will their efforts commence?" reflected doubts. Concurrently, there were instances where researchers were accused of being solely engaged for the pursuit of their own doctoral degrees. The community often drew comparisons between the ongoing project activities and previous funded

initiatives they had encountered. Indifferent statements like "Projects of this nature come and go" were commonly expressed. During project review meetings, student-researchers would frequently raise the question: "Why do rural communities in Nepal exhibit hesitance in acknowledging the substantive contributions of funded projects?" Conceivably, the villagers' short-term expectations could have contributed to this lack of recognition. This was evident during interactions, where certain villagers anticipated financial assistance from the project. Informal conversations between villagers and university researchers unveiled numerous accounts of past experiences, wherein foreign individuals, often referred to as "gorya haru" (white people), had visited the village and provided financial support. A villager recounted, "Last year, a project financed our goat farming venture. We are hopeful for similar assistance from this project." Evidently, rural Nepali villages had developed a pattern of anticipating immediate financial supports from funded projects. Many such projects typically entered the village with short-term initiatives designed to bring about tangible improvements, accompanied by research activities. These initiatives often entailed financial backing and report preparation, primarily aligned with the interests of funding organizations. Consequently, the villagers adopted a culture of expectancy, which, in numerous respects, diverged from the fundamental principle of PAR centered around collaborative practices and praxis. Through observations, both university partners and student-researchers gained insights into the challenges faced by the rural lifeworld in fulfilling their immediate needs. Additionally, these observations illuminated how past short-term, non-participatory funded projects had strategically manipulated the prevailing 'expectancy mindset' within rural communities. This manipulation facilitated the construction and dissemination of narratives that favored the projects' objective.

Informed by the outcomes of participatory assessment pertaining to identified areas for enhancement, the cooperative coalition undertaken by the Rupantaran Project was initiated with the objective of instilling scholastic instruction and learning with contextual relevance via pedagogical novelties. In order to secure acknowledgment from the community and to garner their commitment towards these transformative endeavors, the project established a community advisory committee, with endorsement from local dignitaries and school educators. This committee was meticulously constituted to ensure equitable engagement of diverse demographics encompassing males, females, youth, seniors, socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals, affluent

members, and professionals. The inaugural assembly of this committee, conducted within the communal expanse of the village, proved instrumental in cementing a collective understanding and mission concerning the project's undertakings. Concurrently, as the collaborative initiative progressed, involving PAR undertakings within the educational institution, academic scholars disseminated information about these activities to committee constituents and consistently gathered their valuable insights.

Gradually, it became evident that the local communities were becoming increasingly aware of the positive influence that the university, student-researchers, and educational institution were exerting to enhance the quality of instruction and the learning experience of their offspring. Nevertheless, it was also discerned that there existed culturally ingrained prospects pertaining to the educational institution. This phenomenon was exemplified during interactions with the community advisory committee. Within these engagements, both the educational institution and university researchers were able to ascertain that while parents exhibited contentment towards scholastic endeavors embedded in the curriculum, such as utilizing educational gardens and engaging in community-based visits and services, a prevailing concern revolved around their children's performance in examinations. Evident was the recurrent sentiment expressed by parents demanding the school's primary function to be confined to traditional classroom-bound instruction aimed at optimizing examination outcomes. This enduring convention of community anticipation stood in a persistent conflict with the innovative pedagogical endeavors introduced by the PAR project, aiming to incorporate experiential and contextualized outdoor learning within the scholastic setting. Such deeply entrenched communal anticipations not only restrained the community's acknowledgment of the educational institution's and university partners' contributions but also delimited the latitude available to educators to explore diverse alternative teaching methodologies. The consequence of this was a limitation imposed on the application of local wisdom and heritage of knowledge.

### **Collaborating Party Three, the School**

In the beginning stages, the school, including the headteacher, teachers, and SMC members, needed time to understand how PAR worked together. Problems emerged right from the start of the PAR process. The project's integration into the school seemed

more like an obligation than an invitation. For example, during a review workshop, a Ph.D. researcher suggested, “if the school had first identified its needs for improving education and then asked university partners for help, it might have given them a stronger sense of ownership.” As the process went on, ethical questions became more complicated. When the school staff discussed what improvements were needed, university researchers worried that participants' hidden but personal needs might become official requirements. This created a challenge in balancing specific needs with general ones and individual needs with communal ones. For instance, some teachers asked for ‘training materials’ or ‘personal laptops’. It was hard to tell if these requests were personal or represented what the group wanted, and if they were based on perceptions or objective facts. The ongoing issue of democratic participation raised questions about recognition, self-control, and ownership rights.

The primary objective of the project revolved around the enhancement of the quality of education within public schools. This objective was pursued through the collaborative initiation of innovative pedagogical approaches tailored to specific contexts. Consequently, the pivotal role played by the school itself became evident, encompassing the acknowledgment of collaborative stakeholders' contributions, the undertaking of independent actions, and the assumption of responsibility for these initiatives. The iterative process of implementing and reflecting upon pedagogical innovations encompassed diverse activities such as school gardening, integration of digital devices, as well as engagement with the community through visits and services. Despite the apparent disorderliness, this process demonstrated a consistent trajectory of advancement. Noteworthy is the insight shared during regular staff meetings, where several educators expressed how their interaction with university researchers in a collaborative capacity facilitated the refinement of their teaching methods and professional aptitude. This interaction subsequently encouraged them to independently explore novel approaches. However, it is essential to note that certain teachers occasionally lamented their limited availability to engage in pedagogical innovation via action research due to time constraints. Illustratively, a teacher captured the predicament by remarking-

Your purpose in coming from the university centers on undertaking action research, and as we observe, you possess ample time to reflect and execute your intentions. In

contrast, we struggle with the demands of daily school routines and customary tasks. The collaborative partnership entails a time pressure for us.

The project frequently encountered situations where these time-related challenges among teachers were acknowledged, necessitating a deceleration of project activities. In summation, the project's core aspiration rested in the enhancement of educational practices within public schools. This was achieved through collaborative pedagogical innovation, wherein the pivotal involvement of the school was paramount. The endeavor exhibited a consistent though intricate progress trajectory, marked by the educators' interaction with university researchers. Nonetheless, the temporal limitations faced by educators periodically prompted a reduction in project pace.

Our observation underscores that the prevailing educational framework and its operational structure pose a significant role to the autonomy and self-governance of schools. School teachers primarily direct their efforts towards fulfilling parental desires characterized by the emphasis on adhering to prescribed curriculum within the confines of the classroom, aimed at securing favorable academic results. A participating teacher conveyed, "Frequently, we find ourselves compelled to harmonize our instructional methodologies with external anticipations that exist beyond the educational institution and its physical learning spaces." Moreover, operating within a rigid bureaucratic framework, teachers confront limited independence to creatively shape their teaching approaches, thereby confining them within the boundaries of the established conventional educational framework. The absence of this autonomy substantially diminishes their inclination to take authoritative responsibility for instigating innovative pedagogical practices.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In the domain of action research, specifically within PAR, a substantial body of literature has been dedicated to the investigation of issues pertaining to collaborative initiatives involving entities from different geographical regions (North-South), academic institutions and schools, as well as universities and local communities. This exploration is evident through the works of Bevins and Price (2014), Meredith and Quiroz-Niño (2021), and Solvason et al. (2018). Adding to the reservoir of knowledge within this scholarly tradition, the case study of the tripartite collaboration experienced in Rupantaran project in Nepal presents multifaceted pedagogical aspects, challenges,

and transformative potentials in relation to the democratization of knowledge within analogous collaborative undertakings. This investigation specifically sheds light on the coexistence of, and divergences between, the concepts of recognition and autonomy, which constitute foundational elements of knowledge democracy (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016; Mackenzie, 2008). In this vein, the present section expounds upon the observations derived from the study, employing a theoretical framework drawn from Hall and Tondon's (2015) tripartite model of knowledge democracy. This model encompasses: (1) recognition of diverse epistemologies, (2) autonomy in the generation and representation of diverse forms of knowledge, and (3) the valorization of knowledge as an instrument for enacting socially equitable actions. Furthermore, the discourse broadens its contextual scope by delving into the study's findings in light of Ricoeur's (2005) proposition concerning three categories of recognition within collaborative partnerships, specifically: recognition of purpose, self-recognition, and mutual recognition. Additionally, the concept of relational autonomy, as delineated by Mackenzie (2008), is brought into consideration to enrich the socio-cultural understanding of knowledge democracy.

In the case of the Rupantaran project, the challenges faced by student-researchers within the framework of multi-partner participatory action research were notably intricate. Many of these challenges stemmed from the non-democratic structural framework of universities. In instances of multi-group PAR, when exclusive control over the management and allocation of resources rests with university partners, it results in their establishment of a position of dominance. This phenomenon, as observed by Ricoeur (2005) and MacKenzie (2008), originates from power differentials wherein certain influential factions among collaborative partners exhibit a lack of regard for mutual recognition and relational autonomy of all participants involved. Furthermore, the imposition of uniform university prerequisites and protocols within PAR, compelling student-researchers to adhere to a standardized approach, exerts pressure on researchers to generate knowledge within constrained epistemological and methodological boundaries. This practice not only undermines the acknowledgment of diverse epistemologies (Hall & Tondon, 2015), but also curtails the autonomy of student-researchers in engaging with various modes of knowledge creation and dissemination. Consequently, there exists a potential risk that in order to safeguard their academic accomplishments, student-researchers may inadvertently neglect contextually

responsive, multifaceted viewpoints. The depreciation of knowledge agencies (such as widely recognized scientific journals) in accommodating diverse forms of knowledge origination and representation within co-creative practitioner research constitutes an additional barrier to knowledge democracy. Resistance is also encountered from established bureaucratic frameworks resistant to change and predominantly indoor-oriented educational designs prevalent in schools. The former inhibits researchers' independence in exploring diverse research methodologies and representations, while the latter restricts educators' autonomy in adopting varied pedagogical approaches. Within the context of rural communities in Nepal, a lack of trust among these communities regarding funded projects, coupled with their pre-existing culturally shaped expectations centered around immediate financial gains from such projects, results in mutual disregard for each other's perspectives. This long-term scenario not only undermines the collaborative construction of knowledge but also poses a risk of manipulating knowledge by specific interest groups. Additionally, the predominant expectation of communities for an education system focused on standardized teaching methods and examination scores poses an ongoing resistance to the legitimacy of knowledge construction via formal education, thereby impeding the recognition of local wisdom traditions and knowledge legacies.

Numerous prior research endeavors (e.g., Platteel et al., 2010) have underscored the significance of contextually adaptive communicative circumstances as a pivotal facet within action research partnerships. In congruence with this notion, the present study posits that for multi-partner PAR initiatives to effectively advance the principles of knowledge democracy, it is imperative to institute procedural frameworks right from the inception. Within these frameworks, the collaborating entities collaboratively formulate a substantive and purposeful delineation of the project's objectives (Franz, 2005). This phase, as conceptualized by Ricoeur (2005), is termed the 'recognition of purpose'. It is at this juncture that both the educational institution and the local community begin to internalize the project as a shared undertaking (Nutton, Lucero & Ives, 2020), thereby fostering a sense of relational ownership. The establishment of relational autonomy (as expounded by Mackenzie, 2008) through this approach serves a dual function. Not only does it expedite the process by which PAR researchers establish rapport within the school and the community, but it also engenders an environment conducive to acknowledging and valuing individual as well as collective contributions



(Ricoeur, 2005). As the study indicates, the context of collaborative practitioner research is characterized by the persistent presence of hierarchical dynamics, encompassing relationships between research supervisors and student-researchers, as well as between student-researchers and school educators. In this scenario, the adoption of a ‘non-intervention’ policy by supervisors and the facilitation efforts of student-researchers toward school teachers, grounded not in externally derived theories but in an iterative process of action-reflection, emerge as pivotal requisites. Such an approach strengthens the partnership into what can be termed ‘emerging generative communities’ (Arhar et al., 2013), constituting fertile ground for the generation of novel insights. Furthermore, the sustained interactions over time empower both student-researchers and school teachers to cultivate collaborative praxis (Edwards-Groves & Kemmis, 2015), thereby instigating autonomous exploration of innovative avenues.

The primary knowledge contribution of this study is its exploration of the intricate aspects of autonomy within partnerships involving multiple groups. Over time, if individual autonomy fails to evolve into what Mackenzie (2008) terms as ‘relational autonomy’, it has the potential to give rise to conflicting individual interests, consequently undermining the principle of knowledge democracy. As highlighted by Platteel et al. (2010), while providing adequate space for communication can facilitate collaborators in recognizing each other’s limitations and contributions, it does not inherently guarantee the attainment of relational autonomy. To address this issue, particularly within academic institutions such as universities and schools, a fundamental transformation is necessary. This transformation entails a structural shift away from prevailing non-democratic practices and pedagogical frameworks. Similarly, within communities, a cultural change is imperative in terms of redefining expectations concerning funded projects and educational institutions.

In a general sense, democracy embodies a valuable interchange of diverse viewpoints (Stern, 2019). Consequently, its existence holds a pivotal role within collaborations and associations, especially those involving entities engaged in the generation of knowledge. Nevertheless, Meredith and Quiroz-Niño (2021) posit that unless the multifaceted aspects of knowledge generation receive comprehensive discourse, collaborative undertakings within multi-partner research projects are susceptible to perpetuating instances of epistemic injustice. Against this backdrop, the current research provides insights into the factors to be taken into account when

establishing multi-group partnership initiatives. To achieve this, an essential emphasis is placed on the interconnected understanding of acknowledgment and self-governance. This requires a continual process of reflection and purposeful adaptability on the part of all participating entities.

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