

Bridging distance and building relationships between women farmers in Australia and India to sustain and develop rural communities

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Abstract

This paper outlines a partially formed project that has been developed from the symposium and workshop '*Research and education for rural development and food security to build resilient rural environments: Australian and Indian perspectives*', held in Delhi, India, in April 2015. It outlines some of the important issues and opportunities that can be explored, potential barriers and perceived outcomes.

The project attempts to bridge the distance between women farmers through sharing cross-country perspectives on developmental issues. In particular, it is building conversations between women farmers in Australia (Farming Systems Group, Central West Farming Systems) and India (Self Help Groups) through the virtual space. In doing so it will enable sharing experiences and learning.

The project will explore potential approaches to the process and argues that challenges such as language differences can be diminished while using internet based communication tools. The conception of distance is not just the physical distance that has to be overcome with distance including social and intellectual distance. The paper explores the question What would it take for groups separated by distance and difference to come together and can the internet play a role in bridging that distance?

Initial project activities include an exchange point for building capacity and an understanding of the agricultural role of both groups of women and where and how it is similar and different between the two countries. Project activities will be developed in the spirit of deriving an understanding of what transformation means for each group and will focus on establishing connections between countries.

Introduction and origins

This paper outlines a project that considers the questions of distance between women farmers in Australia and India and to build processes to bridge that distance through the Virtual Hub for Rural Transformation. In doing so, the project will consider how meaningful communication between different countries can be facilitated and how the

process of communication can be geared towards co-learning with incorporation of the construction of new knowledge linked to transformation.

Distance is constructed in various ways that, to a large extent, depend on the perspective of the academic discipline in which they are constructed. Distance, a spatial term, can be used to refer to physical, social and intellectual distance. The three forms of distance interact.

In this paper we will work with the three forms of distance in the following ways. Social distance relates to the ability of one group to accept people from another social group. Social distance includes the level of empathy between groups and individuals, the differences in the social norms of groups, and the ability of members from the groups to function in each other's social environments. The frequency and intensity of interactions between social groups plays an important role in social distance. Physical distance can also contribute to social distance where people separated by long physical distances would be expected to be socially distant, because they are not able to meet and share with each other on a regular basis.

Intellectual distance relates to the difference between the cognitive frameworks used by the various groups, and the individuals in those groups, to make sense of their experiences and to learn. If groups are interacting to resolve an issue or develop new knowledge, the presence of diverse cognitive frameworks will impact on the interactions between the groups and their interpretation of events. The differences in the life experiences, cultures and educations of the members of the various groups would contribute to the cognitive differences between the groups. Intellectual distance also includes the knowledge held by the members of the various groups.

Central West Farming Systems (CWFS) is excited to collaborate with the women involved in Self Help Groups (SHGs) in India, deeming the project to be exceptionally beneficial to all women involved. Feedback received from the Australian rural community has been positive, with many believing that women involved in agriculture and farming in Australia and India share similar issues and challenges. There has also been interest generated in the Australian media and it has been proposed that a documentary be produced for television in Australia that follows the development of the project including the various issues it faces and how they are overcome.

Project participants

Self Help Groups: SHGs in India were developed to support women mainly in rural areas. SHGs are groups of 10 - 20 women who meet regularly and work together to improve their lives. The women share issues such as balancing the various roles they occupy (for example, the physical requirements of farming and the need to feed and nurture their families). Rural communities in India are suffering from an 'urban drift', with young people who do not see farming as a viable activity, preferring to earn a daily wage through activities such as labouring.

An initial step in the development of a SHG, is the pooling of members savings to establish a common fund that can be lent to individual members. Individual SHGs have developed in a number of ways with some becoming agricultural learning groups that have enabled women to take control of their own knowledge generation. In doing so they have transformed their lives and relationships in the community including improved self-esteem, financial stability and social status. As a result, SHGs have reduced distressed migration to urban centres and built educational and future employment opportunities for their children. All members of SHGs participate voluntarily.

SHGs are small and in some cases have developed a federated structure consisting of multiple SHGs. Membership of a federation enhances the capacity of SHGs and their members to build collective efforts to enhance social and economic development and assist women to assert their democratic rights.

External support from Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) such as PRADAN has been important in the initial development of SHGs. In addition, the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) has funded agricultural activities in partnership with Australian universities and PRADAN. This research has assisted those SHGs that are involved in the research to build agricultural research as an element in their activities. Some SHGs are developing characteristics in common with Australian Farming Systems Groups, including developing and conducting research and knowledge dissemination, in addition to their mutual support and development roles.

Central West Farming Systems: CWFS is a not-for-profit organisation based in central New South Wales, 450 kilometres west of Sydney, Australia. It was formed in 1998 as a farmer based research group with the motto of Farmers Advancing Research. The principal aim of the organisation is to be the leading regional group effectively demonstrating, extending and promoting farming innovation to assist farmers to manage their businesses for long-term economic, social and environmental viability.

The group reaches over 2000 people annually through events and communications, and covers 14 million hectares across central west NSW and along the Lachlan River.

CWFS is based in a low rainfall area with an average annual rainfall of 400 – 500 millimetres. This is one of the main constraints with long periods of drought, some up to 10 years, occurring. Farming in this area is predominately a mix of cropping (cereals and cotton) and livestock (beef cattle and sheep (wool and meat)).

One of the projects that CWFS and the local community is passionate about is their Women and Youth in Agriculture project, which they believe would be of interest to the SHGs in India. The objective of this project is to provide capacity building opportunities, upskill and increase the awareness of sustainability in agriculture by encouraging women and youth to participate more fully in all aspects of this male dominated industry. CWFS looks at the barriers and difficulties faced by women in the

agricultural industry and how they can overcome these problems. They also strongly believe in educating and encouraging the youth of today to understand and learn the importance of agriculture. Additionally, CWFS aims to highlight career opportunities for young people in agriculture in order to reduce the cycle of 'urban drift' what has subsequently had a detrimental impact on many rural communities. It is already clear there are many commonalities with the issues faced by women and youth in Australia and India.

Charles Sturt University and the Graham Centre: Since its establishment in 1989, Charles Sturt University (CSU) has grown to become Australia's largest regional university and the country's leading provider of distance education. In 2015, CSU had an enrolment of almost 40,000 students in undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The University has three faculties and teaches on nine domestic campuses. The School of Agricultural and Wine Sciences is located on the Wagga and Orange campuses, NSW, and also teaches Agricultural Business Management at Wangaratta, north-eastern Victoria, and at Muresk, Western Australia. The school has an enrolment (internal and distance education) of over 900 students in its undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

Within CSU, designated areas of research strength have been awarded the status of University Research Centres. The most successful research centre is the Graham Centre for Agricultural Innovation. The key strengths of the Centre are its location and opportunities to develop strong partnerships between farmers and industry groups and researchers; the diverse skills-base of the scientists forming cohesive and multi-disciplinary teams to address the complexities of modern farming; and its access to new facilities including laboratories, glasshouses, rhizolysimeter, animal house, controlled environment and field facilities.

PRADAN: PRADAN is a voluntary organisation registered under the Societies Registration Act of India. It was established in Delhi in 1983 by a group of young professionals who were inspired by the conviction that individuals with knowledge resources and empathy for the marginalised must work with communities at the grassroots in order to help them overcome poverty.

PRADAN believes the path towards conquering economic poverty is to enhance the livelihood capabilities of the poor and give them access to sustainable income earning opportunities. To do this they need to escape from their past, develop an alternative vision for their future and set achievable goals. They also need to be equipped with the technical, organisational, negotiating and networking skills to fulfil their goals. PRADAN aims to stimulate and support the poor to dream of a better future and stimulate their sense of agency as they endeavour to enhance incomes, improve access to services or claim rights and entitlements.

PRADAN has 350 highly motivated and skilled professionals working in the remote villages of India, immersing themselves directly with target communities. These

young professionals are recruited from universities and hold degrees in subjects including management, engineering, agriculture, and the social sciences.

PRADAN professionals, divided into 57 teams, work with over 374,008 families in 5766 villages across seven of the poorest states in the country.

Challenged by the abysmal poverty of millions of people across India, PRADAN has resolved to reach out to 1.5 million poor people in the next 10 years as part of its vision, PRADAN 2017.

Ambedkar University (AUD): Ambedkar University, Delhi focuses on research and higher learning in the social sciences and humanities. The University is named after Dr BR Ambedkar, the visionary Indian reformer, who believed in education as the right weapon to cut social slavery, and endeavours to promote education with a difference, and engaged scholarship with the margins.

AUD is the only university in the region to cater exclusively to the study of the humanities and the social sciences. The University aspires to mould its students as informed and sensitive professionals who engage with their social responsibilities and react to the needs of the marginalised sections of society.

The University has schools and programmes in interdisciplinary areas and in the core disciplines of the social sciences and humanities. It has also set up seven centres over the past four years. It offers education at the undergraduate, masters MPhil and PhD level. The schools and programmes include development studies, human ecology, clinical psychology and psychotherapy, business, public policy and social entrepreneurship, gender studies, culture and creative expressions, design, education studies, law, governance and citizenship and the core disciplines of the social sciences and humanities.

The Centre for Development Practice (CDP): CDP established by the Board of Management in July 2013 and has a two pronged focus; firstly on the creation of a cadre of professional leadership to engender transformative social action in rural development; and secondly, the establishment of the CDP as a vibrant space/platform for dialogue between development practitioners and academics, engaging in collaborative research, documentation and anthologies of practice.

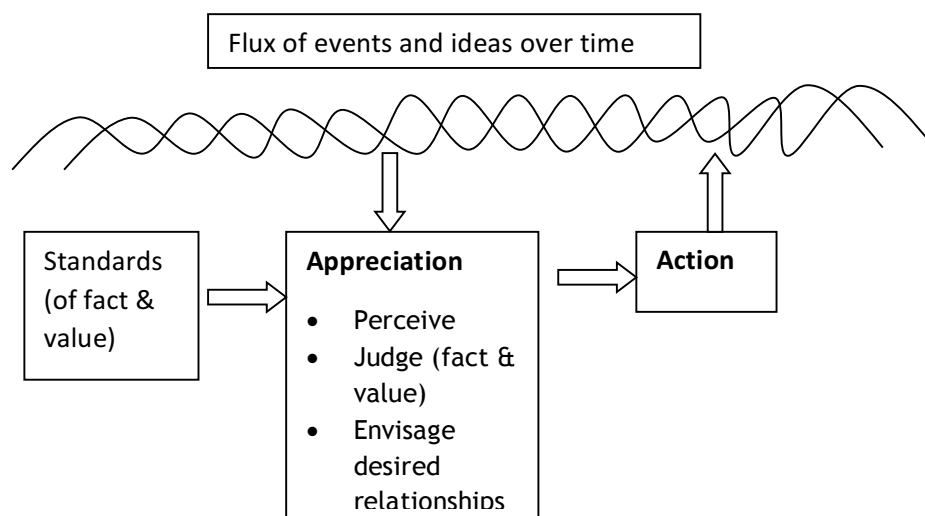
The CDP has identified themes of significance to the grassroots. It is envisaged as the space where scholars and practitioners specialising in developmental questions (theoretical and practical, discursive and experiential), group processes (and group dynamics), psychologies of the self - both suffering and re-creative, action research, and rural grassroots work come together.

The approach

The project at this stage could be criticised for its limited engagement with theory and this paper could suffer the same fate. But, if we do not engage outside the traditional spheres we run the risk of being locked into the past rather than being open to alternative futures. In outlining the approach and perhaps methodology we need to consider our purpose in doing so. Are we seeking a theory to justify what we are doing or is the aim to do something that will generate new theory?

The approach taken has much in common with systems analysis as described by Vickers (1983) as a 'means to understand situations' as part of building an 'appreciation' of the context before deciding whether action is needed or not, and then the nature of that action. Vickers referred to this approach as an Appreciative System in which people decide on actions based on their evaluation of relationships. The Appreciative Systems approach allows the change to emerge under a management system that regularly reassesses the situation over time. The way in which the assessment is carried out and interpreted may also change over time as the framework used to assess the situation also changes over time.

Various authors have worked to further develop and operationalise the approach and Checkland and Casar (1986) and Checkland (2005) took Vickers ideas and drew models to further make sense of them (Figure 1); an activity that Vickers did not engage with himself.



Source: (Checkland & Casar, 1986; Checkland, 2005)

Figure 1. Representation of the appreciative systems approach.

Progress so far

Progress so far has been slow and frustrating. This is in part because we are uncertain as to what we are doing and how to proceed. While there is a high level of enthusiasm amongst the project partners, there is also a sense of caution and unfamiliarity.

Staff from PRADAN and Ambedkar University (AUD) visited two groups of women in the Balrampur and Baghmundi blocks of the Purulia district, West Bengal, India, in late 2015 to discuss the project, introduce the CWFS team and explore potential challenges and ways to overcome these.

The Balrampur group spoke about their experiences with researchers who had visited and interacted with them. These interactions involved translators who assisted them to understand the language and questions. The fear of getting lost in translation was a challenge highlighted by both the Balrampur and Baghmundi groups, with both groups stressing the importance of having a good translator. They explained that the process takes time to perfect and things cannot be expected to go smoothly the first time the groups communicate.

The groups also discussed the issue of distance and how they can feel alienated, particularly by the English language. They expressed how interaction with a group from Odisha or Jharkhand is much easier despite the language barrier.

During the visit, the groups participated in a video call and were amazed at the idea of 'seeing while talking'. Participating in the video call made the women a little more comfortable with the idea and they shared the kind of exchange they would anticipate from such a process.

Some of the women's thoughts for the project included:

- Exploring agriculture/farming systems and sharing their own story of change.
- Exchanging knowledge on different farming practices and production.
- Understanding and sharing the journey of collective formation in India and Australia and the work they are doing.
- Sharing the constant struggle women have with the busy schedule of working on the farm and caring for their families, and learning how women in Australia cope and balance their work and home lives.

Potential barriers to success

The issues and potential problems raised by the participants from Australia and India are similar.

Limited mobile and internet access makes it difficult for women in both Australia and India to access new technologies and techniques. The women are also concerned with the technology being used and whether they will be able to manage the technology effectively. They feel a distance from the technology and do not feel particularly comfortable using it.

The issue of language for communication is also a shared concern. The SHGs in India have had direct experience working with English speakers in the past and are able to work with translators, making use of the speaker's body language to enable clear understanding. But, working through the medium of video calls may preclude this from being as simple.

As discussed earlier the issue of distance also creates a potential barrier to the project's success, in particular the intellectual distance between practitioners, researchers and farmers. There is a need for partners to acknowledge and understand the transformational change of these groups and the individuals within the groups, as well as the processes that facilitate such transformations.

There are potential barriers between all partners involved in the project; between partners within Australia, within India and between Australia and India.

There is also concern about participants losing patience with the process and becoming disengaged. Individuals involved in the project will need to be patient and persist with the challenges that present, working together to overcome them, strengthening learning and building knowledge from these experiences.

What will make it work?

It is essential to build a shared understanding of what will be achieved in the project. This involves all project partners contributing and sharing their perceived challenges, visions and goals so everyone can work towards achieving these.

Bridging the intellectual distance and establishing how to work with these differences is also key to the success of the project. While it is important to maintain the differences amongst cognitive frameworks for the different groups and individuals involved, including the emotional and psychological differences, all groups need to be empathetic and understanding of these differences. It will be the life experiences shared amongst all those involved in the project that will add to the success and knowledge building from the project.

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