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Bridging academic and societal knowledge in higher education: A Habermasian approach of transdisciplinary knowledge co-production

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Abstract

This paper examines how academic and societal knowledge can be bridged to solve wicked, cross-cutting problems through transdisciplinary co-production. While the National Education Policy 2020 serves as a timely policy catalyst for disciplinary integration, the majority of discourse remains limited to multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, attempting the integration inside the academic sphere. However, the complexity of the real-world problems transcends the academic world, necessitating the unification of academic and societal knowledge. The study utilizes comparative analysis of key policy documents and purposively selected alternative learning mechanisms, capturing academic and societal knowledge productions, respectively. Utilizing the Habermasian framework, the paper empirically demonstrates the communicative action between institutional custodianship over knowledge production and knowledge creation in the community-led commons. The paper investigates the structural mechanisms that govern the exchange of knowledge between academia and society, arguing for successful transdisciplinary collaboration by acknowledging society as a legitimate knowledge partner rather than a mere recipient. By advancing transdisciplinary collaboration across academic and societal spheres, the study identifies strategies for aligning the institutional goals with societal cognitive aspirations. The study primarily contributes to the discourse on holistic and quality education by suggesting pathways for higher education for institutionally rooted and socially relevant knowledge through transdisciplinary knowledge co-production.

1. Introduction

Contemporary societal problems are becoming multidimensional, non-linear, and complex, limiting the effectiveness of a single disciplinary solution (Leavy, 2019; Weaver et al., 2023). Therefore, disciplinary integration in the form of multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity has been projected as an alternative cross-cutting paradigm to deal with complex societal problems. However, the capacity of these approaches in addressing complex real-world problems depends on how far they extend beyond academia (Gibbs & Beavis, 2020). Therefore, the need for a unique paradigm emerges, which can transcend the boundaries of academia to address the societal problems deep-seated in the real-life context (Keryan et al., 2020). Consequently, with the currently growing body of research, transdisciplinarity has emerged as a unique paradigm that aims to integrate societal and academic knowledge to solve complex real-world problems (Bernstein, 2015; Pohl et al., 2017).

The Indian academic context has been highly siloed and organized around hard disciplinary boundaries. Interestingly, the existing compartmentalized higher education landscape of India is a recent colonial phenomenon rather than an intrinsic feature of the Indian higher education system (Goyal, 2021). The post-independence Indian higher education system has been characterized by over-specialization and academic silos (Nath, 2025). However, it will be inaccurate to say that the disciplinary integration was completely absent from Indian higher education. India's engagement with disciplinary integration was initially guided by the externally funded UGC initiatives; apart from that, area study centers were

established in some universities to understand the geopolitical dynamics from multidisciplinary perspectives (Bhushan, 2021).

However, integration around academic discipline was largely missing from the policy context of higher education prior to formal recognition by the Yashpal Committee Report and the National Knowledge Commission (Nath, 2025). At the macro policy level, multi- and interdisciplinarity were first emphasized in the National Education Policy, 2020, with some definitional ambiguity in favor of multidisciplinarity. NEP 2020 primarily focuses on multidisciplinarity, with some sporadic references to interdisciplinarity as well (Ministry of Education, 2020). Therefore, India's policy shift towards disciplinary integration suffers from two important limitations. Firstly, it does not distinguish between multi-inter and other forms of disciplinary integration. Secondly, the policy emphasis remains limited to multidisciplinarity, limiting its focus within the academic domain only. Surprisingly, the term 'transdisciplinary' did not even get any mention in the policy document. Which indicates that the policy primarily conceptualizes integration within academia rather than extending it to the societal space.

Therefore, the experience of Indian higher education regarding disciplinary integration remains fragmented and incomplete. Moreover, the literature suggests that there is a significant gap between the disciplinary integration within academia and integration with the real world, which this study aims to address (Hadorn et al., 2008; Harris et al., 2024). Moreover, the prevalent epistemic hierarchy in favor of academia reduces communities to mere datasets rather than equal partners (Godrie, 2025; Godrie et al., 2020). Despite the policy focus on community-based and experiential learning, transdisciplinary learning draws its core guiding principles from other policy documents, such as the National Credit Framework and several UGC guidelines, which reflects the significant policy mismatch for transdisciplinary collaborations. The present study aims to address this policy gap by proposing a transdisciplinary paradigm of knowledge co-production through the collaboration of academia and society. Ultimately, the study demonstrates the communicative action between academia and society through the multiple case studies to transition Indian higher education from the ivory-tower approach to socially responsible institutions.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes Jurgen Habermas' theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984, 1987) as its analytical framework to examine how academic and societal knowledge can be integrated through transdisciplinary knowledge co-production. This study relies on the theory of communicative action because it describes knowledge creation as a communicative, dialectical, mutual, and participatory process rather than a unilateral transmission of information. Since the transdisciplinary paradigm requires the academic and societal stakeholders to jointly define the problems, negotiate epistemological meanings, and co-produce socially contextual knowledge. Therefore, the Habermasian framework was mobilized to understand the context of negotiations and communication regarding bridging the gap between society and academia in knowledge production.

Habermas conceptualized the society as consisting of two interrelated spaces, namely the system and the lifeworld. The system comprised formal institutions governed by instrumental logic, bureaucratic processes, and institutional rules and regulations, whereas the lifeworld comprises socio-cultural realms in which societies and culture produce shared meaning through natural language (Finlayson et al., 2026). In the context of higher education, universities and formal learning institutions occupy the position of a system having institutional custodianship over the production, legitimation, and dissemination of scientific knowledge. On the other hand, the lifeworld comprises the civil society, organizations, local communities, and indigenous groups whose knowledge emerges from traditional practices, lived experiences, and sustainable cultural engagement. Although these two spheres are interdependent on each other, traditionally they operate in relative isolation, therefore leaving a significant gap between institutionally legitimized knowledge (Mode 1) and contextual societal knowledge (Mode 2), as defined by Gibbons et al. (2010). This very relative separation between the two spheres restricts the current higher education system from solving real-life complex problems.

In his theory of social action, Habermas explains that while all types of actions are rational and teleological, typical strategic action, which helps achieve organizational objectives, may not be useful while dealing with the lifeworld. On the other hand, communicative action is grounded in communicative rationality, which positions stakeholders as equal negotiators through reasoned dialogue (Finlayson et al., 2026). Drawing upon the Habermasian framework, the study interprets that the use of communicative action can build trust between the system and the lifeworld. In the context of higher education, communicative action can be used to mediate between the system (academic world) and the lifeworld (socio-cultural world). The use of communicative action necessitates the equal partnership and mutual respect for knowledge creation, which minimizes the risk of reducing the societal space into mere datasets. The communicative action between the academia and the society thus facilitates knowledge co-production with the community as a legitimate knowledge partner.

Drawing upon Habermas' concepts of system, lifeworld, and communicative action, the study aims to examine the relationship between higher education policy and community-based learning mechanisms. Building on Habermas's distinction between "system" and "lifeworld," the study reconceptualizes the academic sphere as comprising a formal institutional domain and a cultural–societal domain. It argues that these domains should be interconnected through communicative action to enable transdisciplinary knowledge co-production (Fig. 1). The study provides an assessment of whether the current higher education policy perpetuates the traditional academic dominance over knowledge or actively recognizes community as a legitimate epistemic partner for knowledge co-production. Therefore, the present Habermasian framework serves as an important analytical tool to assess the necessary communicative conditions for the democratization of knowledge across institutions and communities.

Figure 1: *Habermasian framework for transdisciplinary knowledge co-production*

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design: Qualitative comparative document analysis

The present study adopts a qualitative comparative document analysis approach to examine the dynamics between institutional and societal knowledge systems (Bowen, 2009). Rather than focusing on individual experiences, the study analyzes the institutional-level discourse shaping the knowledge production and dissemination. Guided by Habermasian concepts such as "system," "lifeworld," and "communicative action," the methodological choice of the study helps to analyze the transdisciplinary knowledge co-production through the interaction between academic (system) and socio-cultural (lifeworld) domains.

3.2 Data Collection Strategy

The study prioritizes ‘institutions’ as a unit of analysis over ‘individuals’; therefore, the data collection strategy for this research is secondary data collection across two domains, namely (1) the formal higher education knowledge system (institutional documents, policy documents, reports, etc.) (2) The community-based knowledge institutions (field reports, community training modules, etc.). The study does not intend to use Habermas’ theory of system and lifeworld as empirical categories; rather, it has been used as an analytical framework to analyze how formal higher education and community-based knowledge institutions engage with the lifeworld differently.

3.3 Selection Criteria for Community-Based Knowledge Institutions (CBKIs)

Along with the documents related to the formal academic structures (system), documented evidence from community-based knowledge initiatives (CBKIs) was also collected for their concurrent policy-practice analysis. Considering the absence of a central repository, the documents representing CBKIs were selected based on criterion-based purposive sampling. The selection criterion included i) community-oriented knowledge production and ii) sustained operation (at least five years). iii) Regional or national-level impact iv) Public availability of documents, etc. Additionally, documents related to institutional philosophy, knowledge creation, and community participation were selected for the analysis.

3.4 Data Sources

Based on the above-mentioned selection criteria, illustrative institutions for community-based knowledge production include the PUKAR (Partners for Urban Knowledge, Action, and Research), Barefoot College, Development Alternatives, and Swaraj University, among others. These organizations keep community-based knowledge production at their core mandate; therefore, they differ from traditional institutions in their approach of engagement with knowledge. Importantly, the selection of the CBKIs was done based on the diverse models that they use for community-led knowledge creation. Data sources for the traditional higher education system involve national education policies, guidelines of UGC and other regulatory bodies, institutional community engagement frameworks, etc. Whereas, for

CBKIs, the documents comprise institutional vision documents, training manuals, field reports, programme modules, etc. The institutional documents in both types of institutions provide a better understanding of the institutional mode of engagement with knowledge.

3.5 Data analysis

The study uses an iterative thematic coding process for qualitative document analysis to explain how formal higher education and community-oriented institutions engage with knowledge differently (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theory of communicative action guides the coding and interpretation of data. The data analysis involves the following steps. (1) Iterative reading and familiarization with data (2) Initial coding based on recurring patterns (3) Developing themes based on the Habermasian framework. (4) Cross-case comparison between formal higher education and community-based knowledge frameworks. The coding process primarily relied on selected documents; the Habermasian framework functioned as an analytical lens rather than predetermined categories.

4. Analysis and Interpretation

The qualitative document analysis of four case institutions: PUKAR, Barefoot college, Swaraj University and Development Alternatives revealed how such boundary organizations co-produce and institutionalize community-mediated knowledge. The analysis was conducted using a combination of a Habermasian lens and an inductive-deductive coding process, in which open codes were grouped into categories, which were subsequently synthesized into five representative themes. The findings are presented in five thematic categories across case institutions rather than representing each case separately. The following Fig. 2 illustrates how the themes were identified from the raw excerpts to explain the emerging analytical patterns across the case institutions.

Figure 2 demonstrates five thematic categories, namely participatory knowledge co-production, epistemic pluralism and recognition of mode 2 knowledge, knowledge dissemination through community engagement, knowledge exchange with community through capacity building, and democratization of knowledge through community agency, which were constructed from the document analysis of all the institutions. The varying width of the flows of the Sankey diagram illustrates how different organizational practices were synthesized into coherent thematic categories.

4.1 Theme 1: Participatory Knowledge Co-production

Participatory knowledge co-production emerged as a fundamental theme across case CBKIs, reflecting a shared commitment to democratize knowledge production rather than an academia-centric process. The theme emerged from iterative coding of excerpts highlighting categories such as participatory research, community collaboration, etc. Across the cases, the participation was imagined not merely as a recipient of institutional charity but rather as an epistemic partner in the knowledge production process, starting from the problem identification to solving the complex societal problems.

The documentary evidence establishes that all the case institutions operationalize participatory knowledge co-production through different organizational models. PUKAR explicitly claims the cultural-cognitive embedding of participatory knowledge co-production in its organizational structure by describing their work as “multi-sectoral, cross-disciplinary, community-based, participatory action research" (P1). Furthermore, through its programs such as Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) for youth, it aims to bridge the gap between academic and societal knowledge through “the intersection of academic research and community-based participatory research” (P5). A similar participatory approach to knowledge production is evident at Barefoot College, where locals' expertise is considered a resource. As noted by the founder Sanjit Soy, *“You ask an engineer what the solution to the drinking water problem in a village is, and he would say ‘hand pump.' You ask an old man in the village, and he would say ‘rainwater harvesting.' The aim should be to look for community solutions" (BC11).* The organization employs qualitative interaction with the community for need assessment and subsequently resolves the societal problems in collaboration with the community.

Similarly, Swaraj University uses participatory knowledge co-production through its emphasis on community internships, learner-centered inquiry, social action research, etc. (SU4). Rather than isolating learning in formal academic structure, it conceptualizes learning as a process of civic engagement. Likewise, development alternatives adopt community-oriented solutions through collaborative designing, evidence-based planning, and co-implementation. It believes that innovations are successful when local communities are involved in problem identification, experimentation, and evaluation (DA8).

Analyzing the theme from the Habermasian theory of communicative action reveals that communicative rationality prevails over instrumental rationality in knowledge co-production with the community. Rather than hierarchical transmission from experts to passive recipients, knowledge co-production in this paradigm happens through mutual understanding, reciprocal learning, and equal partnership among academicians, researchers, community members, and other stakeholders. The findings suggest that community participation is not a mere methodological strategy but an instrument to legitimize the epistemological agency of the lifeworld.

The policy analysis reveals that contemporary higher education reforms have recognized the knowledge production beyond the formal academic structure. The policy documents, such as The National Credit Framework (NCrF), National Higher Education Qualification Framework (NHEQF), UGC guidelines, etc., recognize the importance of community-based learning, recognition of prior learning, and transdisciplinary modes of knowledge production. However, the policies largely fail to elevate the communities as equal knowledge partners by retaining the authority of validation, assessment, and creditization within academia itself. Overall, while the contemporary policies promise a positive departure towards community-oriented knowledge, the case of CBKIs demonstrates alternative transdisciplinary knowledge co-production models that extend beyond the current institutional framework.

4.2 Theme 2: Epistemic Pluralism and Recognition of Mode-2 Knowledge

In order to understand how boundary organizations, promote participatory knowledge co-production, the second theme investigates epistemological plurality and mode 2 of knowledge production. Unlike the traditional higher education, these organizations value local wisdom, traditional knowledge, indigenous experiences, and practitioner knowledge as equally important to academic knowledge. Rather than posing institutional knowledge in opposition to traditional knowledge, these organizations seek to value multiple forms of knowledge production that complement each other.

The documentary evidence reveals a commitment across CBKIs to acknowledge multiple epistemologies instead of institutional monopoly over knowledge. PUKAR explicitly acknowledges in its reports and documents that the conceptual framework of knowledge engagement is based on ‘privileging indigenous knowledge located within the community through multiple epistemologies and community-based action research’ (P16, P17). Similarly, Barefoot College also recognizes the importance of mode 2 knowledge by stating, "In working with rural communities, it is assumed that urban people 'bring the change' to them. In reality, the drivers of change are the communities themselves” (BC9). Likewise, the story of training illiterate women as solar engineers (solar mamas) reflects the organizational philosophy of combining scientific knowledge with traditional resources for community development (BC10).

Moreover, the learning city model of Swaraj University aims to combine traditional wisdom with contemporary learning mechanisms for the shared vision of the good life (SU13), promoting the contextualized knowledge in community partnership. Similarly, development alternatives highlight that local communities should be heard, respected, and valued for their deep knowledge of the environment rather than solely relying on scientific wisdom (DA2). It also reflects in their initiative to conserve Himalayan indigenous knowledge through ecotourism.

Although all four organizations differ in their organizational mandates, their convergence on rejection of monopoly of academic knowledge is clearly evident. Despite their different models of recognizing mode-2 knowledge, all the organizations indicate a shift from institutional hegemony to epistemic complementarity, where diverse knowledge pathways are valued as per their relevance rather than institutional tags.

Analyzing from the Habermasian theory of communicative action, epistemic pluralism is definitely not another synonym for methodological diversity but a democratic ideal for rational discourse between equal knowledge partners. All CBKIs uphold practices that reflect the communicative rationality of community stakeholders in participating in the knowledge process as competent actors rather than passive recipients. Thus, the case of CBKIs resists the dominance of formal academic knowledge over the lifeworld by providing the competencies to the communities for rational communication. Apart from

that, the findings also highlight the importance of contextual and practice-oriented mode 2 knowledge, produced through collaboration among a diverse set of actors.

Recent policy initiatives, despite their cognizance of experiential learning, community outreach, and extension, continue to focus on universities and formal academic structures as nodal institutions for validating and legitimizing knowledge. While non-academic spheres, communities, etc. are recognized as precious repositories of knowledge, their recognition as independent epistemic entities capable of producing legitimate knowledge has been limited. In contrast, CBKIs under study have advanced a substantive vision of transdisciplinary knowledge co-production by housing academic, traditional, and practitioner models as equal negotiators for knowledge. Overall, the findings suggest that communities should be recognized as equal, independent, and competent knowledge partners rather than passive collaborators. This recognition is vital for bridging the gap between academic and societal knowledge for a transdisciplinary knowledge production extending beyond disciplinary boundaries.

4.3 Theme 3: Knowledge dissemination through community engagement

While academic knowledge has formal arrangements such as seminars, journals, books, conferences, etc. for knowledge dissemination. Community knowledge lacks these mechanisms. which ultimately affects the very legitimacy of societal knowledge. In lieu of this, CBKIs under examination in this study, ensure that societal knowledge is constantly shared, applied, and translated in different societal contexts through active community participation. Unlike the academic institutional knowledge, the success of societal knowledge relies more on unconventional modes of knowledge dissemination. The CBKIs ensure that societal knowledge acquires its social value by embedding itself in community practice, collective action, and public engagement.

Across the case organizations, knowledge dissemination extends beyond the regular outreach model and becomes integral in societal engagement. PUKAR engages in knowledge dissemination through civic engagement activities such as awareness through meetings, trainings, mapping, door-to-door campaigning, caravans, etc. (P8). Moreover, the Youth and Urban Knowledge Production Program of PUKAR aims to translate the research findings into community action terms to mobilize the research for inducing social change (P29). Similarly, the solar program of Barefoot College reveals that trained Solar Mamas are expected to train their other community members, thus creating a peer learning network for harnessing local sustainability. Likewise, the development alternatives adopt multiple channels such as Radio Bundelkhand to circulate the practitioners' knowledge and grassroots partnership (DA3); its flagship intervention TAP-RISE provides on-demand service, market linkages, and collaborative networks for beneficiaries (DA22).

Knowledge dissemination here does not refer to the mere transmission of information but a live extension of community space where communicative action does not stop with the knowledge production but continues to the continuous interpretation and contextualization. Unlike academic transmission, societal knowledge relies heavily on communicative action rather than strategic action for

behavior transformation. Although the organizations differ in their approaches to knowledge dissemination, they collectively reject the popular linear academic models of knowledge dissemination. Rather they engage in discursive knowledge dissemination of societal knowledge in the form of collaboration networks, in-field applications, peer-learning communities, etc. In all the organizational cases, the circulation of knowledge happens through a social process in which knowledge is continuously practiced, interpreted, and contextualized. Advancing the current policy discourse on extending academic knowledge through community outreach programmes, the CBKIs engage with societal knowledge unconventionally to make the knowledge dissemination process, a living activity of interpretation, contextualization, and application.

4.4 Theme 4: Knowledge exchange with community through capacity building

The documentary evidence from the case institutions indicates that they do not treat the community as merely a site of knowledge creation and application, but they constructively engage with community members for their capacity building so that societal knowledge production can be sustained without any external intervention. Knowledge exchange with the community through capacity building of community stakeholders, therefore, enables them to become researchers, innovators, and problem solvers without needing continuous external support. Community members are trained to do surveys, needs assessment, mapping, data analysis, and participatory action research by PUKAR to enhance the research capacities in solving local problems (P14). Apart from that, through programs such as Youth and Urban Knowledge Production, PUKAR aims to instill soft skills, research skills, and industry skills to prepare youth as drivers of societal change (P27). Similarly, Barefoot College demonstrates that technical skills are no longer the privilege of academia by training semi-literate women to become solar engineers (BC3). Swaraj redefines the community capacity building by offering alternative learning opportunities such as Farmversities and learning cities, where local communities are trained on themes such as soil, water, agroecology, composting, community-based experimentation, etc. to make them self-reliant in these areas (SU10, SU12). Development alternatives foster knowledge exchange through capacity building of communities by training them in innovation, entrepreneurship, skill enhancement, and digital enterprise (DA10). Additionally, some target social groups, such as women, farmers, youth, etc., are trained for employability, sustainable farming, and entrepreneurship (DA12, DA13).

Collectively, these CBKIs redefine the focus of higher education from classroom learning to capacity building to solve real-world problems. Such capacity-building initiatives through knowledge exchange processes can be game changers for contemporary higher education, which can provide students hands-on learning experiences, skill-based education, contextually relevant knowledge, and most importantly, community-responsive approaches. In Habermasian terms, knowledge exchange between community and academia through capacity-building initiatives prepares both academic and societal actors for communicative action to solve real-world problems through transdisciplinary knowledge co-production.

4.5 Theme 5: Democratization of Knowledge and community agency

While the first four themes aim to explore how knowledge is being co-produced, created, and disseminated within the society. The fifth and last theme aims to answer the question, ‘What is the impact of engagement of CBKIs with the community?' Notably, all the organizations examined in this study treat the community beyond the passive recipients of knowledge. This particular theme analyzes the epistemological implications of such engagements. The critical questions such as 'Whose knowledge gets legitimacy?', ‘Who is qualified to produce knowledge?’, ‘Who controls the power of knowledge?’ etc. Despite differing approaches, all the CBKIs collectively aim to democratize the knowledge process and strengthen the agency of the community as a legitimate knowledge partner.

These organizations adopted different pathways for the democratization of knowledge; for example, PUKAR relied on projects and fellowships to strengthen the community agency by nurturing researchers and innovators within the community itself (P25). On the other hand, Barefoot and Swaraj aim to democratize knowledge by training community members, demystifying technology, power sharing, and reconstructing knowledge through interactive learning. Likewise, development alternatives conceptualize democratization of knowledge as 'building with community rather than building for community' (DA1).

Collectively these practices suggest the creation of communicative spaces within the public sphere that enable interaction, collaboration, and partnership among agents from academic and societal domains. The discourse, therefore, challenges the dominance of academic experts in shaping public policies and solutions. Consequently, bridging the gaps between societal and academic spheres requires transdisciplinary considerations and reconceptualization of higher education as a democratic sphere that is open to constructive communicative action with the non-academic actors as equals.

5. Discussion

Overall, the results of the five thematic categories highlight that many of the communicative conditions of the Habermasian framework are being practically realized in community-based knowledge institutions (CBKIs) already in existence. The themes of participatory co-production, epistemic pluralism, community-embedded dissemination, capacity building, and democratisation of knowledge are interconnected and consistently point in an opposite direction to strategic, instrumentally rational approaches to communities and towards communicative rationality, in which academic and societal actors engage with one another in negotiating meaning as equals, rather than experts and recipients. This movement, however, is still largely confined to the lifeworld, while the system, made up of formal higher education institutions and the policy apparatus that regulates them, has not undergone a similar transformation.

This is most evident when there is a gap between policy recognition and policy operationalization. The analysis of Theme 1 and Theme 2 shows that community-based and experiential learning has now

started to be recognized as a legitimate site of knowledge production by the recently introduced policy instruments, namely, the National Credit Framework and the National Higher Education Qualification Framework (UGC, 2023a, 2023b). However, as this research reveals, the power to legitimize, evaluate, and recognize this knowledge largely resides in the academic sphere. This in Habermas's account is a type of selective communicative openness: the system is prepared to enter into a dialogue with the lifeworld and even to take over a part of the content, but at the same time it is not prepared to give the lifeworld the communicative power to co-determine the criteria by which knowledge is judged legitimate (Habermas, 1996). It extends Gibbons et al.'s (2010) Mode 1/Mode 2 distinction, which they first developed to explain the changes that have occurred within the academic knowledge system, and demonstrates that the articulation of an alternative boundary that is being negotiated in the Indian context is not just a field of contestation between disciplines but an articulation of alternative fields of contestation between academia and society as alternative knowledge systems.

Furthermore, the comparison of the four CBKIs indicates that the communicative rationality that became ingrained in the founding philosophy of the institution can result in a particular bundle of practices, rather than individual acts of communication. While the organizational structure of PUKAR's youth fellowships, Barefoot's solar-engineer training, Farmversities at Swaraj University, and TAP-RISE at Development Alternatives could not be any more different, they all share a common characteristic of engaging the community as a co-investigator of knowledge, rather than a subject or beneficiary. Although these institutions differ, the convergence suggests that the use of communicative action is more of a form of orientation that can be realized in several different ways of institutionalization. For higher education institutions that want to take their community engagement practices beyond mere token gestures (Arnstein,1969), this means that rather than creating new outreach initiatives, the more serious reform in the system is a change in the epistemic assumptions, such as validation and credentialization, that currently favor system-based knowledge over lifeworld-based knowledge.

The findings also raise the critical question of whether NEP 2020 is a transformative policy moment or not. Although the policy foregrounds the idea of multidisciplinarity as a step away from the disciplinary fragmentation of Indian higher education with a focus on gatekeeping and legitimation still remaining with the institutions, the lack of any explicit mention of transdisciplinarity implies that the policy's disciplinary integration is an intra-academic process. The present study's Habermasian reading suggests that if the future versions of the policy don't explicitly include community-based knowledge institutions, then transdisciplinarity runs the risk of becoming a rhetorical extension of multidisciplinarity, rather than a substantive reconfiguration of relations between academia and society.

The results should be interpreted with some reservations, however. The study is based on secondary (publicly available) institutional documents and not on primary interviews or ethnographic observation, which could underestimate the informal negotiations and tensions that accompany community engagement in practice. Second, the purposive selection of four CBKIs as described in Section 3.3 serves methodological purposes and does not allow for generalizability of the results to other community-based knowledge institutions that have different organizational scales or geographic

locations. Third, the Habermasian approach is analytically useful, but it emphasizes communicative processes and could be less sensitive to material and financial inequalities, which also have a significant impact on the relations between academia and society. Future work may usefully incorporate the current document-analysis approach in a larger scope of primary fieldwork in a wider variety of CBKIs or broaden the comparative frame to include transdisciplinary models of policy in other contexts in the Global South that face similar colonial histories of disciplinary compartmentalization.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the possibility of bridging academic and societal knowledge by leveraging transdisciplinary knowledge co-production and in the Indian higher education context, the communicative conditions under which this type of collaboration takes place. The comparative document analysis of four community-based knowledge institutions, combined with key policy documents, suggests that although current Indian policy has come a long way in the direction of disciplinarity integration, this integration is largely an intra-academic process that never reaches the point of acknowledging society as an equal epistemic partner. In contrast, PUKAR, Barefoot College, Swaraj University, and Development Alternatives show, in five converging thematic practices, that communicative rationality between academic actors and society actors is not only theoretically desirable but also a possibility to achieve when there is willingness to give up exclusive ownership of knowledge validation.

The central finding of the study is that this seeming conflict in Indian higher education is not just a conflict between disciplines but a conflict between two distinctively structured knowledge systems, the academic system and the societal lifeworld, which cannot be resolved through curricular changes alone. To bridge this gap, the creditization and assessment of community-based knowledge must be extended, and structural mechanisms that make the transdisciplinary notions of "transdisciplinary" or "transdisciplinary research" realizable in a shared epistemic project must be developed. The idea that this study suggests is that the higher education system is moving from the role of knowledge custodians to knowledge co-creators and hence as a partner, in the sense of Habermas, who can and has to participate in the arena of knowledge in a reasoned manner, is one of the paths that will continue to be followed during the process of reform of higher education system in India with the goal of achieving NEP 2020. This would be a significant shift in the direction of Indian higher education from ivory tower to a socially responsible, dialogically legitimate institution.

Declarations

Competing interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

Author Contribution

AN: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SKP: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Data Availability

The datasets generate and/or analysed during the current study are included in this published article and its supplementary information files. Data are also available in the Mendeley Data repository and can be accessed through the link: https://doi.org/10.17632/6mhjrrwv4v.1

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Figures

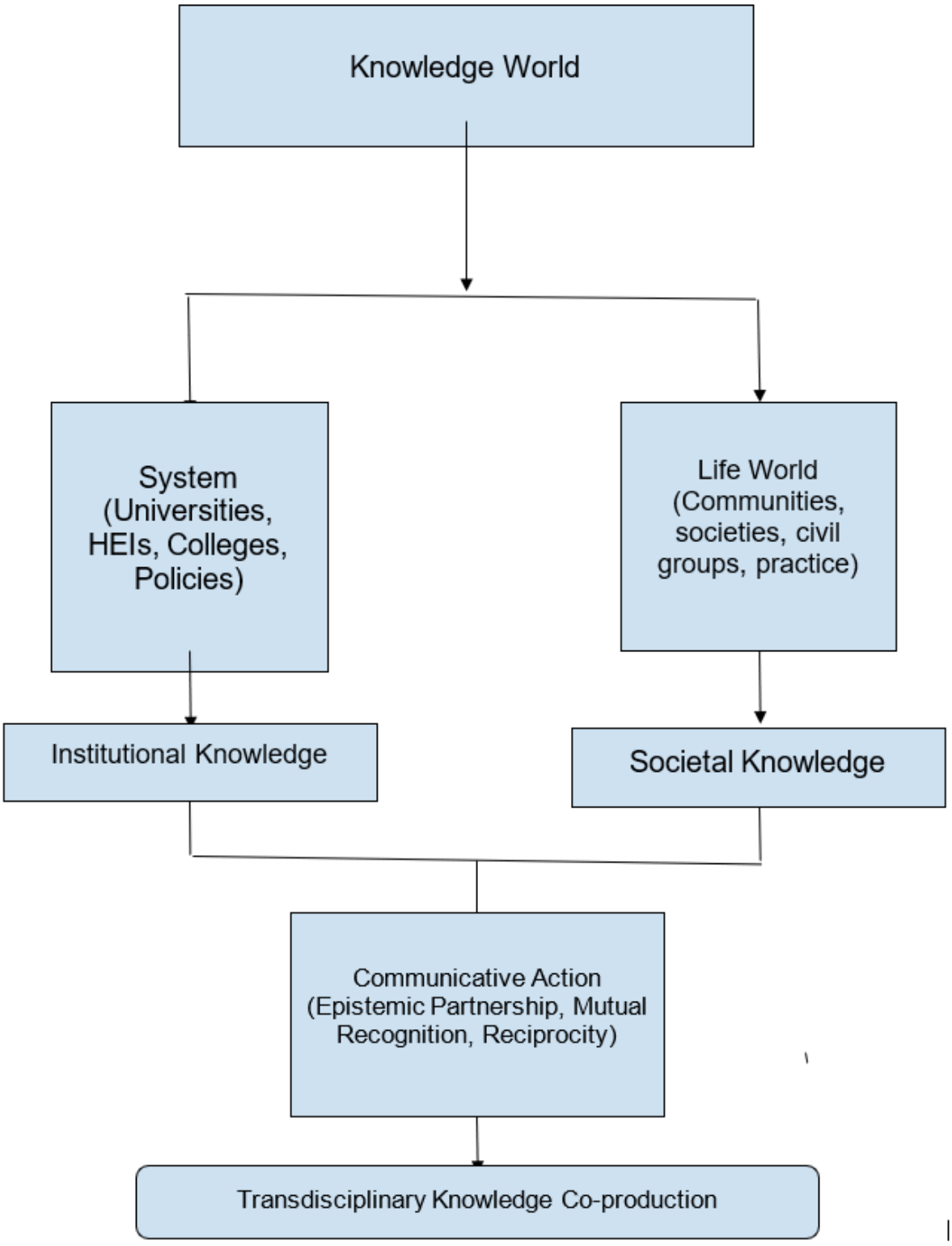


Figure 1

Habermasian framework for transdisciplinary knowledge co-production

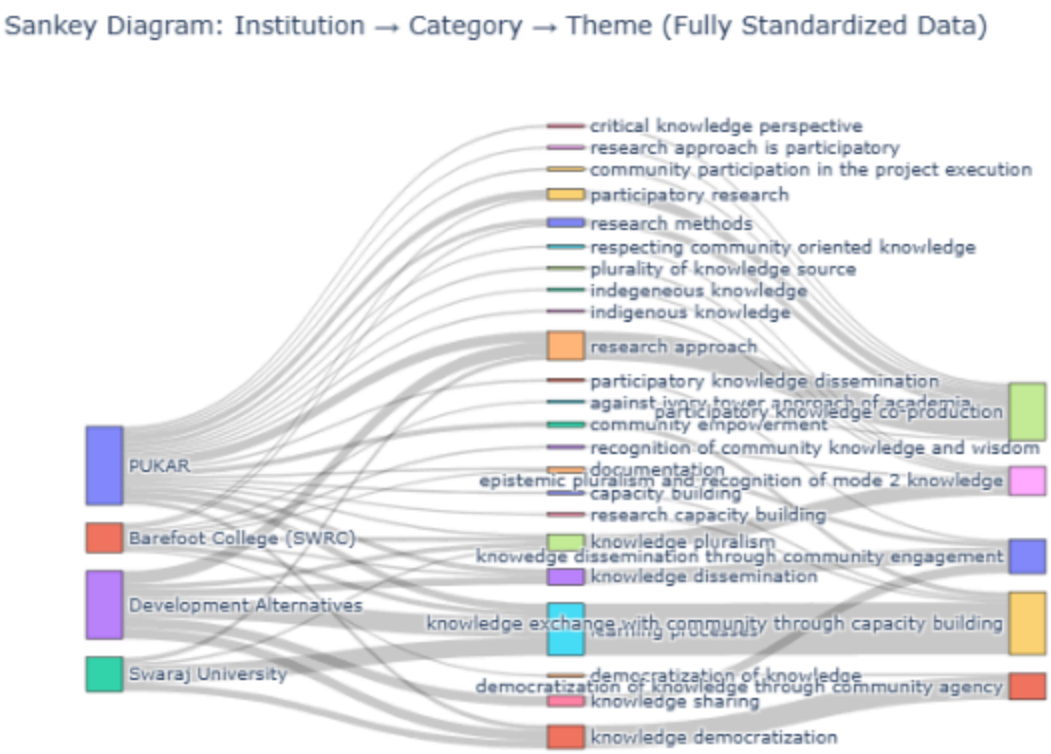


Figure 2

Visualization of thematic categorization of institutional documents

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- DatasetTransdisciplinaryKnowledgeProductionCodingMatrix.xlsx