

# unfolding human potential



## Chapter 4

### ***‘Be very careful that research and universities do not become an extension of the globalising economy’***

*by Arjen Wals*

*(day 2, transcript by Maartje Janssens)*

#### **Transformative moment**

I will start my reflections with a personal story. When I was a PhD student at the University of Michigan, my research group was asked to help with a problem the Detroit Board of Education had in some of the poorest school districts. African-American middle schools were struggling there to keep students in school. There were a lot of drop-outs, teen pregnancies, crack cocaine being dealt. And the question was: *How can we make education more relevant, more meaningful to these young people?* The curriculum was obviously not a curriculum that resonated very well in those schools. Together with the teachers we developed a programme called: *Action research and community problem solving*. For two years, I participated in these projects of observing, talking to young children and teachers. And I *used* in a way my reflections on those experiences as the main source for my PhD research.

Now these schools were rather big schools, and I didn't know all the teachers. One day, I came into the staff room, and one of the teachers came to me and said: 'I've seen you a lot here, but what are you doing exactly?' I was a little bit tired I must say – it was a long day –, so I said: 'We're from the University of Michigan and we're doing research on how young people connect with their environment'. And she listened to me, looked at me and said: 'I hate people like you. You come in our school, use our young people, to do research and write about it in some journal that nobody will read. What do these kids get out of that? It's just helping your career.' That was a transformative moment for me. And although I tried to defend our project, in the end I could not help but recognize that her point was very true. I stood to gain far more than any of the people I was working with there from this research.

### **Knowledge production**

So, let's jump to where we are today. I think it's very important to use the metaphor of knowledge production – I don't like that metaphor very much. I do think there's a lot of production and factory publishing going on, and I think that's highly problematic. We're forced to write many articles, peer-reviewed, in top quality journals with high impact. But only on average 2.1 people read these articles. And there're a lot of resources put into them. It's not the same having scientific impact and societal impact. So when I do research and teach about it, I usually make a distinction between three strands of research.

### **Research as mining**

One I call research as mining. You distract data from a community and convert them into scientific articles that are published in peer-reviewed journals. And if you are good, you make some kind of policy note, or something that you can still share, so that there's some other kind of impact as well. It's kind of a ripple effect. You can put that type of research in a kind of empirical analytical tradition, where often objectivity is strived for. The research is distant from the community, and tries to remain neutral. We've done a lot of that type of empirical analytical research. Often times there's a world view underneath – you could call it a cybernetic world view, that the world is a threedimensional clock. And if we really understand it well, we can understand causality, use statistics to help understand it, measure, control, and reduce uncertainty and complexity.

### **Research as learning**

The second strand I call research as learning. As a researcher, you try to become part of a community, to fully understand it. To understand the life world of children, the biographies of teachers. You don't strive for objectivity, but for intersubjectivity, or a shared subjectivity. This research as co-learning also recognizes that there are multiple ways of knowing. Not just scientific knowing, also intuitive and indigenous knowing. It's important to recognize that each way of knowing is valid and needs to be worked with. And not just hierarchically putting scientific knowing on top. Often times there are interpretative hermeneutic traditions that fit well within this type of research.

### **Research as activism**

The third strand I call research as activism. As a researcher you are sympathetic to a particular cause. Or you're worried about marginalization of women, indigenous communities, the disappearance of species. Or you have some kind of global concern. As a researcher you feel you have a moral responsibility to become an advocate of people who are being suppressed or marginalized. You're explicitly biased. You declare your vantage point, which makes you very vulnerable. You use your role as an academic, your networks, your relationships, your capacities, to help advance a certain cause. You should ask the question: who's questions are we researching? How can we involve people in asking the right questions? What kinds of changes are desired? What's working with us to realize those changes, and what's working against us? What's keeping things from changing? So it becomes more political. This is a socially critical type of research, and obviously in the current mainstream academia the most controversial. It's not easy to find journals that would publish that type of research. Although there are niches, and there's science in transition at the moment, sustainability science, post-normal science. There are all kind of alternative forms of research and methodologies, and these niches are getting more traction. In part because science, and universities in general, tend to be public still. But if these universities do not show that they are relevant to society, then we risk that we loose the public money, and it becomes a private enterprise – which we see already happening, a lot. We must be very careful that research and universities do not become an extension of the globalising economy. That's not the role of higher education and research.