

Article

## **ACTIVIST RESEARCH PRACTICE: EXPLORING RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION FOR SOCIAL ACTION<sup>i</sup>**

**AZIZ CHOUDRY**

McGill University

### **Abstract**

Research is a major aspect and fundamental component of many social struggles and movements for change. Understanding social movement networks as significant sites of knowledge production, this article situates and discusses processes and practice of activist research produced outside of academia in these milieus in the broader context of the ‘knowledge-practice’ of social movements. In dialogue with scholarly literature on activist research, it draws from the author’s work as an activist researcher, and a current study of small activist research non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with examples from movement research on transnational corporate power and resistance to capitalist globalization.. It explicates research processes arising from, and embedded in, relationships and dialogue with other activists and organizations that develop through collaboration in formal and informal networks; it contends that building relationships is central to effective activist research practice. In addition to examining how activist researchers practice, understand and validate their research, this paper also shows how this knowledge is constructed, disseminated and mobilized as a tool for effective social action/organizing.

### **Keywords**

Activist research, social movements, methodology, activism, global justice movement, knowledge production

### **Introduction**

Research is a major undertaking of many social movements, activist groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and a fundamental component of social struggles at local, national and transnational levels. Yet the intellectual work and politics of knowledge production in the course of social activism is still often overlooked. Much academic literature has been produced on “activist research” and “activist scholarship”, but relatively few studies consider the actual research practices of activist researchers

operating outside of universities and independently of formal partnerships or collaboration with academic researchers. This article draws from my experience as an activist researcher in global justice activist/movement milieus, and, since entering academe, my current research on small activist research non-governmental organizations (NGOs). After a discussion of knowledge production and research in NGO/social movement milieus, drawing from Marxist understandings of knowledge and consciousness, I consider how this knowledge is constructed, disseminated and mobilized as a tool for effective social action by and for social movements. This article aims to deepen understandings of the politics of constructing knowledge through activist research. It considers theoretical, methodological, action and dissemination aspects of research for social change by addressing the following questions: How do activist NGO researchers outside of the academy understand, practice and validate their research and processes of knowledge production? What are the sources of such knowledge? How is this knowledge produced? How do social movement activists/NGOs disseminate and use knowledge produced through such research in processes of knowledge mobilization and social action/organizing?

Scholarly discussion about activist research occurs in critical strands of anthropology (Lyon-Callo and Hyatt, (2003); Casas-Cortés, Osterweil and Powell, (2008), Speed (2006), Zamarrón (2009)), social geography (Chouinard, 1994, Fuller and Kitchin, 2004; Maxey, 1999, Pain, 2003), critical adult education (Hall, (1979); Jordan, (2003); Ng, (2006); Kapoor, (2009); Choudry and Kapoor (2010)) and sociology (Burawoy, (2000); Neis, (2000); Carroll, (2004); Kinsman, (2006); Hussey, (2012)), among other fields. Feminist scholar-activists from various disciplines and theoretical approaches have made particularly important contributions to this debate (e.g. D. Smith, (1987); Cancian, (1993), (1996); Fine, (1989), (1992), Naples, (1998); Weis and Fine, (2004); Ng, (2006), Fine and Ruglis, 2009). Often informed by Marxist, feminist and/or postcolonial insights into social relations, epistemologies and the politics of research for social change, claims are sometimes made for particular methodologies and approaches to qualitative research to be inherently oriented towards social justice. These include institutional ethnography/political activist ethnography (D. Smith, (1987); Frampton, et al. (2006); G. Smith, (2006)), participatory action research (Fals-Borda, (1969), (1979); (Weis and Fine), 2004; Kapoor, (2009)), community-based action research (Hall, (1979)), and Burawoy's (2000) extended case method and reflexive global ethnography. Meanwhile, some scholars (Jordan, (2003); Naples, (1998); Frampton, et al, (2006)) have questioned implicit claims of participatory research to be emancipatory, and highlight the power relations embedded in the research process. Speed (2004) contends that, in activist research, tensions exist "between political-ethical commitment and critical analysis" (74), those of universalism, relativism or particularism, power relations between researcher and researched, and of short-term pragmatics and longer-term implications, yet that these are also present in all research. She states that, "The benefit of explicitly activist

research is precisely that it draws a focus on those tensions and maintains them as central to the work” (ibid). Naples (1998) writes that, “the questions we ask and the purpose to which we put the analysis are much greater indicators of what constitutes activist research than our specific methodologies” (p. 7).

While claims are made about implicit connections between social justice, activism and certain methodological approaches, a frequent assumption in scholarship on activist research, research for social change, and community-based research is that university researchers with professionalized, specialist academic training must conduct the research. This literature tends to focus on university faculty or graduate students researching in collaboration or partnership with communities, community organizations or activist groups. It is, therefore, more concerned with implications of such work on individuals’ university careers and academic disciplines, and its scholarly credibility, than on the considerable research and intellectual work generated from within activist/community organizations on which many movements rely for independent analysis of concerns relevant to them (Cancian, (1993); Naples, (1998); Routledge, (1996); Hale, (2008)).

Despite considerable academic focus on involvement of scholars in forms of popular/community education, activist research, academic activism, engaged scholarship and research partnerships relatively little work documents, explicates or theorizes *actual* research practices of activist researchers in concrete locations outside of the academy in activist groups, NGOs or social movements. Intellectual work, knowledge production, and forms of investigation/research undertaken within activism are sometimes overlooked or unrecognized but nonetheless inextricably linked to action in many mobilizations. Bevington and Dixon (2005) argue that “[d]irect engagement [of researchers] is about putting the thoughts and concerns of the movement participants at the center of the research agenda and showing a commitment to producing accurate and potentially useful information about the issues that are important to these activists” (200). Naples (1998) argues that, “analysis ...can be deepened by making visible one’s own activist experiences and standpoint” (7).

### **Knowledge Production and Consciousness in Social Movements**

In *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx (1968) reminds us that all social life is essentially practical: “All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice” (VIII). Kinsman (2006) warns that sometimes “when we talk about research and activism in the academic world we replicate distinctions around notions of consciousness and activity that are detrimental to our objectives. We can fall back on research as being an analysis, or a particular form of consciousness, and activism as about doing things ‘out there,’ which leads to a divorce between consciousness and practice” (153). Freire (1972) tried to overcome the

dichotomy of theory/practice by empowering people to engage in productive and reflective activities of learning through action and facilitating the creation of consciousness through struggle. Allman (2001) affirms that,

Our action in and on the material world is the mediation or link between our consciousness and objective reality. Our consciousness develops from our active engagement with other people, nature, and the objects or processes we produce. In other words, it develops from the sensuous experiencing of reality from within the social relations in which we exist (Marx and Engels, 1846) (165).

Sears (2005) suggests that deeper theoretical work is crucial, but “is not simply the property of specialized theorists with lots of formal education” (151).

In affirming the concept of activist knowledge production, theorizing, research and other forms of intellectual work in struggle, we can look to Gramsci’s (1971) notion of grassroots leaders and “organic intellectuals” who articulate a “philosophy of praxis” that develops in the course of political struggle, the “concrete historicisation of philosophy and its identification with history” (62). Gramsci saw two primary groups of intellectuals, firstly, the ‘traditional’ intellectuals, the scholars, and scientists who although seemingly detached from class positions, are produced by specific historical class formations. Secondly, there are the ‘organic’ intellectuals, the thinking and organizing persons in any class. Yet often organizers and “permanent persuaders” emerging from the grassroots/working-class are not seen as intellectuals capable of creating knowledge. This is echoed in an article on “movement-relevant theory” in which Bevington and Dixon (2005) suggest that much of the theory produced by participants in social movements may not be recognizable to conventional social movement studies, noting that “[t]his kind of theory both ranges and traverses through multiple levels of abstraction, from everyday organizing to broad analysis” (195). Lynd (2011) reminds us that

of the principal luminaries of ...Marxism, no one- not Marx, not Engels, not Plekhanov, not Lenin, not Trotsky, not Bukharin, not Rosa Luxemburg (who has a particular contempt for professors), not Antonio Gramsci, not Mao-Tse Tung—put bread on the table by university teaching... without exception the most significant contributions to Marxist thought have come from men and women who were not academics, who passed through the university but did not remain there” (144)

Among many critical scholars on the left, and in broader society, there remains a tendency to make assumptions about the relative value and significance of the

institutional contexts for knowledge production, elevating academic research above analysis and theorizing from within everyday social action settings. Such hierarchical conceptions help to account for which processes of knowledge production are recognized and what “counts” as knowledge, theory or research. Utilizing the term ‘knowledge-practices’ to “escape from the abstract connotations usually associated with knowledge, arguing for its concrete, embodied, lived, and situated character”(20), Casas-Cortés, Osterweil and Powell (2008) write that theoretical and methodological inclinations of even the most critical academic work on social movements can prevent scholars from

seeing or making sense of various knowledge-practices and their implications. This is significant ...because the inability to recognize knowledge-practices as some of the central work that movements do, has made it difficult for social movement theorists to grasp the actual political effects of many movements. ... these effects include not only immediate strategic objectives for social or political change, but the very rethinking of democracy; the generation of expertise and new paradigms of being, as well as different modes of analyses of relevant political and social conjunctures (20).

Cox and Nilsen (2007) discussion the unequal relationship between activist and academic forms of movement theorizing, charging that academic social movements literature “may *exploit* activist theorising (while claiming the credit for itself), *suppress* it (when it challenges the definition of the ‘field’ that the literature ultimately seeks to assert), or *stigmatise* it as ‘ideology’ (rather than analysis grounded in practical experience)” (430). One might even add that such scholarship may overlook or deny its existence altogether. Casas-Cortés, Osterweil and Powell (2008) suggest that the place-based nature of movement knowledges offers a counterpoint to conventional academic and scientific modes of knowledge production:

The latter tend to be predicated on an authority that often lies precisely in being unattached, removed from ‘place,’ in order to gain the necessary status of generalizability; whereas the knowledges produced by movements are enriched by their spatial and temporal proximity and accountability to the places which they affect, and from which they come (43).

In his work on Latin American NGOs which combine *basismo* (grassroots democracy) work with research, publication and knowledge generation activities, Lehmann (1990) conceptualizes such a process of knowledge production as ‘informal universities.’ This not only broadens the types of public sphere but also places both academic and social movement knowledge within those public spheres.

None of this discussion is aimed at advancing a romanticized view of learning, knowledge production or theorizing in activism. Indeed Foley (1999) highlights the complicated and contradictory nature of learning in social movements. It can both reproduce status quo, dominant positions and ideas, but this same experience can also produce “recognitions which enable people to critique and challenge the existing order” (4). Such learning, he suggests, can be “difficult, ambiguous and contested” (143). Barker and Cox (2002) contend that activist theorizing is always to some extent knowledge-in-struggle and thus that,

its survival and development is always contested and in process of formation. Its frequently partial, unsystematic and provisional character does not make it any the less worth our attention, though it may go some way towards explaining why academic social movements theory is too often content with taking the 'cream off the top', and disregarding - or failing to notice - everything that has to happen before institutionalized social movement theorizing appears in forms that can be easily appropriated (“Movement theorizing”).

### **Research for What – and by Whom?**

Maori educationalist Linda Smith (1999) notes that researchers located outside of universities are often referred to as project workers, community activists or consultants, “anything but ‘researchers’. They search and record, they select and interpret, they organize and re-present, they make claims on the basis of what they assemble. This is research” (17). For Kinsman (2006), research and theorizing is an everyday/everynight part of the life of social movements whether explicitly recognized or not:

Activists are thinking, talking about, researching and theorizing about what is going on, what they are going to do next and how to analyze the situations they face, whether in relation to attending a demonstration, a meeting, a confrontation with institutional forces or planning the next action or campaign (134).

Eschle and Maiguashca (2010) highlight the importance of knowledge production, research and documentation by feminist antiglobalization activists, “Knowledge production is not only an important practice among feminist antiglobalization activists in its own right, it also plays an essential role in sustaining other practices, including advocacy” (138). Here, knowledge production involves three processes:

(a) developing critical studies of existing data as well as undertaking original research; (b) gathering, classifying, and housing primary and secondary sources in the form of documentation centers and libraries; and (c) disseminating this knowledge through the publication of regular newsletters and journals and through public awareness campaigns (138).

But this sketch describes only one form and process of research in activist milieus. Rahila Gupta (2004), of British women's rights organization Southall Black Sisters, notes the importance – and challenges for activists documenting and reflecting on practice: “It is not easy for activists to sit down and record their work, but in this age of information overload you need to record in order almost to prove that you exist” (3). Indeed, documentation is an important aspect of activist research. Bazán et al (2008) concur but make the case for specialized research NGOs (in Central America and Mexico). They contend that

[T]o become a counter-discourse with teeth,... everyday knowledge [of social movement actors] needs to be synthesized, systematized and given coherence. It also has to be linked with analytical knowledge of the contexts within which everyday practices occur – contexts which, while they impinge on people's life, are in many cases analytically inaccessible to them (191).

As these examples demonstrate, there are a range of ways and forms in which movement research occurs, which includes the establishment and maintenance of specialized research and education institutions by social struggles to support social movements. Another notable example of this is the IBON Foundation in the Philippines, a veritable powerhouse of knowledge production and critical research, which has informed domestic and international movements contesting social and economic injustice (<http://www.ibon.org>). For example, IBON supplied much of the data and analysis for mass movement campaigns against the deregulation of the oil industry and oil price hikes that increased profits for transnational corporations at the expense of ordinary people (IBON Research Department, 2003). In turn, IBON has been a major player in developing and supporting the Asia-Pacific Research Network, a growing network of research NGOs and institutional research arms of social movements in the Asia-Pacific region, many of which are deeply implicated in movement struggles.<sup>1</sup> This has also strengthened opportunities for activist researchers to work together transnationally to build analysis and research tools that serve the needs and aspirations of

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<sup>1</sup> See Asia-Pacific Research Network, <http://www.aprnet.org>.

struggles against corporate power, domestic and transnational capital, neoliberal economic and trade agreements, and climate change.

## **Learning From Activist Research Practice**

### *Research/activism against free trade and investment*

In order to explore actual activist research practice, in this section, I discuss examples from my own engagement in research/activism opposing the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in Aotearoa/New Zealand and international collaborations against bilateral free trade and investment agreements. During the 1990s, I was an organizer, educator, and researcher for the Aotearoa New Zealand-based activist groups GATT Watchdog and the Aotearoa/New Zealand APEC Monitoring Group. These worked to educate and build opposition to free trade and investment agreements at domestic and regional (Asia-Pacific) levels. These groups' activism was informed by an anti-colonial analysis which understood capitalist globalization – and the New Zealand economic reforms – as being embedded in colonization, and worked closely with Maori sovereignty activists in research, education and action work.. A major focus was the APEC process that included twenty-one governments in the region, with a goal to advance trade and investment liberalization. APEC's highest profile annual event the Leaders' summit, annually rotated among member countries each year, became a target for mobilizations against neoliberal globalization. Regionally, much anti-APEC activism sought to delegitimize the APEC forum and to expose APEC governments' claims of "civil society" involvement as a sham. Analysis of official texts was a key aspect of practice that informed strategy for the opposition to the hosting of APEC 1999 in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Since 1984, successive New Zealand governments imposed neoliberal policies to an extent hitherto unseen in any OECD country. The reforms mirrored key elements of structural adjustment programmes. For example, between 1988-1993, New Zealand led the world in the sale of state-owned assets, often at bargain prices, mostly to transnational corporations. By the time that the government was preparing to host the APEC Summit, most of the country's productive, financial, energy, retail, transport, media and communications sectors were in the hands of transnational corporations that drained huge profits out of the country. The pursuit of free trade agreements made explicit the legal responsibility of the state to serve corporate interests. The government's cynical use of 'civil society' consultations and NGOs themselves (for service delivery, for example) is in keeping with neoliberal styles of governance. On the other hand, at the time,, many 'civil society' players, including many NGOs and trade unions were frequently uncritical



of being co-opted into meetings and exercises in manufacturing consent and constraining dissent.

In 1998, before the start of New Zealand's chairing of APEC the following year, GATT Watchdog obtained a New Zealand Cabinet Strategy Committee paper "APEC 1999—Engagement With NGOs" under New Zealand's Official Information Act. From this document, it became evident that government intentions were to co-opt NGOs and harness them to promote APEC domestically, while aiming to project to international audiences an image of a democratic government that valued differing opinions. Redactions clearly refer to managing the risks (militant opposition to APEC), since there are several references to risk management and preparedness for "a protest element," but lacking specific details to what this entailed, corresponding to sections that were withheld. What remains in the document is instructive:

On the positive side, the Government has a real opportunity to develop a wider sense of ownership and participation. Ensuring constructive participation by NGOs in the APEC process will be a critical part of the overall strategy of communicating the what, why and how of APEC to the New Zealand community. It would serve to demonstrate to the international community New Zealand's ability, as a participatory democracy, to accommodate debate and dissent among a variety of NGOs... On the other hand, as the experience of CHOGM [Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting] and the MAI [Multilateral Agreement on Investment] indicated, there is significant risk of disruption and protest at APEC events. In particular we are likely to see a protest element around the Leaders' Meeting in Auckland in September.

The document (New Zealand Government, 1998) also advised that, "New Zealand's chairing of APEC should reflect the values of an open and participatory democracy where NGOs have an opportunity freely to express their views" (3). "We propose a dual strategy of *constructive engagement*: [next paragraph redacted]" and then:

The target audience in this strategy is not just NGOs per se, but also the wider group of "middle" New Zealand who will want to see NGO voices given a fair hearing. [Redaction] This will require engaging effectively with *responsive groups* and helping to meet, as far as possible, their own objectives of *being seen to influence outcomes*...the requirement for cost-effectiveness suggests there will be limits to the extent of outreach that may be possible. It will be important to avoid getting bogged down in long, resource-intensive consultations. (4).

The strategy, “involves building broad support for APEC and actively *managing the risk of disruption*” (my emphasis) (1).

The New Zealand government’s NGO engagement strategy paper outlines a plan to contain dissent and manage the government’s image. By its use of the term “responsive groups,” the government assumed the right to determine who was in and who was out in New Zealand “civil society.” It also clearly sought to divide and rule NGOs and community organizations into supposedly constructive and disruptive elements.

In a context where many community organizations and NGOs viewed New Zealand state practices rather uncritically, and largely framed their criticism within parameters imposed by the state, GATT Watchdog and Aotearoa/New Zealand APEC Monitoring Group activists interpreted the document informed by an anti-colonial analysis of capitalist globalization and domestic neoliberalization (see Choudry, 2010, on neoliberalism-as-colonialism/decolonization analysis) and our own struggle experiences: our confrontation with the government over APEC, our being targeted by New Zealand state security forces (the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service and NZ Police, see Choudry, 2005) for lawful dissent against APEC in 1996, our involvement in previous years’ anti-APEC mobilizations in several countries, and our interactions with police at demonstrations and increased surveillance during 1999. Thus, our group was motivated to seek out this information, because we knew that the state was likely to try and ‘contain’ APEC’s critics, and possibly attempt to criminalize elements of it. By bringing the document to light, we could forewarn other organizations and the broader public of the kinds of state tactics they were likely to encounter.

Experiential knowledge and analysis was important, but collecting, analyzing and disseminating these documents was key to building an effective strategy to counter the government’s promotion of APEC to NGO networks and community organizations. Drawing from these documents, a key part of the groups’ anti-APEC strategy was to denounce the New Zealand Government’s APEC Taskforce communications strategy, and to politicize attempts to co-opt or silence critics through “dialogue” in a similar fashion to that revealed in Canadian official documents relating to the 1997 Vancouver APEC summit. This included a picket of the first dialogue on APEC 1999 with NGOs and trade unions outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Wellington in January 1999 and a rejection of approaches from the official APEC NGO Liaison officer (hired by the New Zealand Government’s APEC Taskforce) to discuss APEC. Through media work and dissemination through NGO and community group mailings and meetings, we publicly revealed the government strategy of containment and propaganda through limited dialogue and state surveillance and harassment of the more radical critics. Our strategy involved politicizing the disjuncture between stated intentions for dialogue with ‘civil society’, the calculated actual rationale expressed by the official documents obtained, and past actual experience of state practice of criminalization of lawful dissenters. After

we circulated the Cabinet papers to a wide range of NGOs, community organizations and trade unions, the government's plan to co-opt NGOs and harness them to do their work of selling APEC to "middle" New Zealand failed dismally-- few attended the government's NGO consultation sessions. Further, the operation of the Official Information Act, and broader questions of transparency, state power and claims of democracy became politicized in this research activism work when ministries either refused to divulge or release information, or insisted on imposing expensive processing fees. This was publicized through mainstream and independent media, revealing some journalists to be sympathetic on this issue and willing to write critical, investigative articles on the matter. This case illustrates some ways in which activist research can challenge strategies of state cooptation, build links with other organizations, and inform organizing.

My other, related, research activist engagement includes work to support social movements against bilateral free trade and investment agreements (FTAs). Given the challenges for people's movements organizing cross-nationally on FTAs, particularly to break their isolation, a major concern has been to facilitate sharing of research, analysis and experience with others. It should be emphasized here that this initiative did not come from alternative policy thinktanks and large advocacy NGOs but rather social movements and smaller NGOs which work closely with them. In September 2004, several organizations initiated a collaborative website to support peoples' struggles against bilateral free trade and investment agreements: <http://www.bilaterals.org>.<sup>2</sup> The website was established out of the concern that among many global justice networks of NGOs, trade unions and social movements, amidst the celebration of the stalling of World Trade Organization negotiations, there was little focus on bilateral FTAs *actually* being signed. [bilaterals.org](http://www.bilaterals.org) is an open-publishing site where people fighting FTAs exchange information and analysis and build cooperation. The website has been particularly useful for those people campaigning against bilateral deals who have found it difficult to make links with others around the world, to share analysis and develop broader and complementary strategies. By early 2008, the site was attracting around 200,000 hits a month. It has been used in many ways, one of which is to leak negotiating texts that have otherwise not been made public, such as a draft intellectual property rights chapter of the stalled US-Thailand FTA. Thai media covered this leak, reaching a broader audience. The website is a forum for activists to alert others about developments in their struggles, not least during intense periods of mobilization and state repression; it is a research tool, developed by and for activists.

The Thai anti-FTA movement was proactive in linking up with others fighting such agreements and sharing their analysis so that activists can learn from each other's

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<sup>2</sup> Initiators included the Asia-Pacific Research Network, GATT Watchdog, Global Justice Ecology Project, GRAIN, IBON Foundation and XminY Solidariteitsfonds.

struggles. For example, FTA Watch, a Thai activist coalition, invited [bilaterals.org](http://bilaterals.org) and GRAIN to co-organize a global strategy meeting of anti-FTA movements and held the three-day workshop “Fighting FTAs” in Bangkok, July 2006. This brought together some sixty social movement activists from Africa, the Americas and the Asia-Pacific region, including many who engage in some aspect of research and knowledge production to share experiences in grassroots struggles against FTAs and build national and international strategies and cooperation. It was the first time that many participants had been able to meet with other movement activists fighting FTAs and discuss analysis, strategy and experiences. In February 2008, GRAIN, [bilaterals.org](http://bilaterals.org) and BIOTHAI (Biodiversity Action Thailand) produced a collaborative publication and multimedia website, including audio and film resources, called “Fighting FTAs” providing a global overview of the spread of FTAs and mapping the growing resistance and learnings from people’s experiences of fighting FTAs. This resource was merged into a relaunched and redesigned [bilaterals.org](http://bilaterals.org) website in 2009.

Thus, knowledge, research, strategy and action in these struggles was documented and disseminated through efforts to access state strategies through freedom of information channels, through websites and through more traditional face-to-face meetings made possible partly because of connections made among anti-FTA organizations and movements by sharing information on the internet, as well as long-standing alliances/commitments with movement networks such as La Via Campesina. This example demonstrates how connections between struggles were enhanced and also how dialogue amongst engaged activist researchers, as well as research itself, occurs both within formal coalitions and campaigns, and also in informal webs or networks of various kinds. This illustrates some of the ways in which research work on transnational corporations or an FTA, conducted among activist networks in different locations can approach these institutions and processes through specifically local/national entry points (government trade ministries, academic or business thinktanks dedicated to economic and trade liberalization, or local offices of a corporation) and combine their insights through dialogue and collaboration with other activist researchers who are similarly located, yet in different settings.

### *GRAIN’s research*

The other research activist context in this article concerns GRAIN. Founded in 1990, with a decentralized structure (offices/staff in Europe, the Americas, and Africa) GRAIN<sup>3</sup> is a small, international organization working to support small farmers and social movements in struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems (<http://www.grain.org>). Broadly, its research examines connections between

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<sup>3</sup> GRAIN received the 2011 Right Livelihood Award for its work.

agribusiness and the current global food crisis, food sovereignty, and the role of the industrial food system in creating climate change and landgrabbing. With over twenty years of organizational history and a small team connected to a range of social movements, GRAIN has a strong research focus<sup>4</sup>. In its work, it tries to bring people together, catalyzing analysis and action, and is engaged in the much less visible, but important, work of sharing information and analysis to a wide range of movement networks, media and broader publics.

In interviews, GRAIN researchers emphasized the collaborative, dialogical nature of their research through interactions with movement activists, farmers, and others. They also underline its forms of validation, through checking, testing and sharing material within the organization and in networks throughout the research process, including what can be best described as a peer review process. One GRAIN staffer used the analogy of infection to describe dissemination of analysis and the critical framework which the organization shares. A central question is “how do people take what we write and how does that help them in the battles that they are fighting, the issues that they are dealing with at the local level?” (interview, GRAIN). The relationship between research and change is an important question. As Haluza-Delay puts it, there is often an assumption “that knowledge uncovers the oppressive structures and confronts power. However, it is not the “knowledge” alone that does this, but the process by which the knowledge is taken up and used in the community, altering “common-sense” (86). That means how it informs organizing: Bevington and Dixon (2005) argue that a test of the quality of activist research is whether it is taken up by activists in struggles.

Significantly, GRAIN’s focus is primarily on producing analysis to inform and support people’s struggles, and also to frame issues from a critical perspective for media, rather than to influence policymakers or politicians: “We don’t look necessarily on how many citations we had. We are more interested in how is it getting circulated? What kind of message are people gleaning from it? How is it shaping the discussion and debate in these circles of social movements?” (interview, GRAIN). Listening to people on the ground – farmers, Indigenous Peoples, and others is a vital component of GRAIN’s research practice, built on a critical political, economic, social and ecological analysis which has been developed over years of this work. A GRAIN staffer explained, it is

important to listen to people because part of research is just learning.... So when you talk to people you have to listen them and you have to integrate what they say... that’s really crucial to not do this kind of out there pie in the sky kind of stuff so for me listening to people is really important. It is the same thing as reading but it is just a different practice” (interview, GRAIN).

This echoes Casas-Cortés, Osterweil and Powell (2008) who also highlight the valuing of receptivity and listening “to the explanations and arguments posed by movements, which may, in turn, entail various forms of engagement with, or participation in, the movements’ own knowledge-practices, locating them in relation to more conventional, “expert” theories (26).

GRAIN’s research practice involves analysis of information both from industry and official sources, much of which is available online. Interviews are also important to how they build their research:

The validation is [that] we test it and we share it with people, always. In GRAIN we never had [individual GRAIN researchers’] names in our publications, it is always collective material. It is an ideological thing but it also reflects that there is a lot of bouncing back and [constant] checking . There is a lot of that kind of circulation of material. Within GRAIN and also with friends and [other] groups. So you will call that a peer review I think ... because in a way that is exactly how it works ...you want to be challenged and you want to get serious feedback. So that’s a way of validating. But the real validation lies in what happens when we put it out (interview, GRAIN).

GRAIN’s analysis resonates with Cox and Nilsen (2007), who argue that while activist theorizing is not always subject to peer review before publication, it undergoes a form of peer review after publication,

that brings together a far broader range of empirical experience and points of view than are found in any academic journal. It is also subject to the test of practice: whether it *works* to bring together an action, a campaign or a network – or to win battles, large and small, against its opponents and convince the as yet unmobilised and unradicalised (430).

An example of this is a short document published by GRAIN in 2011 on the role of pension funds in land grabs. GRAIN is at the forefront of critical analysis on the buying up of vast tracts of farmland by banks, investment houses, pension funds and other investors. A GRAIN staffer commented that

three months later, the pension funds had their own internal codes of conduct on land grabbing. It is clear that the pension funds take this issue seriously. They see also that GRAIN and others are putting out information

about it so they see the needs to defend themselves. But they wouldn't do this if the pension funds did not see land as important for them, as not an important commodity (interview, GRAIN).

Arguably, this response demonstrates the centrality of landgrabbing in a number of pension funds and attempts to defend this practice to the public after falling under scrutiny.

At the heart of GRAIN's research process are relationships and dialogue. The research process is always ongoing.

You are always connected with people that you are going to be working on the issue with and in developing the analysis and bringing in whatever information you see as important. The case of dairy and the struggle in Colombia is quite important<sup>5</sup> (see GRAIN, 2012) so it's a matter of, early on, learning from what is happening there and also trying to [highlight] that experience in Colombia for others to use. Of course there is the publication of the research but what is happening all the time throughout that whole process is dialogue with other groups. In this case you might have certain sections you want to check with other people and see if it corresponds with what they say. You might want to ask them to have a box that is part of your publication and you are giving people space for that and then afterwards you are ...together trying to figure out what are the processes that we need to be a part of ... what can we do next and what is possible, and then that will probably stimulate other research at a certain point because things will be identified (interview, GRAIN).

There are strategic considerations in how the information is pulled together and how it is released that are rarely central to academic research.

Because [as an international organization] you're presenting your information in so many different contexts you are also trying to think, well okay this made sense maybe at an international level or this made sense when we were thinking more about Latin America but how can we now think of this issue when it comes more specifically to Africa or Asia or North America or Europe? (interview, GRAIN).

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<sup>5</sup> GRAIN has researched the acceleration of corporate control over the world's milk supply and the globalization of the dairy industry. In Colombia in 2011, mass mobilization forced the Uribe government to back down on a proposed law which would have prohibited the sale, consumption and transportation of unpasteurized milk on which many small farmers, dairy vendors and millions of Colombians depend, and facilitated increased control by corporations.

In both cases/contexts discussed here decisions about framing research and strategy were framed and influenced by quite explicit political positions, sets of understandings and relationships/exposure to social movements. Those engaged in this work make decisions in dialogue with others as well as they can, based on experiential knowledge and analysis which emerge from active involvement in the struggles on the ground. Bevington and Dixon (2005) suggest that movement-relevant research cannot merely uncritically reiterate the prevailing ideas of a favoured movement:

If the research is exploring questions that have relevance to a given movement, it is in the interests of that movement to get the best available information, even if those findings don't fit expectations. Indeed, some of the most useful research produces results which defy 'common-sense' assumptions (191-192).

Taking the time to “get the research right” is crucial—whether this entails adequately researching details of a meeting venue in order to mount effective protest action, or in the more formal sense of research on a corporation, policy or practice, which, if done poorly, can be easily, and publicly discredited by better-resourced protagonists and media. This in turn can undermine efforts to build a campaign through reaching a broader base of people. A central aspect of activist research is the relationship of trust and engagement built up with social struggles and movements, and this can be easily damaged.

### **Conclusion: Reflections on Activist Research**

Building relationships is central to every stage of the activist research described in this article. Reflections on doing activist research, as well as research for activism itself, often emerge from collective, collaborative relations, discussions, conversations and exchanges with a wide range of actors.. While some activist research targets policymakers and international institutions, the main goal in the cases considered here has been to support and inform social change through popular organizing. Implicit within this work is an understanding of the importance of building counterpower against domination by the interests of capital and states. Barker and Cox (2002) contend that “Marx's observation that the means of intellectual production are normally in the hands of the ruling class has an important corollary: that social movements from below (as opposed to, say, 'class war from above') often need to conquer or produce their own means of intellectual production.” (‘Processes of colonization and resistance’).

The activist research processes described here are embedded in relations of trust with other activists and organizations that develop through constant effort to work



together in formal and informal networks and collaborations. Such relationships can take years to build. These networks are spaces for constant sharing of information and analysis. They allow for the identification of research that is most relevant to particular struggles, and communication of that research in ways that are meaningful and useful for movement-building. They are invaluable in the production, vetting/“getting the research right,” application, strategic considerations and dissemination of the research. This is an ongoing process which informs action and in turn continues to be produced and used strategically, drawing upon new knowledge and challenges that arise in the course of confrontations with, for example, transnational corporations, state or intergovernmental policies, international financial institutions, free trade and investment agreements, or, sometimes, NGOs. It is not a process which ends when research is “written up”, and a report published.

Sometimes activist research seems like unraveling a ball of string, full of knots - it can be painstaking and difficult work. The analysis and overarching sets of understandings about how states, capital, and various agencies and institutions function, however, can help to guide the unraveling process, alongside ongoing relationships and discussions within and between social movements. Much of the activist research described here is a continuous process, where information and analysis is shared and processed constantly with others – from beginning to end. A publication may be only one part of this. Some of the most important products of this research may come from email exchanges or workshops that happen before anything is formally written down. This process strengthens the research, as collaboration brings out more information, deepens the analysis and connects the research with others working on the issue. The research process itself is often critical to building networks, long-term relationships and organizing. It is also critical for enabling the research output to have greater impact, as the groups and individuals involved will be more connected to the work and there will be more reason for them to use it in their own work and then to share it with their networks. It informs, and in turn is informed by other forms of incremental learning and knowledge production that take place in social movements.

Within some areas of academic scholarship, there are emerging traditions that seem somewhat congruent with aspects of the examples of activist research discussed here. In his work on political activist ethnography, George Smith (2006) suggests that for activist researchers, a wealth of research material and signposts can be derived from moments of confrontation to explore how power in our world is socially organized. He contends that being interrogated by insiders to a ruling regime, like a crown attorney, brings a researcher into direct contact with the conceptual relevancies and organizing principles of such regimes. As the anti-APEC example illustrates, confrontations with the state can be rich entry points from which to explore the ways that governments, domestic and transnational capital, and other extra-local forces socially organize power. Kinsman (2006) illustrates how political activist ethnography “requires challenging the ‘common-

sense' theorizing that can often be ideological in character – uprooted from actual social practices and organization - put forward in movement circles” (135). Idealist theorizing in 'global justice' circles can often take the form of mistakenly assuming or constructing the diverse range of players in social movements and NGOs to all share the same ideals and aspirations. Motives of governments, international financial and economic institutions towards partnership and consultation initiatives with 'civil society' must be analyzed by empirical investigation of these institutions' actual practices, attending to the forms of social organization embedded in texts and discourses which they produce. Concretely this means an analysis that begins with what actually happens and goes beyond the idealist theorizing of many NGOs. Such NGO theorizing, for example, tends to assume that 'civil society' consultation undertaken by governments, as described in the New Zealand example above, is a manifestation of a responsive government or embodies democratic values, as opposed to seeing it as a way of managing dissent while portraying an outward image of participatory democracy. (Perhaps such techniques as dialogue and consultation are subject to more critical scrutiny now, but it was certainly not a given during the years of vibrant opposition to APEC.)

This article has shown several ways in which activists produce knowledge and conduct research. It discusses this alongside more conventional understandings of “academic” activist research, showing some convergences as well as differences. It is crucial therefore in conclusion to recall that “activist research” cannot claim to be inherently progressive or rigorous, any more than “academic” research can claim to be. Indeed Italian activist Antonio Onorati, (GRAIN, 2012) charges that many NGOs are 'self-referential', developing their strategies and priorities in isolation from social movements. Elsewhere (Choudry, 2010), I critique NGO research and advocacy in the context of global justice networks that implicitly accepts the framing and parameters of government/private sector capitalist logic and precludes more critical positions. The politics of the forms of activist research are impacted by challenges related to mobilizing and maintaining support, continuity and accountability among and between activist researchers and broader social struggles. Funding and institutional recognition of movement research is not necessarily proportionate to the utility of such work, especially if disconnected from the task of building and supporting movements, but rather oriented towards outputs intended to influence decision-makers in government, private sectors or international organizations. Indeed, some NGO research is driven by project-centric cycles and/or compartmentalized logics that are disconnected from social struggles, and more reflective of tensions around funding priorities.

In order to further explore the conceptual and theoretical parameters for conducting research for social change, what I have illustrated here are examples of activist research practice which depend on attending to specific contexts, maintaining and developing engaged relationships, dialogue and strategic collaborations, looking for contradictions and tensions that exist in the systems, structures and institutions being

contested, and commitments to long-haul struggles for change (Choudry and Kuyek, 2012). There remains much unexplored scope for rich exchanges between university-based “activist researchers” and movement research activists “in the struggle”. Further study of methodologies and theoretical frameworks at use in activist research practice in relation to approaches in academic literature claimed as “activist” methodologies has the potential to develop powerful tools for critique of capitalism - new ways, and new intellectual spaces not only to understand the world - but to change it (Marx 1968). In order to change the world, let us be clear that research is only one aspect of struggle – which requires building counter-power, sustained organizing and social movements.

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