
How May Academics Help to Empower Marginalised Communities Through Digital Tech?

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An Indonesian migrant in Malaysia once asked a group of us during a research visit:

'Academic researchers and people from civil society organisations often come and ask us to answer surveys and questionnaires. But we never see them again when they go away, nothing happens and our lives remain the same. When is this going to change?'

What then is the societal impact of much academic research, not just that on digital tech? How can academics ensure that their research addresses the concerns of the marginalised? These are questions we must grapple with when we make the decision to research 'with' marginalised communities, and not just 'on' them.

Ensuring positive outcomes for those we work with has many challenges, among the most significant of which are:

- *Prioritising outcomes over outputs.* Emphasising the priorities of those we work with will require a qualitatively different type of engagement than permitted by the existing dominant 'publish or perish' academic culture.
- *Commitment of time and resources,* including funding, beyond project timelines. Combining relevant research with teaching and other academic commitments is challenging for many academics.
- *Continued engagement with stakeholders.* Maintaining links with those with whom we work so that we can trace impact, ensure sustainability and learn lessons through monitoring and evaluation is easier said than done when most civil society organisations also

depend on gaining new funding for their activities and indeed survival.

- *Evidencing impact and outcomes.* Impact can materialise in ways we never imagine at the outset. It is extremely difficult to measure the myriad routes through which our work shapes outcomes, not least through the cascading effects of conversations and new relationships forged.



Figure 4.2: Sharing resources developed with the LBT community in Maré, Brazil (Source: Heloisa Melino, with permission)

In our recent research-practice on the safe, wise and secure use of digital technologies (<https://ict4d.org.uk/sws>) we worked ‘with’ migrants and other vulnerable groups in multiple contexts, prioritised contextually relevant ways of working, and focused on their needs (<https://ict4d.org.uk/migration-and-digital-tech/>). In Nepal, our emphasis was with returnee migrants, migrant and tech organisations, as well as community radio to reach isolated communities. In Brazil, we worked with LBT women and those living in favelas (Figure 4.2). In South Africa, we worked with migrant communities facing a hostile environment. In all of these instances, we tried hard to emphasise outcomes from the start, but this was challenging. In Nepal, we facilitated the development of a migrant information portal and training

resources to be used at Migrant Resource Centres across the country. In South Africa, we trained groups of migrants on video making skills and online safety that they are passing on to others in their communities. In Brazil the LBT women we worked with created beautiful, localised resources for marginalised groups 'at the peripheries' in favelas, based on our initial training materials on online safety. Nevertheless, so much more needs to be done. We have continued to track the progress of these interventions, but gathering evidence of impact and sustaining them requires considerable investment in both time and resources for both them and for us as researchers.

Empowering marginalised groups through our work with digital technologies, and striving to make the world a better place as a result may be lofty aspirations, but they are worth pursuing. That will require us all to get out of our comfort zones and find ways to prioritise outcomes, commit time and resources, and engage with communities on the ground, rather than in the ivory towers, to learn and gather evidence of impact and outcomes of using digital tech in the service of the world's poorest and most marginalised.
