

ARNA 2017
ACTION RESEARCH NETWORK OF THE AMERICAS
CONFERENCE

1ST
GLOBAL ASSEMBLY
FOR KNOWLEDGE DEMOCRACY

**PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRATIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE:
NEW CONVERGENCES FOR RECONCILIATION**

CARTAGENA, COLOMBIA - JUNE 12-16 2017

1st Global Assembly: A
Brief and a Call to
Participate

Prepared by:
Lonnie Rowell, Christine
Edwards-Groves & Jose
Ramos

The Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA) will convene its 2017 Annual Conference along with the 1st Global Assembly for Knowledge June 12-16 in Cartagena, Colombia. The gathering is being developed through a partnership between ARNA and the National University of Colombia/*Nacional Universidad De Colombia*. The National Pedagogic University of Colombia/*Universidad Pedagogica Nacional* and many other Colombian, Latin American, Caribbean, and North American colleges and universities as well as global universities, networks and institutions are also serving as affiliates and sponsors.

The Conference theme is "***Participation and Democratization of Knowledge: New Convergences for Reconciliation.***" The theme recognizes emerging understandings of knowledge democracy, convergences among those creating knowledge through diverse approaches grounded in participatory frameworks, and the place of such approaches in reconciliations associated with the end of social conflicts. A special feature of the five-day gathering is the celebration of the 40th Anniversary of the First World Symposium of Participatory Action Research (PAR), held in Cartagena and convened by Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1925-2008) and others. The life and work of Fals Borda and other PAR pioneers will be highlighted throughout the conference and the days leading up to it in conjunction with the 150th Anniversary of the founding of the National University of Colombia.

On June 16, ARNA will convene the **1st Global Assembly for Knowledge Democracy** in conjunction with a wide variety of networks, organizations, and institutions involved with action research and participatory approaches to creating knowledge. This gathering will examine global convergences emerging in relation to knowledge production, social progress, respect for epistemological diversity, and alternative globalization. The Global Assembly Co-Chairs are Lonnie Rowell (USA), Knowledge Mobilization Coordinator for ARNA, and Christine Edwards-Groves (AUS), Australian coordinator and international co-leader of the Pedagogy, Education and Praxis network (PEP).

A key question for those working in the social spaces created by the global action research community, Urban Commons movement, the World Social Forum, the Peer2Peer network, the Indigenous Sovereignty and other anti/decolonizing movements, and the flourishing culture of alternative networks in general, is the extent to which epistemological, ideological and political differences can be reconciled in the

interest of a sustainable and socially just world. The Global Assembly will address this question in the context of an ecology of knowledges. Our interest lies in “the geopolitics of Knowledge, its eagerness to problematize the equation of who produces knowledge, in what context, and for whom.”¹ Thus, the 1st Global Assembly is being organized with the intention of initiating a thoughtful and strategic assessment of the politics of knowledge creation and the potential of participatory approaches as alternatives to a monolithic knowledge enterprise based on the domination of the Global North and the marginalization and subordination of other knowledges.

The keynote address at the Global Assembly will be given by Prof. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, a Professor of Sociology at the University of Coimbra (Portugal) and a Distinguished Legal Scholar at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Among his many books in English are *Law and Globalization from Below: Towards a Cosmopolitan Legality*; *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*; and *Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*. The framing of knowledge democracy, in the particular context of the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, indicates a commitment to deeply heterogeneous and emancipatory approaches to knowledge. The idea for an epistemology of the global south guides an understanding of a broader project of transformation, the empowerment of diverse knowledge communities and knowledge systems critical to the long-term sustainment of people and the planet, which sits in the context of the (current) hegemony of West / neo-liberalist knowledge systems. “Cognitive justice,” another term used by Santos, indicates the project of making subaltern knowledges visible and legitimate in this neo-liberal context.

As conveners, ARNA and PEP have carefully considered the question of whether this first Global assembly for knowledge democracy will be a network of networks for action research, or whether it will work and play in the space of knowledge democracy more generally, as part of a broader and more thematically diverse movement. If it is the former, then there is no need to include any other networks or affiliations other than those focused on action research. If it is the latter, then action research is just one of a number approaches and communities that are part of the knowledge democracy process. The question, however, may not be whether the assembly is about action research vs. about knowledge democracy, but how the positions are reconciled and integrated.

Reconciling the two positions between “action research only” and a “more general movement” has two dimensions. The first is the philosophic or epistemological question of what should and can be included. The second is the practical question of what can be done in this first global assembly.

Philosophic reconciliation:

At the philosophic dimension action research itself is extremely diverse, both thematically and methodologically. Its networks and communities are engaged in

¹ Sousa Santos, B. (Ed.) (2008). *Another knowledge is possible: Beyond Northern epistemologies*. London: Verso. P. xxxiv.

committed work building social solidarities, emancipatory and adult education, valuing diverse experiences through participatory knowledge approaches, empowerment in policy / advocacy, transforming gender power, making new knowledges and grassroots transformations visible, networking for change, forging post colonial / post-neo-liberal development pathways, to name just a few themes! It might be said that the boundaries for action research are fuzzy rather than hard.

The global assembly on knowledge democracy provides an opportunity to open to a different fuzzy boundary. This does not and should not challenge the delineations people have made within action research and participatory research communities. It should not challenge the identity of action research at all. It is an invitation to see this approach within a new context, the one outlined by Santos and others in the knowledge democracy space. That is to say that AR is not the only space working on knowledge democracy, there are others: the World Social Forum, the Peer to Peer movement, Commons movement, to name a few.

Action researchers at the global assembly would not be asked to 'let go' of their identity within the global action research community, but simply to play in a different space that is part of a different context of social and global transformation. There could be, over time, rich connections between the AR communities and others in the knowledge democracy space that will enrich many sides in the work of transforming knowledge-power. These connections reflect what Orlando Fals Borda addressed as "participatory convergence" at the 1997 *World Conference for Participatory Convergence in Knowledge, Space and Time*.²

Practical reconciliation:

From a practical point of view, the first global assembly will be primarily composed of people in the global orbit of action research. Even if the assembly was defined using the more open fuzzy logic and included other transformation focused networks, it is likely that the vast majority of people attending the first assembly will be from the AR space, in particular as it follows several days of an action research conference.

Thus from a practical position, the first assembly could in name keep the meeting inclusive using the broad fuzzy boundary of knowledge democracy, while recognizing that practically only a few people from other networks (e.g. WSF, P2P, Commons) likely would be active participants in the assembly.

² Fals Borda, O. (Ed.) (1998). *People's participation: Challenges ahead*. New York: Apex Press. This book, "compiled and analyzed" by Fals Borda, is a collection and synthesis of presentations and discussions at the 1997 gathering in Cartagena. The 1997 World Conference was, as Fals Borda described it, "a Participatory Convergence because two series of sister trends came together" (p. xi). The first was the 20th reunion of the 1977 First World Symposium of Participatory Action Research held in Cartagena. The second was the convening in Cartagena of the 8th World Congress organized by the Australian Action Learning, Action Research, and Process Management Association (ALARPM, later changed to ALARA).

If subsequent meetings happen in later years, or as a web platform develops, they can be inclusive of the broader knowledge democracy space and develop in this way, with the discussions of the first assembly serving as sources for further consideration in developing the broader space.

A call for preparatory workshops:

In preparing for the 2017 Global Assembly for Knowledge Democracy we wish to invite all groups concerned with knowledge democracy to convene workshops in which regional papers can be developed, which can then be shared with the Global Assembly Planning Committee for the purpose of helping insure that the planning process is broadly inclusive both in terms of the identification of themes to be addressed in the Assembly and the approaches taken to address the themes. In other words, our intention is for the 1st Global Assembly to itself be an action research process involving cycles of problem identification, reflection and planning, action, and data collection and analysis.

We make this invitation mindful that as a part of the 1997 Conference, preparatory workshops were held in various locations around the world, including seven in Colombia and more than a dozen in other countries.³ Will the 2017 Global Assembly achieve this rather extraordinary level of participatory convergence? We have no way of knowing, of course. However, not to make the effort would both dishonor the spirit of Orlando's earlier work with global convergences and miss the opportunity now evident across the globe to connect and reconnect with the variety of new convergences showing such potential for forging post colonial / post-neo-liberal development pathways.

³ Fals Borda discusses the preparatory workshops on page xiii of his Introduction to *People's participation: Challenges ahead* (1998).