

# SUMMARY REPORT: Conscious Research. A Conversation.

## KNOWLEDGE, PROCESS AND PRACTICE

16th November 2017, University of Cape Town

**INTRODUCTION** Amidst ongoing debates surrounding decolonisation within our academic institutions, this timely conversation was the start of a constructive and reflexive dialogue to think anew about knowledges and the importance of interrogating and transforming our research approaches and methods. This report seeks to be a synthesis and a record of the ideas and themes that arose during the seminar, that can be taken forward as we continue the conversation. The seminar was a chance to widen the conversation beyond the university and to involve groups involved in collaborative projects with universities, especially in the bio-economy and agroecology domains.

## PARTICIPANTS



A range of UCT staff, postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows attended the meeting. This included academics from the Departments of Environmental and

Geographical Science, Archaeology, Sociology, the African Centre for Cities and the Research Office, and external partners from collaborating NGOs and a range of staff from across the Departments. The experiences of staff and postgraduate students at UCT and the challenges they have faced have led to many engaged conversations on this topic as they are often at the forefront of finding new 'ways of doing' research. Other universities represented at the meeting included the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the University of Amsterdam.

### **Bio-economy RESEARCH CHAIR**

The meeting was hosted by the DST/NRF SARCHI Chair on Environmental and Social Dimensions of the Bio-economy. The Chair is involved in a number of engaged scholarship projects, including the Seed and Knowledge Initiative, Voices for BioJustice, TRUST and the Co-Creating Wild Food Livelihoods project. The Wild Foods project works closely with local participants from different communities in the Cederberg mountains to jointly research, develop and document a knowledge co-creation process across the academic-community spectrum. Making Kos is a key NGO involved in this project, also represented at the meeting.



The Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) is a collaborative project between a range of southern African organisations across South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi, including UCT, that

aims to revive traditional seed and knowledge systems and to deepen understanding about their functioning. Organisations represented at the meeting included Biowatch South Africa; Earthlore (SA); Ukuvuna (SA); Tsuro (Zimbabwe); and the Zambian Agroecology Alliance.



Working with small-scale farmers, civil society and government, Biowatch aims to ensure that people have control over their food, agricultural processes and resources, and other natural resources, within an agro-ecological and sustainable system; reimagining research and advocacy that is truly driven from the bottom up.



EMG seeks to awaken the potential in ourselves and others to engage powerfully, mindfully and creatively in our relationship with our environment.

## SITUATING THE MEETING

We gathered on top of blankets, under trees in the Secret Garden at UCT. We became familiar with each other and set our intentions for the day ahead, as the hum of traffic lingered behind us; connecting over our collective questions regarding the messiness of social research. It was clear that we may have the answers on paper, and neat-looking ethics codes and processes, but challenges can arise quickly and chaos can ensue when we get to work. Though what is clear is that it helps to have conversations, to deepen our understandings, to build our own practices. This seminar provided the space for us to ignite these necessary conversations.

## PRESENTATIONS

RACHEL WYNBERG  
Bio-economy Research Chair and  
Associate Professor (EGS)  
UCT

Rachel Wynberg welcomed participants, emphasising that the discussions were timely, connecting very strongly with calls to decolonise not only the curricula at UCT but also the way in which we do research and engage with groups outside of the university. This is especially the case in landscapes where histories of apartheid and colonialism have left formidable traces. Our work on environmental and social justice adds further layers to the way in which we interrogate and critique our research

practice. While we might think that we have the answers on paper, and neat-looking ethics codes and processes, things get messy and personally challenging when we get to work.

We need to grapple with important questions about how we deal with different degrees of power, knowledge and ignorance; how we accommodate the enormous richness of different knowledges and cultures in ways that are respectful and open-minded; how we navigate unpredictable or conflict situations; how we justify the time we ask of research participants, the expectations research raises, the intrusions into peoples' lives, the social impact of research interventions; how we resolve the paradox of being both inside a process – or 'standing with' as Kim Tallbear describes it – and simultaneously outside and detached, the so-called neutral researcher; and what, in fact, is the ultimate purpose of doing research – and for whose benefit?

Many of us have struggled to different degrees with these questions, and the one universal truth is that there are no obvious answers. What is clear is that it helps to have the conversations, to deepen our understandings, to build our own practices. The seminar is hopefully a part of that process.

FRANK MATOSE  
Associate Professor (Sociology)  
UCT

In order to approach the subject of decolonising research, Frank Matose started our conversation by talking about **knowledge**. What is it? How is it made? Whose knowledge counts? And where does it come from? Asking these questions to ourselves, to each other, and to our institutions is imperative if we are to acknowledge the implicit **power** dynamics construct the research space.

He questioned the normative term of 'knowledge generation' and asked us "is knowledge rather not created from within?" This introduced an on-going theme of **collaboration** and creation *with* communities, rather than imposing pre-determined research objectives upon them that come from outside i.e. from the university.

Integral to meaningful collaboration is placing emphasis upon the research **process** in addition to research outcomes. A commitment to process means that we must be prepared to **take time to build relationships** and expect the unexpected, for research processes are subject to human processes.

In the past, many communities in South Africa have been subject to degrading and inequitable research practices. As researchers, we must acknowledge that we carry this burden and instead of perpetuating existing patterns of inequality, must seek to be agents of change. To do this, we must **"start with the self"** and understand if our research practices transform and redistribute power or further entrench colonial visions.

SOPHIE OLDFIELD  
Professor (African Centre for Cities)  
UCT

Sophie Oldfield noted that scholars working in 'the urban' space rarely engage with questions regarding ethics. This seminar provided the chance to consolidate such questions and bring together researchers working in both **rural** and **urban** settings.

She then gave an overview of her new book, *"High Stakes, High Hopes: Creating Collaborative Urban Geographies in South Africa"*. Sophie explored the question of what is at stake in a partnership between an academic institution and a township, grappling

with evictions, legacies of apartheid and forced to fight for every right, service, and resource. What happens to teaching when student learning and assessment moves out of the classroom onto township streets and into ordinary people's households? And what unfolds differently when university practices of research and assessments are infused in township realities and commitments? Also raised during the presentation was the ongoing theme of **research relationships**: Who are we working with? Who must we answer to? What political relationships and legitimacies are at play? And how do they influence the research?

Sophie acknowledged that collaborative partnerships are often messy and enveloped in conflict. Yet they are also very creative and, more importantly, fundamental if we are to transform and embark on the **decentralisation of knowledge**. As academics, we have the responsibility to "**change our form**" and bridge the gap between academic knowledge and popular knowledge. This means loosening the grip of our commitment to academic publications and rather encompassing and producing different kinds of knowledge - from research posters and neighbourhood directories, to maps, books and community publications.

**VANESSA BLACK**  
Research and Advocacy  
BIOWATCH SOUTH AFRICA

Vanessa Black of Biowatch South Africa brought to us an NGO perspective. Biowatch supports smallholder farmers but Vanessa acknowledged that it has a broader advocacy agenda; as well as donors that they must be responsive to.

The work needs research for monitoring, evaluation and learning purposes and to provide evidence for advocacy. While Biowatch commissions its own research, its long relationship with farmers also provides an accessible entry point for others. Balancing and finding synergy between these agendas can be challenging, especially for a small NGO with limited resources (time, staff, money). How can they be accountable, foster learning and protect the trust relationship with the farmers yet not act as gate keepers? Biowatch also has a responsibility to ensure community knowledge and genetic resources are not exploited.

It was noted that in Biowatch's experience, farmer to farmer learning often has more impact than bringing in experts. However, processes need careful upfront design to ensure everyone has a common understanding of concepts and purpose. The farmers should be included in all phases of the research to dovetail with their ways of doing, including reflecting on the outcomes. However, if a research process is too open-ended, with no tangible and documented outcomes, evidence becomes diluted and subsequently, less impactful for policy recommendations and advocacy.

Both research and donor reporting require documentation of practices, processes and outcomes but often, farmers are resistant - with good reason. It helps to build documentation into the process in creative ways that circumvent language and literacy issues that otherwise create barriers to participation.

**PHILILE MBATHA**  
ASSISTANT LECTURER  
UCT

Drawing from her own research experiences in Richard's Bay (KwaZulu-Natal), Philile Mbatha described the interface between ethics and the concept of **Ubuntu**. The former is something one learns, while the latter is the intrinsic goodness one has. She stated that researchers "must have Ubuntu" because we are humans before we are researchers.

Dominant research paradigms deprive us of our humanity, promoting detachment and objectivity in order to acquire knowledge; we need to fight against this. Philile also gave an insight into some of her experiences of being 'an insider' in the research process and how different expectations were placed upon her in comparison to 'an outsider'. These different contexts invite different ethical questions and require different responses.

Often, when a research projects starts, the community want to know exactly how they will benefit. Yet it's not easy to know this in advance. Philile noted that in her experience, people might benefit more from the process than the often elusive and intangible research outcomes. Participatory-Action-Research (PAR) allows for community voices to be heard.

#### *POINTS OF DISCUSSION ...*

- 'The Community' is an evolving and dynamic flux of forces.
- How can ethical issues be supported by our institutions?
- We must stop thinking that as researchers, we have to choose between academic and on-the-ground research. How can we overlap?
- Whose responsibility is it to consider the ethical implications? Individuals? Institutions?

## POSITIONALITY: A PARTICIPATORY EXERCISE

For us as researchers to be able to engage further with these questions, we must firstly **interrogate who we are**, how we are perceived in the research space and what power relations we bring. In order to answer these questions, understanding our **researcher positionality** is vital.

During this participatory exercise, we had to write down on stickers four aspects of our identity that influence how we perceive the world and thus our research processes. We were then presented with different research scenarios, discussed in different groups where we spoke about our positionality in each situation. We spoke about the identities we would; (1) emphasize, (2) take off or (3) wish we had and finally (4) reasons for the decisions.



Understanding positionality: a participatory exercise

Positionality in research has grown primarily out of **feminist and post-colonial scholarship** as part of the response to the positivist concept of objectivity. Feminist and post-colonial researchers ask us to instead acknowledge our own subjectivity and positionality and its effect on the process of research and our results.

**Scene 1:** You are Facilitating a focus group of 9 elderly, female, Zulu speaking farmers in rural KZN. You are exploring the farming practices they engage in.

**Scene 2:** You are presenting the findings and policy recommendations from your PhD that studied small-scale fisheries and sustainable livelihoods in the Western Cape to the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

**Scene 3:** You are interviewing a Monsanto representative to gain his perspective on the effects of GM white maize in a community of small-holder farmers in KZN. You are aware of evidence that suggests GM white maize negatively affects small-holder farmers in South Africa.

**Scene 4:** You have a meeting with an NGO to talk about their possible support for your research looking at urban food security in Khayelitsha.

**Scene 5:** You are writing an article for the Daily Vox (online news outlet) that asks UCT students about their involvement with and opinions on the #FeesMustFall movement. You are meeting with different groups of students to understand their views.

# TAKING THE CONVERSATION FORWARD

## KNOWLEDGE

We have established how important it is to interrogate *knowledge*. We have also considered how knowledge has been institutionalised in our universities and have taken into account how this institutionalisation is embedded in the colonial vision. How then do we interrogate? Questions surrounding the creation of knowledge must be asked and actively answered in and through the research that we undertake: Whose knowledge counts? How is it created? Who owns it when the research has finished?

We must seek to diversify what knowledge is considered legitimate by decentralising the creation of knowledge. As researchers, we must recognise that knowledge already exists in the spaces that we enter. Through collaborative research practices based on respectful relationships, we can break the cycle of damaging and dehumanising research that has come before us. We must use our privilege and capacities to transform and deconstruct the knowledge hierarchy that is perpetuated by our institutions.

## PROCESS & PRACTICE

The research process is often neglected in favour of predetermined research objectives and end-points. Funders frequently require more formal documentation of monitoring and evaluation and evidence, which hinders and undervalues the insights that may be gleaned from collective processes. Rather we must seek collaborative relationships, standing with and learning from the communities in which we work. The obligation to funders was often raised as an obstacle to true and meaningful research partnerships. How can researchers be empowered to negotiate the research agenda and place emphasis and value upon the research process?

How can students engage with research ethically and appropriately within a limited time frame? This question is asked against the backdrop of academic institutions that promote individual goals and qualifications over collective involvement - processes that often require time beyond a Master's or a PhD degree. It is thus the role of the institution to embed these ethical concerns within research requirements.

## CONCLUDING WORDS

1. This conversation must be taken forward within wider calls for **decolonisation of research and teaching** at UCT.
2. The **roles and values of the university** need wider interrogation. Individual achievements are often valued more than the potential contributions universities can make to serve intellectual movements. Universities are a huge resource for people. We need to seek to find ways to mainstream 'conscious research' within academic institutions, including UCT.
3. Conversations about conscious research need to be brought to the **NGO space**.

## NEXT STEPS: THINGS WE CAN DO

1. **Blog / website**. Write short pieces about 'doing research' and the problems we face, with a focus on the themes from the seminar.
2. **Circulate readings** that speak to the themes that emerged from the seminar. Academic papers, blogs, articles etc.
3. **Expose students to radical methodologies** to "give us a chance to care".
4. **Convene similar conversations** about topics such as research and advocacy; research and training; ways in which research can be jointly conceptualised across institutions.

## SOMETHING TO KNOW ABOUT ... THE UCT KNOWLEDGE CO-OP

The UCT Knowledge Co-op builds on a tradition of social responsiveness – and aims to make it easier for community partners to access UCT's skills, resources and professional expertise. It works by matching community groups with academic partners in a collaboration that meets the needs for research or practical support identified by the community group. <http://www.knowledgeco-op.uct.ac.za/>

# Conscious Research. A Conversation. 16th November 2017

We welcome you all to what we hope will be the beginning of a constructive, reflexive and on-going dialogue to think anew about knowledges, the importance of interrogating and transforming our research methods, and the ways in which we engage as researchers. This takes place within the context of growing debates on decolonisation within our institutions. Through a series of talks, discussions and participatory exercises, we are seeking to deepen our understanding to construct more appropriate, conscious, and holistic approaches to research.

## SESSION 1. Chair - Rachel Wynberg

VENUE: The Secret Garden @ Upper Campus, UCT (Directions to follow)

- 9.00 Welcome, why we are here and outline of the day (**Rachel Wynberg**)
- 9.15 CONSCIOUS RESEARCH & TRANSFORMATION AT UCT (**Loretta Feris**)
- 9.30 Introductions from each participant. What is my interest in being here? (**All**)
- 9.50 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO DECOLONISE RESEARCH? (**Frank Matose**)
- 10.10 Questions and Discussion
- 10.45 Tea in the EGS Library

## SESSION 2. Chair - David Fig

VENUE: EGS Library

- 11.00 COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS AND THE PROJECT(S) OF RESEARCH (**Sophie Oldfield**)
- 11.20 WHAT DO WE EXPECT FROM COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH? (**Biowatch South Africa**)
- 11.40 Questions and Discussion
- 13.00 Lunch provided by *The Spinach King* in the EGS Tea Room (**1 hour**)

## SESSION 3. Chair - Sonwabo Ngcelwane

VENUE: EGS Library

- 14.00 POSITIONALITY: AN EXPLORATORY EXERCISE (**Jennifer Whittingham**)
- 14.45 WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES AND TAKING A STAND (**Philile Mbatha**)
- 15.05 Questions and Discussion
- 15.30 Tea

## SESSION 4. Chair - Merle Sowman

VENUE: EGS Library

- 15.45 Taking our conversations forward
- 16.30 Closure

