



THOUGHT PIECE

The Global South to the front: critical questions from two South-South dialogues on community engagement

Matías G. Flores, Cornell University

Abstract

In this article, I will reflect on the importance of two recent “South-South” exchanges organized by faculty and leadership from the Universidad de la República in Uruguay and Rhodes University in South Africa. I believe these encounters represent an innovative and much-needed alternative to collaborations where Global North voices are most prominent and Global South is reduced to an object of study. Finally, I identify five critical questions that emerged in these conversations for future South-South dialogues in the field: What is the Global South? Why should we have a dialogue? What should that dialogue look like? What are the main challenges for a South-South dialogue? What can the Global North learn from a South-South dialogue on community engagement?

Keywords: *community engagement, South-South partnerships, global dialogue, Global South*

Introduction

One thing that has concerned me the most in my exchanges with Chilean colleagues is how a considerable number would know more about the community engagement trajectories, programs, and networks from the US, the UK, Spain, and Australia than their Latin American neighbors. While there are notions about the history of a critical community engagement ethos in the continent (Flores et al., 2023), little is known about current structures and programs, such as the mandatory social services in Mexico, the constitutional-level integration of the three university missions in Brazil, or the socio-educational practices in Argentina. Similarly, experiences from Asian and African cases are barely mentioned.



This can be explained by the concentration of the field of community engagement in Global North cases and English publications, although several conferences, journals, and networks have been growing recently in either Spanish or Portuguese. In Chile, unfortunately, higher education policies typically follow the cases and trends in the Global North, while also maintaining a neocolonial mentality where everything that comes from the Global North and in English deserves special attention. *How to address this tendency and how to bring other voices into the conversation?*

In 2011, the Talloires Network of Engaged Universities edited a book on “engaged universities” at an international level as a response to the concentration of studies based on the Global North. In that book, the authors asked, “What can the Global North, and the whole world for that matter, learn from the civic engagement experience of the universities in the Global South?” (Watson et al., 2011, p. xxvi). The study included 20 universities: three universities from the North, thirteen from the South, and four from what the authors called a “transitional zone” (including Northern universities in “Southern skins” and Southern universities in Northern regions). They found a distinctive *Southern model of university-community engagement*¹ and concluded this Southern model “represents a rich and fruitful addition to the available models, mixes of intellectual capital and narratives in the field” (Watson et al., 2011, p. 249).

The scholarship by Watson et al. (2011) is one way to respond to this challenge, where Global South experiences are an object of study, and the active voices come from the Global North.² It centers on the Global South’s absence and contributes important insights but without the Global South actors. In contrast, in this article, I will reflect on the importance of two recent “South-South” exchanges organized by faculty and leadership from the Universidad de la República in Uruguay and Rhodes University in South Africa. I believe these encounters represent an innovative and much-needed alternative to how to promote a global dialogue in the field. Finally, I identify five critical questions that emerged in these conversations for future South-South dialogues in the field.

Two prominent engaged universities in the Global South

Universidad de la República (Uruguay) clearly represents what is known as a *Latin American university model* (Bernasconi, 2015). This public university offers higher education with free tuition, no access requirements, democratic governance (voice and vote for faculty, students, and alumni), and community engagement (*extensión universitaria*) as a third mission or pillar. In 2006, it started a ‘second university reform’ process that promoted the

1 They identified eleven characteristics that were different from Northern models: lack of comfort zone, drive for transformation, priority towards development and national cohesion, focus on human capital and employment, driven by necessity over choice, role of private institutions for public purposes, international partnerships for assistance, importance of vocational education, relation between religion and science, Mode 2 engagement, and a sense of societal pull (Watson et al., 2011).

2 All authors worked for institutions based in the US and England (Watson et al., 2011).

integration of teaching and learning, research, and engagement (Cano & Tommasino, 2017). This integration of the university missions was expressed in curricular spaces called *Espacios de Formación Integral* (Integral Teaching Spaces) and the *Programa Integral Metropolitano* (Integral Metropolitan Program), a place-based community engagement program in the marginalized neighborhoods of Montevideo. Universidad de la República led a revival of the Latin American debate on community engagement (*extensión universitaria*), organizing regional conferences and publishing an impressive number of books and articles on their experience.³

Rhodes University (South Africa), also a public university, has been developing a solid community engagement strategy following the South African government's positioning of community engagement as a university mission in the immediate post-apartheid moment (Department of Education, 1997). In Makhanda (ex-Grahamstown), the Rhodes University Community Engagement division (RUCE) has developed engaged research, service learning, and critical active citizenry or volunteerism programs (Sibhensana & Maistry, 2023). Particularly concerned about public education since 2014, RUCE has promoted programs with impressive results on local students' trajectories and outcomes, such as the Nine Tenths Mentoring Programme (Rhodes University, n.d.). RUCE has also been leading the community engagement conversation in South Africa, organizing national conferences, establishing and publishing the African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement, and soon to be offering an accredited Post-Graduate Diploma in Higher Education Community Engagement.

Two South-South dialogues

In 2024, these two universities co-organized two encounters. In March 14, Universidad de la República organized the Seminar: *La extensión universitaria en clave sur-sur: diálogos entre Latinoamérica, el Caribe y África*. On the first day of the seminar, a rainy day in Montevideo, a bilingual and virtual panel gathered Di Hornby, Director of the Community Engagement Division at Rhodes University, Margie Maistry, Research Associate at Rhodes University, and Darren Lortan, current IARSLCE President and Chair of the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF) (Universidad de la República, n.d.-a). Two months later, on May 15, in the context of the Rhodes University Community Engagement 2024 Conference, the panel *South-South Partnership Relationships* included Agustín Cano, Professor at Universidad de la República, Kanya Padayachee, Research Associate, University of the Free State, Grey Magaiza, Head of the Sociology Department and Community Development Programme at the University of Free State, and me (Rhodes University, 2024).

In these spaces, all questions came from the Global South to Global South scholars and students embracing diversity and difference. There was no assumed and overarching

3 All their publications and resources are in Spanish (Universidad de La República, n.d.-b).

‘Southern model of university-community partnerships’; all participants tried to understand their differences and learn from one another. In Uruguay, Darren, Margie, and Di shared how Ubuntu philosophy, Tanzania’s *Ujamaa* experience, and the student-led Black Community Programmes during apartheid, continue to inspire and shape an African way of engagement. In the South African panel, Agustín Cano raised questions to promote a global dialogue, linking the Latin American community engagement connection with broader social movements, Paulo Freire’s legacy, and the agency of the students’ movements in the university transformation.

Five critical questions and takeaways for future global dialogues

After participating in both events and revisiting its recordings, I identified five critical questions and takeaways that can inspire new global dialogues: What is the Global South? Why should we have a dialogue? What should that dialogue look like? What are the main challenges for a South-South dialogue? What can the Global North learn from a South-South dialogue on community engagement?

What is the Global South? The Global South cannot be reduced to a geographical location on a map. The concept refers to a shared experience of colonial violence, a subaltern position in uneven global power dynamics, and the results of constant epistemic violence, the outcome of a colonial erasure of knowledge. However, the Global South is not only a place of suffering and oppression; it also refers to a shared history of struggles for liberation and agency in the context of resistance. It is a living example that societies can and must change, in a dialectic relation between tragedy and hope.

Why should we have a dialogue? We still have an urgency for social justice and epistemic justice at the community and the university level. We need to revisit our past to learn from our mistakes and recover our attempts to create alternative relations between universities and communities. We must acknowledge the plurality of ways of knowing that are usually made invisible under the shadow of Western or neocolonial mentalities in our own institutions.

What should that dialogue look like? We should go beyond shallow North-South dialogues, where the agency is placed in the Global North. This means resisting both a homogenizing perspective, where the South should mimic or follow the North, or the othering/essentializing perspective, where the South looks too different or exotic to the North. In contrast, South-South dialogue should embrace diversity and multiplicity following the same nature and principles of higher education community engagement. It seems it is easier to engage in dialogue with our communities than other foreign scholars.

What are the main challenges for a South-South dialogue? One clear challenge is the language barrier, which in the case of the event in Uruguay was successfully addressed through simultaneous interpretation. However, this translation effort is more than just a literal translation. It implies a conceptual challenge where we need to deconstruct terms

and identify commonalities or equivalents. There is also an institutional challenge when we expect scholars to participate in the dialogue. Universities are based on prestige, and scholars seem to prefer spending time looking at the best practices while ignoring the not-so-good or bad and harmful practices. It is especially problematic whenever legitimacy is given by a global ranking that reproduces models of universities that are disconnected from societies. A final challenge is about understanding students as agents of change and not empty vessels to be filled with pre-defined vales and contents. Acknowledging their agency also implies that faculty need to be open to their vulnerability and unlearn harmful habits.

Lastly, paraphrasing and tweaking the Watson et al.'s (2011) question, *what can the Global North learn from a South-South dialogue on community engagement?* These dialogues showed how close the Global North is to "Southern" characteristics. In other words, the Global North is no exception to power imbalances and colonial and epistemic violence. Within the North there is oppression and resistance that need to be addressed in a global dialogue on community engagement, especially in a moment when the US had reenergized a sociopolitical trend sustained in fear and hate, when war and genocide are shaking the world, and the natural disasters cannot hide anymore the impact of the climate crisis. These trends shake us as humanity and require solidarity across the globe. A South-South dialogue can offer insights and hope.

Conclusion

Although I value the meaningful questions brought forward by Watson et al.'s scholarship, I believe the field needs to invite more Global South scholars to the front, allowing the agency to probe existing questions and raise new ones. Fortunately, there have been several efforts to promote a global dialogue from that 2011 book project (Global University Network for Innovation, 2014; McIlrath et al., 2012; Tapia et al., 2024). What sets the Universidad de la República and Rhodes University encounters apart is the active role of two key Southern institutions in shaping the conditions, questions, and goals for future global dialogues.

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Notes on Contributor

Matías G. Flores
Cornell University
mf785@cornell.edu
ORCID: 0000-0002-3820-9681

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