Interdisciplinary Action Research:
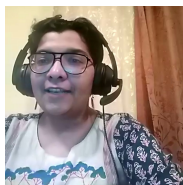## Conversations with Emerging Leaders

A collaborative initiative of Centre for Financial Accountability (Delhi) and Environment Support Group (Bangalore)

In this climate of despair induced by COVID-19, various young researchers and activists have been working on emerging trends in Interdisciplinary Action Research which address some of the most pressing issues of our times, and that from various sectors: urban planning, public health, sociology, ecology and environment, digital commons, public education, migration studies, entrepreneurship, informal economy, and more. CFA and ESG collaborate to bring to focus various exciting explorations by such young researchers, who conscientiously draw attention to some of society's biggest challenges through their interdisciplinary efforts.

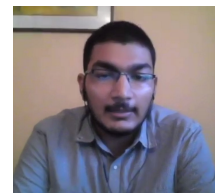### *Webinar 2: Digital Commons: Action-Research Perspectives*

Discussants

1. **Nandini Chami, IT for Change**
2. **Deepthi Bharthur, IT for Change**
3. **Dhruv Chakaraverti**, **SEWA**
4. **Anupriya S, SEWA**
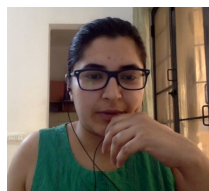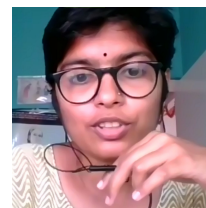5. **Nitya Nangalia, SEWA**

Nandini Chami of **IT for Change** kickstarted the webinar by drawing attention to the increasing monopolisation of data and digital platforms by large corporations. "It is important to see how we can reclaim data and build a people-centric economy to protect the interests of people at the margins", she asserted.
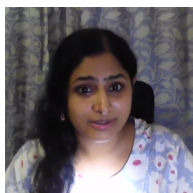
Taking a cue from this, **Dhruv Chakareverti** of **SEWA**, shared the efforts that he and his organisation have made to digitally empower people, especially those with limited data literacy. He spoke of SEWA's *farm to table* initiative which leverages the power of digital tools to link farmers directly with consumers.He also speaks about the "Ghar par sewa" platform which is made language friendly and supports cross platform support, unlike others where workers are forced to use it only in English and on a smartphone.

Despite SEWA's impressive work in using data to enhance rural livelihoods, **Anupriya S** was quick to point out that it came with it's fair share of challenges. "Access to internet connectivity requires good bandwidth and a strong underlying infrastructure. In states like Uttarakhand where SEWA is active, connectivity is a big issue. This reduces the effectiveness of a virtual experience." The lack of digital inclusion was a recurring theme of the discussion. As Nandini Chami later went on to share, certain parts of rural Orissa have a digital penetration rate as low as 6%.

Ambika Tandon, moderator for the session, opened the floor for comments on data governance and the role the state has to play in data protection. In response to this, Nandini Chami called for the need for a Data Protection Bill to ensure that sensitive data of citizens' receives the highest degree of protection. She also advocated for greater decentralisation in data governance. "Data management and business should be done by workers' cooperatives. Data which is sourced from communities should be available to these same communities for their own use. Unfortunately, right now, the data landscape is quite different", she complained. Not satisfied with nation-specific data policies alone.

Deepthi Bharthur, also of IT for Change, started off by saying "there is an ardent desire for techno-solutionism over the last few years" and also called for similar efforts on the international stage by stating, "We need data constitutionalism on the global level, along the lines of the global human rights discourse", she declared.

Bhargavi Rao, a member of the audience, enquired as to whether SEWA had made any collaborations with governments on building digital platforms.

Nitya Nangala of SEWA, responded in the affirmative. "We have provided some support to governments in building digital platforms. However, so far these efforts have been restricted to e-commerce. We haven't collaborated with the administration on issues of data governance yet", she revealed. She also shed light on issues about investments being concentrated in digital platforms and how alternatively these should be in accessibility, because none of these platforms can be put to use without accessibility.

A key focus area all the discussants agreed on was the need to democratise the ways in which data is generated, stored and monetised. As Deepthi Bharthur put it, "The people from whom data is generated must have a right to decide how it is used" and concluded saying this will help in creating community data, which we see as a stepping stone from achieving digital commons.

For further reading on the efforts of IT for Change and SEWA on democratizing the digital commons, please visit:

1. https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/add/Report-Platform%20Planet_Development_in_the_intelligence_economy.pdf

2. https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/add/Report-Platform%20Planet_Development_in_the_intelligence_economy.pdf
3. http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/16034.pdf
4. https://itforchange.net/index.php/grand-myth-of-cross-border-data-flows-trade-deals
5. https://digitalindia.gov.in/content/broadband-highways

ESG and CFA continue the *"Interdisciplinary Action Research: Conversations with Emerging Leaders"* series next Thursday, 17th September 2020 (5:00 - 6:30 pm on Zoom and Facebook) addressing the theme: **"Maternal Health of Migrant Labourers"** with **Divya Ravindranath** of **Indian Institute of Human Settlements. More details on this webinar series can be accessed on www.esgindia.org and www.cenfa.org. Recording of the webinar is accessible at:**

[This report has been prepared by Ashwin Lobo Research Associate, Karthik Anjanappa Research Associate and Malvika, Ayush and Satvika Interns, at ESG. Bhargavi Rao, Trustee, at ESG provided inputs.]