



Critical community engagement and the Latin American *ethos*: contributions to a Global South dialogue¹

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Abstract

The advancement of the concept of community engagement as a reference for university-society relations invites us, particularly those of us from the Global South, to reflect on our history and traditions. We understand community engagement as a disputed concept throughout history that can potentially house an ethical-political-pedagogical project that questions traditional university models. Observing its historical development and tensions in Latin America invites us to go beyond particular projects, giving an account of a regional movement that continues to inspire university reform processes connected to projects for transforming society. This article presents the history that constitutes the *Latin American community engagement ethos*, its prevalence in critical community engagement, and some experiences that illustrate a living paradigm still under construction that responds to the continent's needs. It concludes with an invitation to review the critical traditions of community engagement and promote the dialogue of experiences in the Global South.

Keywords: *community engagement, Latin American universities, critical community engagement, university extension*

Introduction

At a time when community engagement is positioning itself as a concept that encompasses different interaction practices between universities and society and when some countries export accreditation systems tending to standardisation, there is a risk of forgetting the diversity of trajectories, expressions, and meanings at a global level. This risk is significant for those of us who come from the Global South and have a different historical and social

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memory to those who today, because of the challenges of the so-called “knowledge society” and the questioning of techno-scientific knowledge, are returning to strengthen the relationship between university and society.

This connection between universities and society is not new for Latin American universities. Since the wars of independence in the 19th century, Latin American nations promoted the creation of universities that would break with the legacy of the Europeanizing colonial university and respond to the needs of the new national and modernizing projects. Ordorika (2013) has characterised this as the “state-building university,” which:

embodies the creationist myth of national projects in the intellectual, social and political spheres, the legacy and promise of the eagerness to school the population and national advancement [...] concretises the national saga that symbolises national pride, opportunities and development through higher education [...] [and] nurtures the intellectual and personal aspirations of the nation and its inhabitants, its social movements, revolutions, and restorations (Ordorika, 2013, p. 110).²

These universities developed as contradictory institutions, in which democratizing movements and Latin American critical thinking coexisted with the hegemonic *professionalist* condition, functional to the needs of the national elites accommodated in their peripheral position in the capitalist world-system.

In this article, we seek to share the community engagement experience in Latin American universities in the 20th century and how this trajectory survives today in the critical community engagement paradigm. These experiences reflect a process of dialogues and encounters between nations and scholars that, identifying themselves as equals, have created a *Latin American community engagement ethos* oriented towards the democratisation of knowledge and social justice, setting guidelines in our universities.

We understand community engagement as a disputed concept throughout history that potentially can house an ethical-political-pedagogical project that questions traditional university models (Colacci & Filippi, 2020; Tommasino & Cano, 2016). In this way, the term community engagement is understood as a “functional equivalent” (Dognac, 2016; Dognac Quintana, 2018) to the Spanish concepts of *extensión universitaria*, *proyección social*, *vinculación con el medio y tercera misión*³ (and their similes in Portuguese). Observing its historical development in Latin America, a tradition generally absent in English-language university debates, invites us to go beyond particular experiences and programs, accounting for a regional movement that continues, with its tensions and disputes, to inspire university reform processes connected to societal transformation projects.

The article is structured in three sections. First, we review milestones and articulate movements of community engagement at the continental level that allow us to identify a *Latin American community engagement ethos*. Secondly, the critical Latin American community

2 This and next quotations were translated by the authors from Spanish.

3 Literal translation would be *university extension, social projection, linkage with the context, and third mission*.

engagement paradigm is presented. This paradigm aims to maintain the *ethos* built during the 20th century, and the Universidad de la República's case is reviewed. Thirdly, we describe specific experiences that illustrate a living paradigm still under construction that responds to the continent's needs. We conclude with an invitation to review the critical traditions of community engagement and promote a dialogue of experiences in the Global South, to jointly explore the possibilities of continuing the community engagement movement under new statements according to the current challenges.

Movements and entanglements in Latin American community engagement

In this section, we review three relevant milestones for the constitution of the Latin American community engagement ethos, its limits, and the continuities expressed in recent conferences in the continent. We focus on continental conferences because they represent an incipient global dialogue at a regional level and an effort to build commonality out of the different national trajectories.

The first milestone is the 1918 university reform movement, originated in Cordoba, Argentina, that marked the character of universities in Latin America. The reform movement, led by students desacralised and broke with a clerical, elitist, privileged-access university model, wherein knowledge and education responded only to the demands of particular and sectorial interests. In their *Manifiesto Liminar*, students avoided colonialist models, writing, that they have just broken the last chain (Federación Universitaria de Córdoba, 1918). At the same time, the movement introduced the concept of a democratic, co-governed university, with academic freedom and autonomy while committed to the social problems of the population. This student movement linked up with the workers' and peasants' movements to carry out its program of 'university reform with social reform'. Community engagement then became a form of articulation of actors (Bustelo, 2023). Later, popular universities of great importance such as the Centro Ariel (Centro Ariel, 1930) were born in Peru, Mexico, Argentina, and Uruguay.

In 1958, the First Latin American Conference on Community Engagement and Cultural Exchange was organised in Santiago, Chile by the Latin American Universities Union (UDUAL). This meeting, of which there are scant records, sought to build a common definition of community engagement, promoted the exchange of students and professors in the continent, and collaboration with UNESCO, OAS, and other international organisations. The conference defined community engagement as:

By its NATURE, community engagement is the mission and guiding function of the contemporary University, understood as the exercise of the university vocation. By its CONTENT AND PROCEDURES, community engagement is based on the philosophical, scientific, artistic, and technical studies and activities through which the problems, data, and cultural values in all social groups are diagnosed, explored, and collected from the social, national, and universal contexts. By its PURPOSES, community engagement should propose,

as fundamental goals, to project, dynamically and in a coordinated manner, culture and to link all people with the University. In addition to these purposes, community engagement should seek to stimulate social development, and raise the spiritual, moral, intellectual, and technical level of the Nation, proposing to the public opinion, impartially and objectively, the fundamental solutions to problems of general interest. Thus understood, the mission of community engagement is to project, in the widest possible way and in all spheres of the Nation, the knowledge, studies, and research of the University, to allow everyone to participate in the university culture, to contribute to social development and to elevate the spiritual, moral, intellectual and technical level of the people (Universidad de Cuenca, 1958, p. 305).

Significantly, this Conference ratified that community engagement is part of the university's mission. Subsequently, it became an important milestone in institutionalizing the community engagement concept at a continental level. Within the framework of this Conference, the Second Round Table of Seasonal Schools [*Escuelas de Temporada*], referents of this community engagement format, were also held. For example, to democratise university knowledge, the Seasonal Schools at Universidad de Chile offered courses to the public during the summer without academic prerequisites. In Chile, these schools were founded by the feminist Amanda Labarca and used mainly by women, students, and professors from all over the Americas (Flores Gonzalez, 2023).

In 1972, in Mexico, the Second Latin American Conference on Cultural Dissemination and Community Engagement was also coordinated by UDUAL. The event sought to distinguish the concepts of community engagement and cultural dissemination and to connect with the challenges of transforming the Latin American sociopolitical and economic context during the Cold War and liberation struggles in the Third World. Influenced by the work of Paulo Freire and the theory of dependency, this Conference synthesised the main components of the critical tradition of Latin American community engagement: the commitment to the subalternised sectors and the conception of engagement as a pedagogical process, articulated with a broader movement that projected an anti-colonial and Latin Americanist horizon. The Second Conference states,

Community engagement is the interaction between the university and other components of the social body, through which it assumes and fulfills its commitment to participate in the process of creation of culture and liberation and radical transformation of the national community. The fundamental objectives of engagement are: 1- To contribute to creating a critical conscience in all social sectors to favor a true liberating change in society. 2- To contribute to all sectors to reach an integral and dynamic vision of man and the world, in the context of the historical-cultural reality and the social process of emancipation of Latin America. 3- To promote the critical review of the foundations of the university and the awareness of all its strata as an integrator of teaching and research, to carry out a unique and permanent process of cultural creation and social transformation. 4- To contribute to the dissemination and creation of modern scientific and technical concepts essential to achieve effective social transformation, while creating awareness of the dangers of scientific, cultural,

and technological transfer when it is contrary to national interests and human values. Orientations: Community engagement shall: 1- Remain in solidarity linked to every process in society tending to abolish internal and external domination and the marginalisation and exploitation of the popular sectors of societies. 2- To be stripped of all paternalistic and patronizing character, and at no time be a transmitter of the cultural patterns of the dominant groups. 3- To be planned, dynamic, systematic, interdisciplinary, permanent, mandatory, and coordinated with other social sectors that coincide with its objectives, and not only national but to promote integration in the Latin American sphere (UDUAL, 1972, p. 478-483).

In this context, the technology transfer model of the North American developmentalist trend was criticised, as were the limits of cultural dissemination. In many cases, the institutionalisation of community engagement had crystallised these critiques. For instance, community engagement projects were developed as popular education processes in urban and rural environments, as well as programs that sought to link engagement to the academic teaching processes. Examples of these include the self-governance movement of the School of Architecture of the UNAM in Mexico (Cano Menoni, 2019), and the experience of Barrio Sur de Montevideo in Uruguay.

However, these experiences, long known in Latin America (Tünnermann Bernheim, 1978, 2000), had their own limits. The 1918 movement did not develop a dialogue with the indigenous peoples, made invisible the actions and participation of women, who were already present as students and first graduates, and marginalised some engagement developments. The 1958 concept of community engagement reproduced the idea that the university was the center of knowledge and the people the center of ignorance, where the university collects society's problems, projects its culture, and offers solutions. It also silenced other ideas, like Amanda Labarca's, who understood community engagement as pedagogical work or adult education. The orientations of the 1972 Conference, more aware of some of these limits, were, in general, neutralised by the cycle of military dictatorships and conservative restoration processes that almost all Latin American countries suffered in the 1970s (in some cases even earlier). The repressive phase was followed, in some instances, by a conservative modernisation imposed in an authoritarian manner. On this basis, in the following decades, the hegemony of neoliberal policies promoted a 'university counter-reform' (López Segrera, 2008) with a mercantilist orientation, which increased the privatisation of higher education and tuition fees in many countries of the region, and sought to reorient community engagement policies towards commercialisation of knowledge. These policies and developments damaged the Latin American community engagement ethos, reducing it to the dissemination and transfer of knowledge.

In response to these processes, within the context of the restoration of democratic governments, since 1996 new Latin American and Caribbean Congresses of Community Engagement⁴ were organised in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador,

4 Its names have changed over time. In 1996 it was called "Encuentro", in 1998 "Iberoamerican", in 2017 it returns to "Latin American and Caribbean."

Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela (Monge Hernández et al., 2020). Although they began in a self-organised way among few universities, in the context of the 1999 Congress, the Latin American and Caribbean Union of Community Engagement (ULEU) was created as an association for linkage, cooperation, exchange, and reflection on community engagement in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (Valenzuela Tovar, 2018). Its objectives are to contribute to improving higher education's quality through the institutionalisation of community engagement and its integration with teaching and research, and to promote the development and training of human resources in community engagement in higher education. ULEU also seeks to promote the internationalisation of community engagement throughout the region, based on mobility strategies and joint development of programs and projects. These Congresses and the ULEU account for a revitalisation of Latin American community engagement, promoting the publication of academic journals,⁵ books (Castro & Tommasino, 2017; ULEU, 2015), the creation of a digital library (Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, n.d.), the promotion of national networks of community engagement, and the Academic Commission of Community Engagement of Association of Universities "Grupo de Montevideo" (AUGM), which also organises its own congresses in the countries of the Southern Cone of the continent (Asociación de Universidades Grupo de Montevideo, n.d.).

Critical community engagement today in Latin America and the Caribbean

As mentioned above, community engagement has taken diverse forms and definitions in the university world and Latin America. This section focuses on the paradigm of Critical Community Engagement as a *praxical corpus* that explicitly seeks to maintain the Latin American community engagement ethos. At the end of the section, we illustrate this paradigm with the trajectory of Universidad de la República.

Tommasino Comesaña and Correa García (2023) explain that the term 'critical community engagement' [*extensión crítica*], was coined by a group of intellectuals and activists in Latin America and the Caribbean, following Paulo Freire's educational theory and a sense of political radicalism. The *critical* alludes to the possibility of sustaining an in-depth look at the problems conceived in their historicity and their politicisation, visualizing the power structure that underlies social reality, and positioning ourselves as subjects in the processes of understanding and transforming that reality-in contrast to the functionalist paradigms of the neutrality of science (Erreguerena, Nieto y Tommasino, 2020; Tommasino & Cano, 2016; Tommasino Comesaña & Correa García, 2023). According to Tommasino Comesaña and Correa García, critical community engagement,

5 For instance, Revista +E de Extensión Universitaria at Universidad Nacional del Litoral, Argentina, and the discontinued ULEU magazine *Identidad y Territorio*.

Allows us to think about the political-epistemic bases of community engagement [...] to promote a paradigm that postulates community engagement as a substantive mission of the Latin American and Caribbean university, which articulates several perspectives and promotes a critical interpretation of the current capitalist, patriarchal and colonial social order in favor of the strengthening of the dominated sectors as historical subjects and protagonists of social change (Tommasino Comesaña & Correa García, 2023, p. 96).

The final declaration of the 16th Congress of the ULEU, held in 2021 in Costa Rica, highlights the role of critical community engagement as a perspective that allows interpreting the challenges of social change in Latin America in dialogue with subalternised subjects. The declaration commits to these processes of change and promote transformations in public universities so that they are in a better position to collaborate with them (ULEU, 2021). In that Congress, some political and ontological principles were synthesised, such as “care for life,” “common good,” and “*buen vivir [good living]*,” and the horizon of contributing to “the construction of more dignified and solidary societies, in which the processes of oppression and domination disappear, and proposals that combat ecocide, exploitation, patriarchy, racism, colonialism and any other structure of domination are generated and strengthened” (ULEU, 2021, p. 158).

To this end, the ULEU fosters epistemological transformations and coherent methodological criteria. To these scholars, critical community engagement should collaborate with “...the construction and reconstruction of other epistemologies, which facilitates the intercultural production of legitimate knowledge, transforming the conditions of dialogue, while at the same time carving an innovative, systemic and humanistic management” (ULEU, 2021, p. 159). In addition, ULEU emphasises the pedagogical role of community engagement as a space that makes possible an integral education of university students and calls scholars to work on the curricular and pedagogical frameworks that affirm the integration of community engagement with teaching and research.

ULEU’s declaration gives a major role to social movements and the subalternised sectors of society. To ULEU, these sectors are subjects with whom to make alliances that produce mutual learning and affirm the organisational strength of social transformations. They conclude: “Thus, the interaction and permanent learning between the university and society must become the central axis of community engagement [*extensión, vinculación y acción social*] for the construction of truthful, critical, and ethical communicative processes, oriented to the transformation of the reality of the region. Community engagement is a bridge of knowledge serving nature and humanity” (ULEU, 2021, p. 159).

There is no pure example of a critical community engagement institution or a clear cut or ‘shift’ towards a critical community engagement. The critical community engagement paradigm is nurtured by scholars’ practices and university programs in different moments in history. ULEU’s notion of critical community engagement draws from the non-linear and dialectic experiences of universities. As an example, we review Universidad de la República’s case, Uruguay.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, community engagement was promoted by students' and professors' lectures and courses that addressed issues of interest to workers, particularly the Uruguayan Regional Workers Federation (FORU) unions. Beyond mere culture dissemination, the lectures supported the workers' struggles. The Popular University of Uruguay, created by the Federation of University Students of Uruguay (FEUU) in 1930, combined literacy, trades, artistic, cultural, scientific, political economy, and history courses and lectures on workers' legislation, agrarian reform, imperialism, law, and social struggles (Scagliola, 2021). It was co-managed by a board of directors composed of students and workers (Bralich, 2007). The Central Popular University, the largest of its kind in the country, had more than 1300 students (Van Aken, 1990).

In the 1950s, community engagement was institutionalised as one of the essential functions at Universidad de la República, as projects were expanding, professionalizing, and linking to research. In 1957, three pilot engagement programs were launched, one in a rural town in the interior of Uruguay, another in a suburb of Montevideo, and a third in a poor neighborhood near downtown Montevideo. Influenced by the dominant developmentalist paradigm of the decade, these programs sought to contribute to interdisciplinary diagnosis and planning of solutions to social problems in these neighborhoods. They were installed as place-based engagement programs to address their areas of reference's health, educational, productive, and social problems.

Around the same period, through innovative curricula and teaching methods community engagement began to be understood as a suitable form of integral education for university students. In Medicine, community engagement was defined as a form of 'in-community teaching' (Carlevaro, 1972), with a humanistic and integral, holistic, social, and anthropological perspective of health and disease processes. In Fine Arts, community engagement broke the market-based art model, oriented toward the consumption of the privileged classes. Scholars took art to the marginalised neighborhoods, favoring active teaching of the students, who were able to investigate and create new artistic forms and proposals that could interpret those realities and produce experiences and meanings together with the popular subjects. In 1963, the School of Agronomy created an Experimental Station in the north of Uruguay to support a new curriculum that gave greater importance to community engagement as a form of collaboration with small family producers in the country's interior.

In the 20th century's last decade and the beginning of the 21st century, critical community engagement had a moment of renewal at Universidad de la República, fueled by the contribution of social movements at the international level such as the neo-Zapatista movement in Chiapas (Mexico), the Landless Movement (MST) in Brazil, and the feminist movement. The conception of movements as knowledge-producing subjects (Pinheiro, 2015) favored horizontal dialogues between the university and the movements, with joint action-research programs. During this time, Universidad de la República developed a 'second university reform' emphasizing community engagement (Cano & Tommasino, 2017; Cano Menoni & Castro Vilaboa, 2016). In this context, it created integral programs

(linking teaching and engagement), communication programs, and incubator programs for associative and popular economy. In sum, critical community engagement practices can be traced through the history of Universidad de la República.

Pathways, regional collaborations, and critical practices

From a regional point of view, even though countries differ in their trajectories, most Latin American universities count on institutional support for community engagement (Cano Menoni and Flores, 2023). This support ranges from the statutory definitions, secretariats, vice provosts, departments, and budgets that strengthen community engagement. Several countries have national networks that promote the encounter of public universities, such as the *Red Nacional de Extensión Universitaria de Argentina* [National Community Engagement Network of Argentina] (REXUNI), the *Fórum de Pró-Reitores de Extensão das Instituições Públicas de Educação Superior Brasileiras* [Forum of Community Engagement Pro-Rectors of Public Institutions of Higher Education] in Brazil (FORPROEX), and the *Red de Vinculación con el Medio del Consorcio de Universidades Estatales de Chile* [Network of Community Engagement of the Consortium of State Universities of Chile], among others.

Latin American critical community engagement, being a particular expression of the diversity of institutionally recognised practices, has been extremely productive in promoting additional networking spaces between universities and academics from different countries. In the last few years, several specific training spaces on the subject have been promoted including congresses, conferences, undergraduate and graduate courses, specialisation courses, and calls for grants. This section presents two examples of collaboration networks and some specific projects.

Regarding networking, the *Critical Community Engagement Research Group Theories and Practices in Latin America and the Caribbean* of the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO) and the Training Schools of the ULEU stand out (CLACSO, n.d.). The CLACSO Research Group, led by Erregarena, Gomez Castrilli, Padilla, and Tomassino, brought together 186 researchers from 15 Latin American and Caribbean countries: Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, and Uruguay. This research group established a framework of theoretical, epistemological, political, and methodological agreements for its work, and articulation with social actors and movements. In their founding document, CLASCO scholars identified four guiding principles,

Critical analysis of the current social order in Latin America and the Caribbean, interrogating the integrating and reproductive role played by education in general and university education in particular. Contribution to the strengthening and emancipation of the dominated sectors as historical subjects and protagonists of social change; strengthening the autonomy of their organisations and democratizing power towards the social base. Agreement with a transformative educational process where there are no stereotyped roles of educator and student (everyone can learn and teach). [It is a] Process that contributes

to the production of new knowledge and critically links academic knowledge with people's knowledge. Interdisciplinary approach and collaborative work between movement/actors and social organisations, in each and every stage: problem definition, planning, execution, and evaluation (CLACSO, n.d.p.).

One of the main results of the work of this group is the recent publication of a book with selected and commented texts on critical community engagement (Erreguerena, 2023). In it, contributions from thirty-four scholars discuss the connection between community engagement and the Cordoba reform of 1918, the influence of Paulo Freire, Latin American and Caribbean critical thinking, the feminist movement, the anti-colonial perspective and epistemological diversity, the territory, and participatory methodologies.

A second example of network collaboration in critical community engagement has been the ULEU Community Engagement Schools. As a specific formative device, these spaces for dialogue and training have made possible the problematisation of both the integration between teaching and community engagement and the realisation of theoretical and practical experiences with territorial intervention. A host university organises each school and brings together teachers, non-teaching staff, community engagement workers, and students from several universities to carry out training spaces in community engagement and create integral practices in the territory with social organisations. The university community and the social organisations are included in participatory methodologies with a gender perspective.

In recent years, three versions have been organised in Argentina (Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, 2017; Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, 2019; Universidad Nacional de San Juan, 2019). In 2017, the Universidad Nacional de Cuyo organised a school focused on rural extension, family agriculture, community health, art, and culture. In 2018, the Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata (UNMDP) concentrated on training, intervention, and territorial development through the Community Engagement Centers within the university. In 2019, the Universidad Nacional de San Juan school focused on strengthening its university Community Engagement Projects.

Regarding critical community engagement experiences and programs, we highlight two orientations: the territorial perspective, and the articulation between teaching and community engagement. Universities that have developed processes of territorialisation have programs that promote 'situated universities' (Rinesi (2015)). These situated universities develop their universal missions as universities, strongly articulated to their specific territories, their context's problems, and populations. The territorial perspective on community engagement also contributes to redefining how knowledge is produced by questioning its underlying power relations (Porto Gonçalves, 2009).

There are several examples of this type of program: in Uruguay the Apex-Cerro Program and the Integral Metropolitan Program (PIM) at Universidad de la República (Pérez & Cano, 2018; Acosta & Bianchi, 2010; Carlevaro, 1998); in Mexico, programs at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, at the Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas as well as in the "open classroom" proposal of the Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México (Molina

& Ejea, 2019; Rodríguez & Rosen, 2016); in Chile, the work of Universidad de Playa Ancha in Valparaíso (González et al., 2017); and in Argentina, the case of the Community Engagement Centers (CEU) of the UNMDP (Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, n.d.).

Since 2013, the UNMDP has created new mechanisms for the presence of the university in peripheral neighborhoods of the district and nearby cities (Colacci et al., 2022). The CEU aim to generate articulations between the UNMDP and the community, with programs established in mixed co-managed venues with Neighborhood Associations, Promotion Societies, Cooperative Schools, Social Clubs, etc. They have built collective participation framework, and restored social bonds, assuming education as a generator of opportunities and equity. From these spaces, territorial diagnoses of different problems are carried out and articulated with activities, projects, and community engagement programs. Their existence played a fundamental role during the recent COVID 19 pandemic, where CEU scholars intervened jointly with social movements to address pressing problems of the population. The diagnoses carried out jointly with the population has allowed them to invert the origin of the community engagement projects, starting from the problems surveyed in the region. The existence of these centers in remote neighborhoods encourages, through planned actions, the inclusive mission of public universities, stimulating the enrollment of young populations in higher education.

Concerning the experiences that articulate teaching and extension in the perspective of an integral education, we can observe a renewed interest in the last fifteen years in some Latin American countries, especially in universities in Uruguay and Argentina (Cano Menoni & Flores, 2023; Tommasino & Cano, 2016). Rather than just understanding community engagement as means to contribute to society in which the formation of university students was a secondary effect, this perspective develops centers the education of university students.

This implies a reversal of the diffusionist perspective on community engagement. Recreating conceptions that emerged in the 1960s and expressed in part in the Second Conference of 1972, these new orientations have placed the pedagogical foundations of community engagement at the center and have valued the potential for students' active and critical formation. This perspective has been articulated with critical community engagement, giving it a strategic component, since by the *curricularisation* (incorporation in the curriculum), community engagement can transcend its marginal place and have a more solid academic and institutional framework.

This educational orientation of community engagement is heterogeneous. Different conceptions and pedagogical practices, such as popular education, active teaching, pre-professional practices, service learning, project-based learning, and ideas on integral education, have been combined and, at times, have come into tension. In the perspective of critical community engagement, it is this active, interdisciplinary, dialogic formation, which enables, at the same time, a better appropriation of theoretical and technical knowledge at play in real work contexts, as well as a critical understanding of the role of professionals in society and an ethical-methodological sense of the intervention processes. A comprehensive

training experience of this nature is *humanizing*, in the words of Pablo Carlevaro (2009), since, together with the mobilisation of knowledge and skills, it stirs [*conmueve*] sensitivity towards social problems and injustice, and foster processes of awareness from positions of commitment and solidarity.

Some of the formative devices developed along these lines are the Espacios de Formación Integral at Universidad de la República in Uruguay (Red de Extensión, 2019) and the socio-community practices in Argentine public universities (Tommasino, 2022). These open devices allow adaptations to different areas of knowledge and disciplinary profiles, favoring the integration of community engagement into the curriculum in different ways e.g., compulsory, optional, elective, internships, and theses.

Towards new horizons for the future

To state conclusions in such a complex process of our universities would require considering that there is something to crystallise, which would omit the existing vital dynamics open to different possibilities. From our perspective within universities in Latin America, we find meaning in the dispute of these horizons for the future, considered as pedagogical and epistemological pursuits in the present. These disputes recreate the social commitment of our public universities by expanding their spaces for transformative dialogue with society.

A 'critical community engagement' movement has recently been re-emerging in Latin American universities. It has sought to reinvent the legacy of the Latin American community engagement ethos in light of the problems and challenges of the present. While we know that these are open-ended attempts in constant transformation, we can synthesise six common characteristics that guide these efforts, to:

- a) Promote a dialogic, participative, and collective construction incorporating people's knowledge into academic knowledge.
- b) Ensure that community engagement is a pedagogical proposal for the integral education of university students; that it is binding, situated, pertinent, and committed to social problems, promoting the curricularisation of extension in undergraduate and graduate academic formations.
- c) Incorporate feminist epistemologies and the revaluation of experiences as a first step for the construction of scientific knowledge, in dispute with positivist methods of supposed neutrality (Colacci et al., 2021; Filippi Villar & Colacci, 2022).
- d) Incorporate counter-narratives as alternatives to hegemonic storytelling; to listen to other forgotten voices, and give place to silenced stories.
- e) Value subjective involvement as a power of the intervention and learning processes, seeking a sensitive, humanizing education that incorporates affection in academic education.
- f) Promote the territorial perspective together with social movements and organisations conceiving engagement as a space for dialogue and participatory action research between the university and subalternised subjects.

Our challenge is to recover the historical legacy and statements from new ethical-political inscriptions. To this end, we consider community engagement as a participatory ethical/political university decision, a tool for social transformation with a permanent effect as an educational act. Positioned today in the development of this movement, we promote the social commitment based on the democratic and democratizing construction of knowledge in a dialogic way, prioritizing the subalternised sectors due to social, gender, racial, economic, cultural, and environmental inequality.

The history of the Latin American community engagement ethos and the critical community engagement movement leads us to the opening of new questions in a time of uncertainty: What are the existing meanings, practices, and experiences in the Latin American University that can feed an alternative university project? What are the historical and current debts of exclusion, cultural invasion, and academic extractivism of universities concerning their societies? What principles, conceptions, and methodologies do we need for an alternative construction? What relations can we establish between the legacy of the University Reform and critical community engagement, and the need to invent new paths in the present, '*sin calco ni copia*,'⁶ as Mariátegui said? How do we reconcile a conception of the University as a right with the transformation of higher education institutions so that they can contain diversities, without reproducing epistemic violence, welcoming knowledge historically forbidden by the academies? Who are the actors to promote a project of this nature? How to articulate in a novel way the community engagement with Latin American research, overcoming old and new forms of colonial domination and counteracting the commodification and extractivist tendencies of cognitive capitalism? How, at the same time, to make an epistemic critique of academic productivism and the ideology of development – equivalent to economic growth and exploitation of nature conceived as a 'resource' of 'buen vivir'?

There is no universal and uniform recipe for expanding the imagination and promoting new structural changes in universities; it is necessary to be sensitive to each context and culture. However, this Latin American history and the crucial questions it raises, spark reflections with a global-level scope. A South-South dialogue that recovers these traditions is needed to give answers to some of these questions while, at the same time, helping reinvent proposals and avoid an unreflective repetition of statements and concepts from the Global North experience. This dialogue is necessary to open paths of dispute to other possible epistemologies, to erode systems and filter the foundations of models presented to us as unique, eternal, and unbreakable.

We need to share and rethink the histories and critical approaches to community engagement in the Global South in order to continue the battle for the democratisation of knowledge and the decolonisation of universities. We need to spur a new research agenda on the origins of community engagement in the Global South, before it was labeled 'community engagement.' We need spaces of encounter where untold stories can be told,

6 Neither imitation nor copy.

and the acknowledgment of our practices can create conditions for a real global dialogue. In this perspective, we can explore and build 'the common' between Latin American and African university traditions, recovering the sensitivity of addressing similar problems, grounded in oppressive logics sustaining worlds of social injustice. Our invitation is to create new bonds and common objectives looking at our diverse and rich history.

A real global dialogue requires acknowledgment of our practices. For Freire (1994), dialogue is an experience of human encounter, which creates a shared space through speaking, listening, and questioning. It is a process of communication through which people understand the world and endow it with shared meanings and senses to transform it (Freire, 1994). A dialogue of this nature between African and Latin American community engagement would provide vibrant lessons to better understand the problems of our societies and universities and share and recreate strategies and objectives of transformation from the perspectives of the Global South.

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