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- Contribute to the body of knowledge on CE produced in Africa; encouragement of the African voice and voices from the global South in general, which may aid in combating epistemicide and marginalising alternative knowledge paradigms at higher education institutions.

- Grow community engagement as a discipline with philosophies, theories and praxis relevant to the African context, and a practice that contributes to the various dimensions (social, economic, cultural, psychological, spiritual, and political) of human and community development.

- Embed community engagement in all activities of the university, especially research, and signal the importance of scholarly work on community-university partnerships.

- Advance collaborative research methodologies, especially community-based participatory research (CBPR), where communities and academics are knowledge co-creators and collaborators in research practice and knowledge dissemination. This kind of research, which values the input of and produces knowledge for and with local communities, can contribute to the process of decolonisation of universities in Africa.

- Provide a space for professional development, discourse and debate on community engagement and sharing knowledge through the scholarship of engagement in the African context, the global South and partnerships with the global North that provide perspectives on and for Community Engagement in South Africa and the rest of the African region.

- Incorporate an author and young editorial board members support programme to encourage new authors in the field to establish themselves as scholarly writers and a new generation of editorial board members.

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Grounded in Place, Connected to the World: Community Engagement at the Heart of the African University

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> *Education is a means of knowledge about ourselves […] After we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us. With Africa at the centre of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries (wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 87).*

What does a distinctly 'African' university look like in the 21ˢᵗ century? What is the purpose of these higher education institutions? The mid- to late-twentieth century was a period of reimagination and contestation about the character and role of the university as countries on the African continent regained their independence. At the heart of these debates was a tension between 'excellence' and 'relevance', or the simultaneous need to be "responsive to the local and engaged with the global" (Mamdani, 2019 p. 16). This tension was not only about the outlook of universities but also the type of graduate produced: the 'global scholar' whose ideas transcend national boundaries and imagine new possibilities, or the 'public intellectual' connected and committed to society (Mamdani, 2018).

By tracing the twentieth century debate about the purpose of the African university between Walter Rodney, writing from the University of Dar es Salaam (est. 1963) in Tanzania, and Ali Mazrui, writing from Makerere University (est. 1922), Mamdani (2019) illustrates this contestation. In this debate, Rodney indicated that universities should join the struggle to consolidate national independence and effect social justice, whereas Mazrui called attention to the authoritarian tendency of those in power and the danger this posed for university functions of teaching and research, as well as their capability to hold the state to account. In this comparison, Mamdani highlights the tension between universities as sites of public engagement, where intellectuals are embedded in the place from which they research (Rodney), and as sites where scholars are free to become fascinated by ideas transcending national boundaries (Mazrui). A core question emerged: should African universities serve as sites of public engagement or as havens for unfettered intellectual inquiry?

Although this debate indicates opposed viewpoints about the purpose of universities, these positions need not be mutually exclusive. Instead, this contestation indicates a need to balance knowledge that reflects local society and the global scholarly community, so that one can simultaneously be a global scholar *and* context-based public intellectual. A balance

between these two purposes is also essential for the functioning of universities: they enable an embeddedness in place as well as the development of relationships of solidarity (Ajayi et al., 1996). They are both locally responsive and globally engaged.

In this light, higher education community engagement holds promise. Defined as the mutually beneficial relationships between universities and surrounding communities in pursuit of co-generated knowledge and solutions to societal challenges, community engagement anchors universities in their contexts. It affirms that they are not detached 'ivory towers' but institutions embedded in and dependent on place (Almjeld, 2021). By recognising the knowledge of surrounding communities, community engagement signifies the value of relational ways of understanding and meaning-making through context. In this sense, universities are called to be present *in* and *for* their localities, contributing not only knowledge but, as socially responsible institutions, to livelihoods, opportunities, and capacity-building.

Relationality and reciprocity are central. Universities cannot simply respond to local needs at a distance; they must be locally embedded, attentive to histories and to the power imbalances that shape relationships with communities, and honour agency and knowledges within communities. Engaged research practices, which draw in communities as knowledge co-creators, are especially powerful. Many community-based research approaches have roots in Africa and the Global South more generally and provide a guide for democratised knowledge production practices (Lepore et al., 2021). At the same time, community-based engaged research practices, like all human collaborations, are rarely perfect: these partnerships are complicated and often contradictory, but are significant as productive exercises of imagining alternative ways of knowing (Martinez-Vargas, 2020). They call on researchers to imagine and innovate more equitable ways of doing research in ways that are ethical and relevant to the places and landscapes in which universities are embedded.

Yet place itself is never static. It is constructed through the lived experiences of people, and its meanings are dynamic and fluid. Places are woven together through evolving practices and movement (of people and knowledges) that extend across communities, institutions, and continents. In this way, place is constructed consciously through our social practices, and is thus connected to other communities and landscapes (Agnew, 2011). Although rooted in the local, community engagement also unfolds through relationships that stretch across institutions and countries. Community engagement therefore straddles the local and the global, deeply rooted in context whilst also unfolding through practices of solidarity. Indeed, the voices calling for increased South-South collaborations in community engagement and knowledge production continue to grow louder (Flores, 2024; Lepore et al., 2021).

The contributions gathered in this volume offer fresh insights into how community engagement is being enacted across diverse contexts, from 'doing research the African way', to local economic contributions and social enterprise development, to multilingual career

guidance, to transnational South-South research networks, and reflexive explorations of what it means to undertake community-based engaged research.

In 'The African Knowledge Production Incubators: Doing Research the African Way', **Nevashnee Perumal and colleagues from six South African universities** explore what it means to decolonise social work education through the *African Knowledge Production Incubators (AKPI)* project. Grounded in Participatory Action Learning Action Research (PALAR) and Zavala's decolonial framework, the project creates 'incubation spaces' where African scholars and students engage in collective storytelling, reflection, and healing as acts of reclaiming epistemic agency. The incubators become relational and transformative spaces, sites for 'the decolonisation of self' as a precursor to curriculum change, demonstrating how knowledge production can be both deeply local and profoundly collaborative. Through a series of imbizos, photovoice projects, and South–South exchanges (including engagements with scholars in India), the project illustrates that African knowledge is generated through connection, community, and care, challenging the individualism and hierarchies of Western academic traditions. It offers a model for relational, place-based and democratic scholarship that re-centres African epistemologies while remaining open to dialogue across contexts.

In the second paper, 'Universities as Just Anchor Institutions: Promoting Inclusive Economic Growth', **Noel Pearse and Thandiwe Matyobeni** examine how Rhodes University's *Masakhe Enterprise and Supplier Development Programme* embodies the principles of a 'just anchor' institution. Framed around social justice and the pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), the study illustrates how universities can leverage their resources, procurement systems, and partnerships to stimulate local enterprise, create decent work, and foster economic inclusion. By aligning the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment framework with community engagement, Rhodes University's Community Engagement Division serves as a catalyst for accessibility and empowerment in Makhanda. This case highlights how an African university can act as both a driver of inclusive development and a custodian of social transformation, translating its embeddedness in place into tangible contributions toward economic justice.

In the third contribution, 'Community-Based Participatory Research as a Driver of Social Enterprise Development', **Ekaete Benedict** offers a case study from the University of the Free State that illustrates how community-based participatory research (CBPR) and participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) can strengthen both student learning and community capacity. Working in partnership with the student-led ACCESS social enterprise, the project enabled students to co-create a business model canvas, conduct SOAR analyses, and develop practical strategies that enhanced ACCESS's organisational sustainability. Through reciprocal learning and co-production, participants deepened their understanding of social entrepreneurship, decoloniality, and Ubuntu-informed engagement. Benedict's study demonstrates how embedding CBPR/PALAR in entrepreneurship curricula can enrich experiential learning, strengthen employability, and support community-driven social enterprise development.

The fourth contribution, 'Language, Relationality, and Career Guidance: A Community-Engaged Psychology Perspective' by **Centurion Zwane**, extends this conversation by foregrounding language and relational ethics as central to meaningful community engagement. Drawing on the Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF), the study examines how multilingual, Ubuntu-informed pedagogies can transform career guidance in under-resourced South African schools. Through a service-learning partnership between Rhodes University psychology students and local high school learners, the paper shows how translanguaging and relational teaching foster comprehension, confidence and belonging. By integrating theory, language, and lived experience, this contribution demonstrates that career guidance, like all forms of community engagement, is most powerful when it is relational and contextual, affirming learners' dignity and agency while reimagining psychology education as a socially responsive practice.

The fifth paper, 'South–South Networks Catalysing Social Responsibility in Higher Education', by **David Monk** (Gulu University), **Irma Alicia Flores-Hinojos** (University of Los Andes) and **Mahazan Abdul Mutalib** (Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia), expands the collection's geographic and conceptual horizons by situating community engagement within transnational networks of epistemic justice. Anchored in the Knowledge for Change (K4C) Global Consortium, a Global South-led initiative in community-based participatory research, the authors reflect on their experiences establishing regional training centres in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Through narrative inquiry, they reveal how collaboration, reciprocity, and relational learning challenge the 'danger of a single story' in global development discourse. These regional centres function as hubs for epistemic justice, advancing participatory methodologies that honour Indigenous and local knowledges while cultivating new generations of socially responsible researchers. By fostering South–South solidarity, this work demonstrates universities as globally connected yet locally grounded communities of practice, reclaiming knowledge production as a collective act.

In the final contribution, 'Carefully Navigating the Messiness of Community-Engaged Research', **Nyx McLean** argues that the inevitable complexities and contradictions of engaged research are not signs of failure but vital sources of insight. Drawing on feminist internet research projects within the Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN), McLean illustrates how grappling with positionality, intra-community tensions, ethical dilemmas, and shifting research questions can deepen reflexivity and strengthen the rigour of engaged scholarship. The paper frames "messiness" as an ethical and methodological resource, calling for researchers to cultivate reflexive practice, communities of practice, and an ethic of care that holds space for discomfort while ensuring accountability. In foregrounding care, relationality and reflexivity, McLean invites researchers to embrace the complexities that animate engaged research.

A lesson that emerges throughout these contributions is that community engagement, in its multifaceted forms, is less about perfection than it is about persistence. Justice and community development, in this framing, are not singular, complete, or linear. Instead,

it is through these imperfect but meaningful and sustained connections that African higher education honours its transformative promise. By embracing place, relationality and solidarity, the community engagement mission of higher education affirms that the purpose of universities is not only to (co-)produce and share knowledges but is about building the relationships that make these knowledges instruments for social change.

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The African Knowledge Production Incubators: Our Story of Doing Research the African Way

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Abstract

This paper addresses the enduring challenge of Eurocentric curricula in higher education, specifically detailing an initiative by African social work scholars to decolonise the social work curriculum. The African Knowledge Production Incubators (AKPI) project, stemming from Nelson Mandela University, University of KwaZulu Natal, Wits University, and Stellenbosch University, adopted a Participatory Action Learning Action Research (PALAR) methodology, inherently democratic and decolonial. Leveraging Zavala's (2016) decolonial framework, the project established 'incubation' spaces where we came together to share and co-create our African lived experiences through storytelling, collective sense-making, and reclaiming our narratives. This process fostered critical consciousness, personal cognitive liberation, and a clear embrace of Afrocentric perspectives, involving postgraduate students in similar processes in their own research. The project foregrounds the decolonisation of self, curriculum and research, demonstrating how storytelling, aligned with PALAR, can achieve decolonial outcomes within social work education. It aims to catalyse thoughtful conversations on integrating African selves within community, curriculum, and scientific inquiry.

Keywords: *African Knowledge Production, incubation, decolonisation, social work education, storytelling, Participatory Action Learning Action Research*

Introduction

The African Knowledge Production Incubators (AKPI) project was born of restlessness relating to a need for transformation in social work education and a desire to take action (Mbembe, 2016). The project was proposed to the National Research Foundation in the Competitive Support for Unrated Researchers stream in 2020 and accepted (Grant number 129384), with the following research question: What are academics' experiences of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) curriculum and their own contributions to indigenous knowledge production? This article details the Participatory Action Learning Action Research (PALAR) methodology (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Reason & Bradbury, 2008) and demonstrates the process of engaged research. Formal ethical approval was obtained from Nelson Mandela University (H21-HEA-SDP-001). The AKPI project is based on collective sharing and co-creation of African lived experiences (Chilisa, 2020) from six social work academics originally across five South African universities: Nelson Mandela University, University of the Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch University, University of Fort Hare, and University of KwaZulu-Natal, all of whom were granted permission from their universities to participate in this study. The project is designed around the metaphor of incubating, whereby participants spend time in a 'warm, safe space' nourishing themselves by placing their experiences of being raised as African children under the spotlight.

Transformation of the academic self is a natural result of compassionate, affirmative and critical self-reflection (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). It is a crucial first step in decolonial work, particularly pertaining to transforming social work knowledge, education, and curriculum (Higgs, 2012). Self-reflection enhances conscientisation by challenging one's own thinking regarding technocratic academic practices emanating from Western conditioning, thus resulting in shifts in mindset (Mbembe, 2016). Curriculum transformation speaks to breaking down Western knowledges as central ideals (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

The major findings from the AKPI project point towards curriculum transformation in the following way: redesigning educational content that is evidence-based, which for African knowledges includes the lived experiences of all who are involved in learning, teaching, and research (Chilisa, 2020). The findings also underline the following necessary inclusions: authentic module content which centres student knowledges, community and academics' experiences, and challenges as well as structural determinants of such lived experiences. Inviting and documenting ancestral and cultural wisdoms pertaining to problem solving, and beginning to understand the centrality of the spiritual world as underpinning African living were further found to be key drivers of a decolonial curriculum.

The AKPI project is thus situated at the intersection of personal narrative, student activism, and scholarly innovation. It emerges from the recognition that decolonisation is not only about curriculum reform but also about the transformation of self and reclaiming of epistemic agency. In this project, decolonisation extends beyond mere rejection of the unilateral dominance of Western knowledge. Drawing from scholars like Maldonado-Torres (2007), Mbembe (2016), Mignolo (2007), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

(1986), decolonisation is understood as an ongoing process of epistemic reorientation that recognises the plurality of knowledges and legitimises diverse voices. Within this framework, knowledge production becomes a collaborative process in which local perspectives and experiences coexist alongside, rather than below, Western paradigms. Decolonisation is not a new order that seeks to replace the Western with the African, but rather a relational process that repositions Africa at the centre of discourse and practice (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). It further calls for the co-existence of diverse knowledge systems, including Eurocentric frameworks, while promoting culturally sensitive and contextually relevant practices that respond to societal realities (Coates et al., 2013; Tamburro, 2013; Smit & Nathane, 2018; Qalinge & Van Breda, 2019).

By foregrounding storytelling, healing, and collective meaning-making, the project demonstrates that knowledge production is not a neutral or abstract endeavour but a deeply relational and political process. It challenges the dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies and asserts the legitimacy of African perspectives in shaping curricula, research practices, and the very purpose of higher education. It highlights how personal histories intersect with collective struggles, the structural barriers that impede change, and the transformative possibilities that emerge when academics and students work collaboratively toward epistemic justice. Because African voices have long been silenced, we use pronouns such as 'I', 'we' and 'us' with the intention to claim our narratives.

Context

Everything begins with the self and with those who came before us. Our identities, experiences, and ways of knowing are shaped not only by family and community but also by the formal education system – a system historically not designed by, or for, people of colour. This system, rooted in colonial legacies, requires us to assimilate knowledge constructs that bear little resonance with our lived realities. In turn, these constructs are often transmitted as values to subsequent generations, resulting in a cycle where, consciously or unconsciously, we begin to resemble the employers and oppressors of our parents and grandparents. As Mbembe (2016) reminds us, colonial education was not only about transmitting knowledge but also about producing compliant subjects, disciplined to reproduce the logic of empire.

As Nevashnee Perumal, I situate myself within this historical trajectory as a fourth-generation South African of South Indian indenture origin, whose profession is social work and whose current role is within academia (Perumal et al., 2023). My positionality is significant: as an academic, I work in a 'thinking space', a university, where thoughts ought to be transformed into action that advances the public good (Matsiliza, 2022). Yet, during the #FeesMustFall (FMF) student movements, my own restlessness intensified. The protests, ignited by students demanding free, decolonised education, underscored for me the urgency of disrupting the epistemic injustices embedded in higher education. The African Knowledge Production Incubators (AKPI) project was born out of this restlessness,

catalysed by the recognition that change begins with collective efforts to reimagine knowledge (Perumal et al., 2024).

The AKPI project created safe academic spaces for like-minded, like-hearted, and like-spirited academics and postgraduate students who shared a deep desire to decolonise and indigenise the social work curriculum. This process began with the most fundamental of human practices: storytelling. Storytelling became a means to reflect on and process the pain endured as marginalised people during apartheid and in post-democratic South Africa. For the teller, stories offer catharsis and self-reflection; for the listener, they provoke imagination, curiosity, and empathy. By narrating our experiences and engaging in reciprocal listening, we collectively attached meaning to shared resonances. These meanings were documented and distilled into common themes that provided the foundations for the indigenous knowledge we sought to produce – and the colonised knowledge we aimed to untangle. Storytelling, as Zavala (2016) argues, is a decolonial strategy that affirms the multiplicity of voices and ways of knowing, resisting the silencing effects of Eurocentric epistemologies.

The question arises: What sparked this project? The origins are deeply personal. As a child of the Group Areas Act, my upbringing was sheltered, geographically restricted, and framed by structural inequalities. During the FMF student protests which unfolded in 2015 and 2016, heralding a call and demand for free decolonised education across universities in South Africa (Nathane & Harms-Smith, 2017), I became acutely aware of the severity of institutionalised injustices perpetuated against students. Their demands for free, decolonised education resonated with my own educational journey. Yet I had not previously recognised the extent to which I too had been subjected to similar epistemic violence. In my lower-middle-class household, the single rule was clear: my father would take out loans to fund my education, and my responsibility was to pass, secure employment, and repay the debt. Within this framework, I had not paused to question whose knowledge I was consuming, or whether it spoke to the realities of my community.

Although scholars and students have historically called for transformation in higher education, these critical post-democratic protests revealed that students were being subjected to curricula that centred knowledge from distant countries and contexts that appeared only on maps, yet whose epistemologies dominated South African classrooms. These imported knowledges were often disconnected from local realities, and, paradoxically, were implicated in the very socio-economic challenges facing the African continent. Students were expected to learn about 'other people's problems' and adopt 'other people's solutions' while their own lived realities were rendered invisible. This mirrors what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) calls the "coloniality of knowledge," in which Africa remains positioned as a consumer of external epistemologies rather than a producer of knowledge grounded in its own histories and struggles. When students began to resist and assert their constitutional rights to free, decolonised education, they were met with intimidation, violence, and criminalisation (Langa, 2017). This systemic silencing of student voices underscored the moral imperative to act.

My initial attempt at action was through a research proposal that aimed to decolonise social work theory, skills, and practice. The proposal was rejected at institutional level. Although I have since blocked out the specific reasons given, I vividly remember the impact of the rejection: a profound sense of weakness, despondency, and defeat. I abandoned the idea at that moment, but the deep threads of social justice remained restless within me, persistently pulling at my conscience.

The opportunity to reignite this vision arose when the National Research Foundation (NRF) issued a funding call that foregrounded developmental research. I cautiously revisited my earlier proposal, but this time reframed it as a collaborative project. Drawing on the strength of meaningful collegial relationships, I engaged scholars strategically positioned at different universities across South Africa, including the University of Fort Hare, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Stellenbosch University, and the University of the Witwatersrand. The latter three universities span the continuum of privilege in the South African higher education landscape, enabling the project to engage across diverse contexts of resource access and institutional culture. This aligns with Santos's (2014) call for an *ecology of knowledges* – a recognition that knowledge is plural, situated, and enriched through dialogue across contexts of privilege and marginalisation.

At the core of this project was a team of committed academics, each of whom was expected to mentor at least one postgraduate student. Laterally, the project sought to extend its reach by initiating incubators within each participant's academic department, thereby encouraging departmental colleagues to engage with decolonial conversations. This layered design ensured that the project was not limited to isolated individuals but instead seeded change at multiple levels: personal, interpersonal, departmental, institutional, and across institutions.

The NRF approved the proposal (NRF CSUR grant numbers 129384), and institutional ethical clearance was subsequently granted (H21-HEA-SDP-001). What had once been rejected was now formally recognised and resourced. For the project team, this moment marked a symbolic 'once upon a time', the beginning of a new story that connected personal histories, collective struggles, and academic praxis. It affirmed that resistance and persistence are essential to decolonial scholarship and that rejection does not signify the end of possibility but may catalyse new and more resilient beginnings. The following sections outline the conceptual foundations of the project, the methodological choices that shaped its implementation, and the insights gained from its early phases of incubation. In doing so, we contribute to ongoing conversations about decolonisation, indigenisation, and the urgent task of reimagining higher education for the public good.

Research Methodology

This qualitative research study followed a Participatory Action Learning Action Research (PALAR) methodology. As a genre of action research, PALAR was a natural fit for the AKPI research journey, since it is a transformative method that is democratic and decolonial in

its design. Zuber-Skerrit (2011) proposes that PALAR is well-suited to address complex problems, especially those that advance a social justice agenda. Our agenda (and the resistance received to its launch), is clear from the description Nevashnee Perumal offers in the previous section.

Zuber-Skerritt (2018, p. 515) defines PALAR as "a special kind of action research that integrates various concepts and processes, including lifelong learning, collaborative action learning, participatory action research, and action leadership." In relation to the AKPI project, it became apparent that the PALAR method was suitable for decolonial educational engagement, where hierarchy and imposed knowledge systems are being challenged and dismantled. Consequently, PALAR became instrumental to co-generate knowledge and facilitate meaningful transformation across educational spaces. Applying PALAR encouraged us to take ownership of our challenges and devise a means to resolve them through the combined processes of action research (AR), using action learning (AL) and participatory action research (PAR) (Zuber-Skerrit, 2011).

We realised that the process of decolonisation had to start with the courageous interrogation and ultimately transformation of the self, as a precursor to the transformation of the curriculum and our respective academic spaces (Race et al., 2022). This approach concurs with the ontology of participative reality, characteristic of PALAR. We therefore invested a significant amount of time in self-reflexivity, which required journeying through our concrete experiences and the critical reflections on these experiences. Self-reflexivity, a critical data generation technique in PALAR, became a daily mantra of the AKPI co-researchers and culminated in personalised printed journals and video recordings of our heritage. Reflecting on our personal experiences required plenty of self-compassion. Neff (2021) describes self-reflexivity (inherent to self-compassion) as a process of acknowledging and accepting one's pain as instrumental in making a U-turn to the self.

Since PALAR has a deeply relational ontology, our data generation methods included having intentional and rigorous engagements through storytelling (Zavala, 2016). All our engagements centred around a particular focus area, where each of our critical subjectivities could be heard and critiqued. This dialectical epistemology became the launching pad for collaborative learning, unlearning and relearning. For me, Veonna Goliath, this involved unlearning the demonisation of the Khoisan ritual of "trance states" (Minguzzi, 2025). This iterative examination of practice included planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Zuber-Skerrit, 2011), a process that facilitated the integration of theory, praxis, research, and action. We acknowledge the limitation of excluding undergraduate students and broader community voices from this process, however, deliberately decided to delineate our focus, as this first incubation unmasked a lot of painful, internalised marginalisations, which we knew required an immersive, slower process. We decided that as we deepen the conversation with the delineated sample groups, we would learn the process of how to widen the scope and expand the sample groups, which is a risk mitigation approach and part of the accountability of researchers (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

The research process is described in more detail below, using the PALAR 'donut' model (Figure 1) proposed by Zuber-Skerrit (2011).
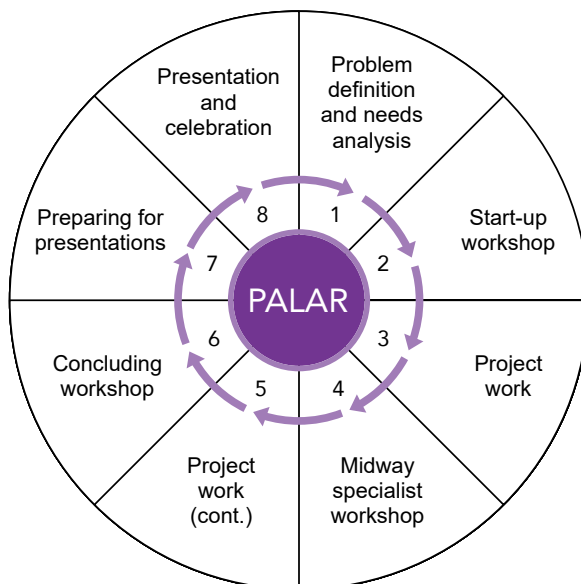
Figure 1: PALAR donut model (Zuber-Skerrit)

The process encompasses eight cycles, which ensued with the initial problem definition and needs analysis (*described in the introduction*) followed by the start-up workshop in Gqeberha, where the six core team members of AKPI formed what is known in action research as the Action Learning Set (ALS) (Zuber-Skerrit, 2011). The dialogical and dialectical engagement was the primary data generation method. We converged around the shared vision to learn how to centre African knowledge in our social work curriculum so that our students could learn how to render unprejudiced, context-specific social work services.

Each of these soulful engagements directed us to the next steps in the cyclical journey. The reflection during the iterative cycles of knowledge engagement alerted us to the exclusion of student voices, thus activating the authentic transformative action (Hunter et al., 2013) of inviting postgraduate students whose work aligned with the vision of the AKPI project. This stimulated the next cycle of experimental learning at the Gauteng and Gqeberha international incubations together with the six postgraduate students, which accelerated action leadership (Zuber-Skerrit, 2011). The subsequent cycles of action are reflected in the project timeline in Table 1 in the article. Our engagements with the colleagues in South India are also presented through our first person reflection, in accordance with our REC-H clearance conditions. The critical reflections on each of the data generation cycles were consistently and continuously coded because the cyclical process of

generating and analysing data is interlinked, and reflection is integrated into every data-generation session.

The multiple sources of data were also triangulated through engagements in the ALS, self-reflexivity, personal journaling, and photostory books. When the postgraduate students became part of the second ALS, it became critical for the core team of academics to ensure that our voices were not dominating; that we remained accountable in our supervisee-supervisor relationship, in addition to being co-researchers in the AKPI project. We engaged in regular member checking to check for potential biases and reflecting on our different roles (Savenye & Robinson, 2011). One of the main challenges we encountered was balancing the complexity of our academic roles, especially being from five different universities, as our academic calendars were seldom synchronised. This also necessitated robust and frank discussions where compassionate accountability checks allowed a natural reconnection with the soul of the AKPI journey. Each of the data generation cycles and the meaning-making from these processes is described in the story section of the article.

Conceptual Framework: Decolonial Education

Zavala's conception of decolonial education strategies is instrumental in the area of Participatory Action Research (PAR), and by extension, in PALAR (Zavala, 2013; 2016). The key notion in his assertion is that decolonising research strategies are less about the quest for new methods and more about the intellectual, relational, and experiential spaces that enable decolonial research to take place. The collaboration amongst the AKPI researcher/participants is testament to this notion, and this collaboration enabled and promoted counter/storytelling, remembering/naming, healing, and reclaiming, which Zavala (2016) outlines as key strategies, for interrupting dominant knowledge hierarchies and affirming the indigenous epistemologies. Zavala (2016) further describes the interlocking relationship between storytelling, naming, and reclaiming as dynamic and developmental rather than linear and foundational. Decolonial education, particularly in social work, therefore serves as a critical intervention against the ongoing influence of Eurocentric and colonial epistemologies that continue to shape global knowledge systems. We actively challenged the persistent marginalisation of our Indigenous and African knowledge systems through the AKPI project by harnessing knowledges from the ground up thereby seeking to re-center our epistemologies as legitimate in the production of knowledge (Mignolo, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

It is worth noting the significance of framing our contribution within PALAR and decolonial education as a method of research and theory as well as praxis of engagement. As Zavala (2013) alludes, over and above selecting appropriate methods, decolonial education is critical in creating institutional, communal, and political spaces where indigenous communities have real decision-making power. Notably, the decolonial strategies of telling the story of how we conducted our research, as well as how we used storytelling, naming and reclaiming to gather our data, is detailed in the sections that follow. Grounding our work

on an Afrocentric perspective, through storytelling, naming and reclaiming, we not only affirm the co-existence of multiple epistemologies, but also consciously resist the colonial influence, intending to embrace the lived experiences and communal ways of knowing. Here, we only present a brief explanation and a summary of the framework.

Counter/storytelling

The 'outsiders-within' positionality resonated amongst us as the researcher/participants because we acknowledge that our thinking does not fit into the dominant Eurocentric and Western cultures that universities are structured around. Although we are constrained by these norms, telling our stories of being raised as African children and of how we did this research is an act of resisting institutional norms. It is this border thinking, sitting as academics of colour between indigenous knowledges and colonial western knowledge in the university, that catalysed resistance in the form of practicing alternatives in our research through our real and lived experiences. Zavala (2016) describes the naming as mediated by dialogue, while this dialogue is made possible by reflections upon the lived experiences of and with colonialism in all its forms. As we engaged in group dialogues *(izimbizo)* and reflections, with other scholars and students, we emphasised raising consciousness about the impact of colonialism and coloniality in educational contexts. This awareness-raising endeavour focused on developing the ability to critically see and describe how systems of injustice continue to shape our lives today, often operating beneath our conscious awareness (Freire, 1998).

Healing

Social/collective healing and spiritual/psychological healing are two practices identified in the second decolonial strategy (Zavala, 2016). We saw this as a form of restoration of our marginalised lived experiences. Zavala clarifies that healing for indigenous communities is a collective experience. The AKPI's collective engagements through imbizos with local and global scholars, students, cultural leaders, historians and communities created healing spaces and provided support that shifted away from individualism and dependence on Western validation, thus reclaiming the power of our own epistemologies.

Reclaiming of identities and spaces

Reclaiming is described as "a strategy in decolonial education that involves recovering who people are (their cultural identities), their practices, and their relation to place (land, cosmos)" (Zavala, 2016, p. 5). Zavala also underlines that the insider-outsider position that we, as academics of colour, occupy in the university places us in an enabling position to engage in PAR research. This research method sees to it that indigenous knowledges are collectively and ethically reclaimed from communities and placed at the centre of learning and teaching. As an AKPI project team, we did this through a shared, conscious understanding of how knowledge production is rooted in specific geographies, cosmology,

and cultural landscapes, with emphasis on connections of knowledge to land, ancestry, and spiritual dimensions, to name a few (Perumal et al., 2024). It is this acknowledgement that led us to approach data generation, analysis and reporting/documenting of our experiences through a decolonial lens of storytelling in this article.

Storying the Story of Incubators: Successes and challenges

This section details the successes and challenges of the project, and its contribution to broader debates on decolonial research in Africa and beyond. Table 1 below presents a chronological overview of key milestones, from its award during the COVID-19 lockdown to subsequent incubations and conferences. During the project period, we developed artefacts in the form of a podcast detailing the realities of PALAR (*Social Work Khuluma*) as well as two photobooks using SHOWeD principles (Wang & Burris, 1997), one with our histories and collective statement of intent as the extended project team, and our journey through South India in the other.

Table 1: Chronological overview of key milestones in the NRF Competitive Support for Unrated Researchers Project

Dec 2020	NRF Competitive Support for Unrated Researchers grant awarded during COVID-19 lockdown, South Africa
Jun 2021	First core team incubation
Oct 2022	Ventana imbizo
Jan 2023	Incubation in South India
Feb 2023	Setting up home incubators in university departments
Jul 2023	Mini incubators established
Sep 2023	ASASWEI Conference imbizo
Dec 2023	International imbizos – WITS (Johannesburg) & NMU (Gqeberha)
May 2024	Rhodes University Community Engagement Conference (Grahamstown)

First Core Team Incubation

Nevashnee Perumal, Priscalia Khosa, Motlalepule Nathane, Veonna Goliath, Mbongeni Sithole, Thanduxolo Nomngcoyiya

The purpose of our first incubation, which was held in Gqeberha in June 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, was to generate data for our project's first objective viz. telling stories of our lived experiences of being African. The question of 'who is an African?' is beyond the scope of this article, however our conception is that an African varies across intellectual and political traditions, and that being African transcends biological or geographical

boundaries. Hook (2004) describes Africanness as grounded in a shared psychological and political consciousness of resistance to oppression, uniting diverse groups, who are subjected to racial, systematic and structural marginalisation. From this perspective, being African is not a visible identity but a state of consciousness. As Morgan (2020) asserts, Africanness therefore becomes a collective assertion of dignity, agency and belonging in defiance of historical silencing or negation.

We approached the first incubation with a common purpose of decolonising the social work curriculum. The imperative was to consider the lived experiences, fears, and aspirations we brought to the project. Herein, we shared stories of how we met and what drew us to each other, as well as significant moments in our upbringings, cultural heritages, how these influenced our positionality as academics, and why the AKPI project matters to us. Kovach (2009) argues that it is the responsibility of those in positions able to influence knowledge production to share and voice stories of the oppressed. Authenticity and collectivism as the AKPI team permitted a deeper connection, characterised by openness and vulnerability in sharing our stories. The sharing of stories was a powerful strategy, demonstrating our rich, inherent knowledge systems. There was a deeper appreciation of each other as holistic beings after stories were shared.

Colonial spaces like universities promote individual alienation, contradicting African societies' emphasis on collective belonging and ancestral connection. African traditions maintain that understanding one's origins is essential for future direction. In African languages the saying *if you do not know where you come from, you will not know where to go* highlights the importance of having a clear sense of our origins and lineage. As Africans, we connect with the spirit of our ancestors who carry us, and always feel their presence (Masango, 2006). During gatherings, we acknowledge them through *iingoma* (songs) and *izibongo* (praise poems), candle lighting, and conversations, so they may guide us through the journey ahead (Mvenene, 2024). These acts, according to Chen (2025), are integral in African life, rituals, and social interactions. It bears the ability to influence emotional states and physiological response.

Our stories reflected the richness in the traditions and rituals we inherited from our ancestral and local knowledge holders and wisdom bearers. There were significant intersections in our experiences, pertaining specifically to values of family orientation, social justice, and *Ubuntu*, amongst others. The physical and emotional space that the incubations afforded us enabled us the safety and warmth that was needed to learn, unlearn, and relearn, with the common vision to transform social work education. These learnings translated into guidelines for setting up home incubators in our university departments and the need to involve postgraduate students as collaborators in the project. These experiences are documented in the published article: *African knowledge production incubators: Approaching indigenous and decolonized social work from the ground up through stories of our lived experiences* (Perumal et al., 2024).

Ventana Imbizo

In a hybrid format imbizo at the 4th Ventana Conference on Latin America in October 2022, hosted by the University of York in the United Kingdom under the theme *Decolonial Dialogues from, within and beyond the Global Margins,* we were drawn by the subthemes and formats to present an online imbizo. Imbizo in isiZulu is translated to mean a community gathering called to solve pertinent community issues. Practitioners, researchers and individuals with an interest in Latin America and perspectives on the African decolonial experience were invited to facilitate workshops or present papers that question, unsettle, rethink or disobey coloniality. We all convened in Gqeberha and joined the conference online while in the same room, which allowed us to have uninterrupted connection, and which deepened our sense of togetherness as a tribe. In our project, the construct 'tribe' metaphorically represents the community of practice united by shared values and collective identity. Whilst the term 'tribe' is historically contested due to its colonial associations with primitive, territorialism and cultural othering (Gingrich, 2015), we consciously reclaim it as a construct symbolising the sense of community and shared purpose.

During an imbizo, community members sit in circles with no one being elevated but everyone being equally recognised as a contributor in the community. Everyone's voice is heard, and the circle symbolises connectedness, underpinning the African value of *Ubuntu*. In Africa, an imbizo holds great significance as a platform for honest engagements on shared interests and concerns. It allows communities to collaboratively strategise and develop sustainable solutions that advance their interests (Baloyi & Lubinga, 2017; Pahad & Esterhuyse, 2002). When conducting the imbizo, we acknowledged those who came before us, whose shoulders we are standing on. We shared a video that we created during our first incubation, of who we are and why decolonial work is important to us. In line with decolonial principles of acknowledging those who came before us, we also recognised the discomfort created by such dialogues which demand that scholars state their positionality. Hence, at every conference or imbizo, we reflected on our positionality as African scholars as well as the persistence of colonial structures, practices, and the empowerment of marginalised communities by questioning, rethinking, and disobeying coloniality through critical approaches of how we teach and conduct research. Key to the imbizo was inviting conference participants to share their experiences or views about decolonisation. The prompt questions we used to engage with participants in the imbizo were:

- Share how coloniality manifests itself in your professional practice, spaces, classroom, and academia.
- What is your contribution to decolonial/indigenous knowledge production?

During this conference we met scholar Adriana Moreno Cely, a Colombian activist, culminating in an online meeting where we co-generated knowledge of how participatory action research with indigenous communities can translate into the praxis of re-valuing

indigenous and local knowledge (Moreno Cely, 2022). This imbizo asserted that the daily dynamics of accumulation, separation and systemic oppression continue to dominate the Global South, meaning that the end of the colonies did not translate to the end of coloniality (Mashau, 2018). Knowledge from the Global South continues to be framed as inferior, unproductive, or even non-existent, while the knowledge systems of the Global North are upheld as valid, hegemonic, and universally valuable (Moreno Cely et al., 2021).

For example, some participants shared that a teacher or researcher from Latin America working in the UK must grapple with being an outsider within the academy, which resonates with Zavala's insider-outsider construct. In contexts such as Canada, the debate highlighted that inclusivity is not synonymous with decolonisation, since the latter requires more than simply including underrepresented populations. This raised critical questions about how we perpetuate decolonial thinking within our own spaces, while recognising that we may unintentionally remain complicit in sustaining colonial agendas.

Incubation in South India

In pursuit of knowledge and insights from countries that have traversed decolonial and indigenous discourse, the AKPI team visited three universities in India in January 2023 for international symposiums. India, having been a pioneer in developing fully indigenous curricula and sharing similarities with South Africa as a 'developing' nation', presented an ideal learning ground. During the trip, interactions took place with colleagues and students at Bharathiar University (BU), Gandhigram Rural Institute (GRI), and Central University of Tamil Nadu (CUTN). There was a deep appreciation from both countries for our cultural and ethnic commonalities and diversities. The India visit culminated in a creative output in the form of a photobook entitled: *South Africa in South India: A photo journey of the African Knowledge Production Incubators*. Employing the photovoice method (Wang & Burris, 1997), our blurbs captured the meanings we ascribed to some of the moments throughout the journey in India. It was important for us to generate creative outputs, regardless of the publication status, so that our memories, forged relationships, stories exchanged and lessons learnt are captured in ways that speak to the communities we visited as well.

We gifted these photobooks to the colleagues in India for onward sharing with the communities and students with whom we engaged. Our individual reflections as documented in the photo book revealed contrasting university models between India and South Africa. Indian institutions exemplify community-engaged universities, honouring indigenous heritage through intergenerational knowledge transmission and open integration with surrounding communities. Universities serve as accessible spaces fostering patriotism, cultural celebration, and collective learning through community involvement. Conversely, South African universities remain isolated 'ivory towers' distant from community needs, reflecting colonial legacies that prioritise exclusion over transformative engagement and indigenous knowledge preservation.

Setting up Home Incubators in University Departments

Setting up home incubators in our academic departments, as an AKPI objective, was challenging. Colleagues in our home departments questioned why we embarked on this project. They wondered whether it meant we are questioning the validity of the current curriculum and claiming it is not decolonised or indigenous. Colleagues were also wondering 'what is in it for them?' if they do engage and participate in the home incubators. We rationalise these dilemmas as being rooted in Eurocentric and Western ways of knowing and doing research. As the saying goes, 'it was not a bed of roses', especially in historically white institutions.

For one of us working in a historically white institution in the Western Cape, it was difficult to have a conversation about decolonisation and indigenisation of the social work curriculum. It constantly felt as though there was a need to protect the historical roots of the department and the curriculum, almost as though it would be violating a sacred code if the department agreed to even embrace the idea of the project. Therefore, penetrating through the systems that have existed for over 100 years was no easy task. Nonetheless, we are proud of the small shifts that were observed as the project was progressing. Salient informal and individual conversations and subtle departmental discussions about the need to decolonise the curriculum, some emanating from postgraduate students' research interests, was encouraging. However, there was no outward move to begin removing the structure of western roots in its entirety.

For another one of us, in the Eastern Cape, the idea of setting up home incubators was received almost as a 'fear of the unknown' although our academic department started facilitated decolonial conversations a year before this project began. A significant observation was that the fear of colleagues to participate in the incubation could possibly have been fuelled by one of the AKPI team members also being the head of department at the time. This signalled an acute reminder of the intersectionality of one's identity with power, privilege and positionality (Weekes, 2023). We started with five (and ended with four) of nine colleagues who joined the monthly lunch hour conversations where we began by telling stories of how our families shaped our identities based on the apartheid government's rules, how we accessed various educational spaces, the pain of poverty, addiction, indenture, and the awareness of being White and Afrikaans speaking. These conversations enabled us to better understand why we do what we do as colleagues, in our classrooms, in our courses, in our social events and staff meetings resulting in the beginning of decolonial transitions in our department.

In a third academic department in KwaZulu-Natal, the conversations around decoloniality had long been happening and it was already incorporated into the department's research meetings. The department called these conversations *Isivivane* and hosted Nevashnee twice to engage with colleagues, postgraduate students, and members of other departments in the faculty. The feeling of warmth, belonging, purpose and hope permeated these engagements with a deep resolve that unshackling ourselves from coloniality is possible as a collective.

In the fourth academic department, which is in Gauteng, there was one introductory incubation held. There was extensive work done to follow the internal university process of inviting academics to participate in the session. While academics were all invited, the session was attended mainly by a few academics who were new to the department, and the AKPI project team members joined online. The conversations started with a provocation called 'the sayings of the wise': academics were invited to share indigenous sayings and proverbs shared by elders in their families. The hybrid conversations revolved around decolonising the adoption and child protection processes in South African families by tapping into indigenous knowledge systems practiced by African societies. Childrearing and child protection practices from different cultural groups were shared, and it was evident that much of this rich knowledge is known and practiced widely in African societies. The session was concluded with sharing of homecooked African cuisine that was prepared by Motlalepule at her home. Academics who did not join the session were welcomed to share a meal and further conversations on indigenous knowledge family practices ensued.

We problematise the traditional ways of being in academia, which emphasise the careerist approach driven by a neo-liberal capitalist agenda (Dlamini, 2019; Sewpaul, 2024) in the following ways. Firstly, the competitive 'publish or perish' ideal that does not promote a collaborative research approach among academics. Challenges to setting up home incubators bore testament to this by the reluctance of academic staff members to be part of the project, as there was a belief that they would be contributing to the development of others. This thinking is counterproductive in the broader vision of indigenous knowledge production. Therefore, all the AKPI outputs are collective and collaborative, disrupting systems of subsidy accumulation as single author in one institution only.

Postgraduate Reflections on Mini Incubators

Nkqubela Aphiwe Ntloko, Dzunisani Euginea Baloyi, Crucial Mutambu, Tinstwalo Novela, Brian Muvhali, Nokwanda Myende

As postgraduate students, our involvement in the mini incubators imbizo enriched democratic participation, aligning with the PALAR outcomes of democracy and emancipation (Wood, 2019; Kearney et al., 2013). The process was devoid of power imbalances among the co-researchers, no head or tail as everyone assumed equal responsibility. Thinking minds and compassionate hearts created an inclusive space where everyone felt respected and worthy. Experiences, wisdom, and ideas were heard and sharpened with keen interest. Our senses were awakened to our Africanness, the injustices and opportunities to address them inspired us to contribute African solutions to African problems; to reclaim Africa for Africans and the diaspora. The imbizo levelled power, enhanced collaboration, and forged partnerships, challenging the ingrained hierarchy of academic knowledge production. Scholars agree that its participatory, robust, and thorough nature also makes it a relevant data generating tool (Baloyi & Lubinga, 2017; Mathangu, 2010).

Furthermore, we fostered empowerment, knowledge exchange (*umrhabuliso*), and realised Ubuntu through communalism, promoting African identity and values. Our experiences in this academic project showed Ubuntu transcending rhetoric and standing as a lived ethic. Instead of being flattened into sameness, we flourish individually through academic and psychosocial support that endures in our family-like/tribe and bond as the AKPI team. Academic prefixes such as Professor, Doctor, were set aside and our given names used to address and engage each other. In African culture, naming is deeply sacred, it carries historical significance in shaping identity (Madima, 2024). Therefore, addressing each other by our first names or relationship eg. sister, elder, brother, etc. was affirming their meanings, lineage, and purpose. Names in Africa are foretelling, and intrinsically tied to spirituality, ancestry, identity, and social structure meant to heal the community (Kanu, 2019). A person's name is considered to be the person's soul possessing celestial powers and embodying spirit (Olatunji et al., 2015). We formed strong bonds and organic relationships, something rare in academia where power hierarchies often position senior professionals above students who are typically seen as recipients of empowerment and knowledge.

Our interconnections have nurtured our strength to navigate professional and personal life demands, further affirming African knowledge as scientific, significant, and equal to other knowledges (Alem, 2019; Hountondji, 2009). An imbizo provided the practical framework of collaborative expression, while Ubuntu made us feel at home. The essence of Ubuntu could not have been fully captured using English alone. A significant milestone in the mini-incubator was the photobook creation, whereby we comfortably introduced ourselves in our mother tongue, without pressure to translate it to western standards of academia. Centralising and integrating African languages was paramount, as language embodies culture, identity, and indigenous knowledge. Thus the incubator challenged the assumption that intelligence is measured by mastery of a dominant or foreign language, particularly when so much of academic production relies on borrowed linguistic systems, like English, that reproduce hierarchies of knowledge value.

This second unpublished photobook, *Our stories of being raised as African children in South Africa*, challenges historical marginalisation and fosters decolonial scholarship (Segalo & Cakata, 2017; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). Coming together reminded us that our stories are interconnected and original, making them worthy of publication. The experience fostered belonging through Ubuntu, family, and community, while providing an opportunity to address our collective frustrations and explore sustainable solutions to our daily challenges as social workers.

Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) Imbizo

As a lateral and vertical project, the AKPI project aimed towards inclusion of academic departments, postgraduate students, and practitioners as key drivers of decoloniality. At the 2023 ASASWEI conference, we requested to present an imbizo with an audience of

academics, students and practitioners instead of a group podium didactic presentation. In keeping with the theme of the conference pertaining to natural disasters and pandemics, we based the imbizo using Zavala's storytelling design and deliberated on what healing strategies were used and found useful for communities during disasters and pandemics. This well-attended session started with brief inputs from project members, but the entire session was audience-led, which created an equalising platform (Santos, 2014; Zuber-Skerritt, Wood & Kearney, 2020). The topic of disasters and pandemics resonated with the audience since the conference was held in KwaZulu-Natal province, a province affected by natural disasters. The atmosphere was charged and the session ended with a song led by the audience which continued to the main plenary session, where the whole conference joined in demonstrating the power of iingoma from the ground up.

International Imbizos in South Africa

Following the work done with academics in our home departments, postgraduate students, and the practitioners, the project culminated by hosting two international imbizos on South African soil; one in Gauteng and the other in Gqeberha. Postgraduate students of the core incubator team as well as our home incubator colleagues attended. We intentionally lined up Sister Hilaria Soundari, who is a Catholic sister working at Gandhigram Rural Institute, Marisol Sanchez, an ex-academic from Ecuador and now yoga instructor and subsistence farmer, Brian Mogaki, a historian and a senior tour guide at the WITS Origins Centre, and Chief Edmund Stuurman, a chief of the Khoisan people in Gqeberha. We are of the view that the spirit of our ancestors, as well as the deepening of our intention in this project through the varied incubations, assisted us to curate this line up.

We were clear that we wished to create opportunities to learn from people who navigated cultures, spirituality, community education, quests for social justice, theories of life before colonisation and apartheid, and ancestral wisdoms. We revelled in the vernacular terms such as *iingoma* (isiZulu term meaning 'songs'), *intlalontle* (isiXhosa term meaning 'living well'), and *sumak kawsa*i (Kwicha term meaning 'life in harmony'). All these resonate with the core purpose of social work. We spoke about the processes and strategies during imbizos in communities where the calabash holding *amahewu/umqomboti* (traditional drink) is passed around the circle of people without discrimination for all to partake of. We realised that joint problem solving begins with equalising power (Damons & Wood, 2020), all voices are heard (men, women, non-gender conforming people, children, youth and the elderly) as we have attempted in the AKPI project.

Sister Hilaria Soundari sensitised us to the street corner model of engaging with youth, which translates into working in the places where the people who require help are situated. She further spoke about the honeybee model of social interactions, meaning to take the 'best nectar' from any situation. Marisol Sanchez demonstrated, through a welcoming ritual, how to acknowledge the earth, water, wind, and fire, showing similarities to our indigenous cultures and traditions. Chief Stuurman showed us the presence of an ancestor

in full human form in a family photograph, which was unexplainable by the family since the person had long passed. Brian Mogaki explained how the first nations in our country had traversed spirituality through the reverence of the eland antelope and how men and women played equal parts in navigating the spirit world.

We concluded the imbizos with an engaged exhibition of our photobook, where everyone could affirm as well as clarify indigenous practices that each of us outlined in our photostories. As described by Perumal et al. (2024), as Africans we express our feelings through how we experience them in our bodies, and therefore after the international imbizos 'our hearts were full and our heads were spinning' (in a transformative way). Additionally, the international imbizos fostered collective sense-making and active reclamation of indigenous narratives, including epistemological diversity, power equalisation and cultural integration. Ultimately, the process aimed to achieve the decolonisation of self, curriculum, and research, leading to transformative experiences.

Limitations

Having a sample consisting of academics with limited student inclusion as research participants restricted the generalisability of the findings to broader civic partners. However, the generated findings serve as a catalyst for change, which becomes a medium through which civic community voices can be invited when reflecting on the findings of the study. We were intentional about using research methods that are congruent with our indigenous research approaches, and used the reflexive cycles as the triangulation checks, referred to as "process validity in action research" (Damons & Wood, 2020).

Conclusions and Way Forward

The AKPI project was established as a collaborative space to nurture decolonial, contextually grounded forms of scholarship and to challenge dominant hierarchies of knowledge production in social work education. It is concluded that this project makes a three-fold scholarly contribution. Firstly, it positions the AKPI model as a novel, scalable, and multi-institutional framework that advances decolonial collaboration, thus providing a significant contribution to decolonial praxis. Secondly, it highlights the methodological innovation demonstrated through the integration of Participatory Action Learning Action Research (PALAR) with Zavala's decolonial constructs: storytelling, healing and reclaiming, thereby establishing a rigorous methodology for generating African-centred knowledge. Thirdly, the theoretical contribution is made by providing empirical evidence affirming that the 'decolonisation of the self' encompassing critical consciousness and cognitive liberation, is a foundational precursor essential for meaningful curriculum and institutional transformation.

Key lessons applicable beyond the immediate context include recognising storytelling as a legitimate, emancipatory, and culturally relevant data generation tool in non-Western

settings, emphasising critical self-reflection as imperative for transformative change, and valuing Participatory Action Learning as an inclusive, democratic approach to complex, cross-institutional problem-solving in the Global South. We further acknowledge the potential that this project has to expand the understanding of engaged scholarship across disciplines, so as to realise epistemic justice. As the project team, we respectfully suggest the following future actions:

1. Adopt Decolonial and Collaborative Methodologies

Implement PALAR methodology to ensure a democratic, caring, and collaborative process for co-creating knowledge (Wood & Zuber-Skerrit, 2013). This approach emphasises shared power and a 'ground up' development of curriculum content, thereby affirming African knowledge as scientific and significant, equal to other global knowledges (Alem, 2019; Hountondji, 2009).

2. Centre African Identity and Relationality

Establish dedicated 'incubation spaces' in the form of a global institute that would encourage self-introspection, deep connection, and vulnerability through shared storytelling to prevent the alienation often found in colonial academic settings. These spaces should be grounded in the lived ethic of Ubuntu, which supports individual flourishing within a collective and fostering "relationship-centred resilience" (Anofuechi & Klaasen, 2024; Van Breda, 2019).

3. Foreground Indigenous Knowledge Practices

Acknowledge ancestral roots and historical strength by foregrounding African cultural practices into scholarly gatherings, such as using iingoma (songs) and izibongo (praise poems) (Chen, 2025; Mvenene, 2024). This process facilitates critical consciousness, cognitive liberation, and a reclaiming of narratives that connect scholars to their past for future guidance (Masango, 2006).

4. Disrupt Neo-Liberal Academic Norms

Challenge competitive practices like the 'publish or perish' mantra and extractionist research. Prioritise collaborative knowledge production for collective ownership and jointly planning social interventions based on research findings together with marginalised communities. This would move away from individualistic, careerist approaches.

Acknowledgment

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Just Anchor Institutions:
A Case Study of a University Promoting Inclusive Economic Growth

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Abstract

The concept of a just anchor institution emphasises the obligation of higher education institutions (HEIs) to contribute holistically to advance social justice in the local communities in which they are anchored, and can serve as a framework for HEI community engagement. Furthermore, within the higher education sector, community engagement initiatives can be positioned to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including those related to economic growth. SDG 8, in particular, is focused on decent work and economic growth.

This paper explains how a South African university introduced a programme to promote inclusive economic growth through enterprise development and supplier development, utilising existing legislative frameworks to achieve this goal. The Masakhe Enterprise and Supplier Development Programme at Rhodes University encompasses economic, infrastructural, and educational components.

A justice perspective on the concept of an anchor institution is used to analyse the project and the broader role of the Community Engagement Division, focusing on principles of creating shared value, accessibility, visibility, and empowerment.

Data collection methods included interviews and documentation related to the project. A content analysis approach was used to analyse the data. The main findings of the study highlight the value of a just anchor institution framework for the holistic development of local communities in realising the SDGs. The case study also highlights the significance of a sustained relationship between the anchor institution and its local community, as well as how broad-based black empowerment legislation can serve as a source of funding for the inclusive economic development of small enterprises.

Keywords: *anchor institution, higher education, Sustainable Development Goals, enterprise development*

Introduction

As societies grapple with multifaceted environmental, social, and economic challenges, collaborative, trans-sector, and grassroots interventions and practices have been proposed as key drivers for sustainable development (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012). On a global scale, the United Nations (UN) has developed a plan of action comprising 17 interlinked Sustainable Development Goals and targets to be achieved by 2030 (UN General Assembly, 2015). The importance of universities' contributions to the realisation of the SDGs is recognised (Kinol et al., 2023; World Economic Forum, 2025), and the SDGs are also relevant to universities as they can provide a means of framing priorities to ensure the university's goals are locally responsive and globally engaged, and for contributions to be formally recognised and measured (Bell, 2019). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), such as universities, are vital to achieving the SDGs due to their role in "human formation, knowledge production and innovation" (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021, p. 1). Through their education, research, outreach, campus operations and the campus experiences they provide, universities can potentially impact SDG areas such as the economy, societal challenges, the natural environment, policies, culture, and demographics (Findler et al., 2019). While there is an expectation that HEIs can and should contribute to realising the SDGs, the reality is that relatively few are doing so (Leal Filho et al., 2023), or at least, do not draw explicitly on the SDGs to shape their community engagement (CE) policy and practice (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021).

In South Africa, the public good orientation of universities is mandated in national legislation (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013; South African Government Department of Education, 1997). The development of Higher Education Community Engagement (HECE) in South Africa has progressed through key milestones, including the White Paper 3 (DoE, 1997), the Higher Education Amendment Act (DoE, 1998), the National Plan for Higher Education (DoE, 2001), and the HEQC founding document (2001), establishing CE as a core university function. Further initiatives, such as the 2006 Bantry Bay Conference and the 2010 Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP), consolidated its role in promoting transformation, sustainability and social responsiveness in South African universities.

At the same time, community engagement is not formally defined; there are no standardised measures of quality assurance or evaluation, and it is unfunded (Bank, 2018). Challenges to strategising and implementing CE activities in HEIs include some conceptual ambiguity with no shared understanding of what CE entails (Netshandama, 2023). There is also ideological resistance from some academics and leaders who often view CE as peripheral or a threat to academic autonomy, which limits its institutionalisation (Mohale, 2023; Saidi, 2023). Furthermore, structural and financial constraints, including limited funding, a lack of incentives, and competing priorities such as global rankings, hinder the implementation of CE initiatives (Dube and Hendricks, 2023; Vally, 2023). Netshandama (2023) critically examines the challenges and necessity of monitoring and evaluating

(M&E) community engagement (CE) in South African universities, arguing that while M&E is vital for accountability and learning, it faces deep conceptual and practical barriers. She advocates for a reflective, participatory, and decolonial approach to impact assessment that prioritises inclusivity, transformation and epistemic justice.

To overcome these challenges, universities are adopting socially innovative approaches to align their activities with both local needs and global challenges. For example, universities are key contributors to the local economy and can leverage their economic power to drive community engagement (Yamamura & Roth, 2023; Mbah, 2019). This paper focuses on a programme by a South African university that adopted a holistic approach to addressing inclusive economic growth, utilising existing legislative frameworks to achieve this goal.

Furthermore, this programme is analysed from the perspective of the university as a just anchor institution, which is introduced next. Thereafter, the aim and objectives of the paper are stated, followed by a discussion on the research methods employed. This is followed by the findings, which present the background to the programme, the role of community engagement in positioning the University as an anchor institution, the details of the project's formation and operation, and its outputs and outcomes. This is followed by a discussion of the positioning of community engagement for sustainability in general and inclusive economic growth in particular.

Anchor Institutions

The concept of an anchor institution refers to institutions that are rooted within a particular locality due to their physical investments and/or mission (Ehlenz, 2016). These institutions have a significant economic and social impact, providing jobs and services, and often facilitating innovation, education, and cultural activities. Given their prominence as employers and landowners, the future of the institution and city are intertwined, prompting the institution to intervene in the development and revitalisation of the community (Ehlenz, 2016; Rodin, 2005). The concept of anchor institutions emerged in the United States of America (USA) in the 1960s in response to the impact of neoliberal policies on communities facing systemic barriers to economic growth. Assets found in the community, such as infrastructure, green spaces and individual assets, underpinned development interventions. The concept has also been applied by the United Kingdom (UK) government in development initiatives (Smallbone, Kitching and Blackburn, 2015).

Roles and Contributions of Anchor Institutions

According to Jeffrey (2025), as anchor institutions, universities can either (1) build the local community, (2) broker knowledge and/or relationships, (3) serve as beacons to draw people to their site or point to a desired future, and (4) operate as a base for community engagement. The literature on anchor institutions offers examples of a diverse range of initiatives, with limited consensus on a common language to describe or research the

initiatives being undertaken (Garton, 2021). Despite the wide range of initiatives, anchor institutions frequently adopt collective impact initiatives (Kania & Kramer, 2011) or a collective impact approach, whereby they attempt to "align the goals, priorities, strategies and resources of the separate organizations in order to drive change simultaneously" (Allen et al., 2017, p. 3). By leveraging their resources and influence, and through collaboration, anchor institutions can drive regional growth, improve quality of life, and help address local challenges. In this way, universities can contribute to development by helping to design institutional arrangements that involve different strategies, such as organising sufficient resources and then mobilising these resources and power to enact the necessary institutional changes (Kumari et al., 2020).

The Initiative for a Competitive Inner City (ICIC) has identified four categories of anchor institution roles, namely: core institutional roles, economic roles, physical roles, and public purpose roles, with strategies for economic development including local procurement, employment, workforce development, business incubation and arts and cultural development (Ehlenz, 2018). These roles explain how anchor institutions in urban or rural communities can have a meaningful impact on disadvantaged areas to stimulate community revitalisation (Ehlenz, 2018). The framework focuses primarily on the economic impact of anchor institutions within inner cities or disadvantaged areas. It identifies seven key areas through which these institutions can stimulate community revitalisation. These areas are (1) purchasing goods and services, (2) employment, (3) developing real estate, (4) creating business incubators, (5) advising businesses and building networks, (6) workforce development, and (7) creating an enabling environment for skills development through co-curriculum development, internships and entrepreneurial training opportunities, as well as the attraction of venture capital.

Universities as Anchor Institutions

Universities and hospitals are most frequently cited as examples of anchor institutions (Garton, 2021). Early models of universities as anchor institutions emerged in the USA in response to the transformational role being adopted by inner-city universities (Bank, 2018). The University of Pennsylvania is often showcased as an example of a university recognising its anchor institution status, and it has had, over several decades, an impactful intervention in its surrounding neighbourhoods (Rodin, 2005). In other examples, the US land-grant colleges began to connect universities with regional economies and practical education. Metropolitan universities in the UK, particularly those located in depressed inner-city areas, also contributed to the development of the concept (Bank, 2018).

Anchor university models continued to evolve, incorporating urban renewal in the mid-20th century and embracing partnerships and reciprocal relationships with the communities in which they were located in the late 20th century (Perry & Villamizar-Duarte, 2018). The role of universities as anchor institutions is currently understood as a comprehensive approach that includes economic development, infrastructural

revitalisation, and the promotion of social, cultural, and democratic values. Drawing on the ICIC's model, Fongwa (2021) proposes a framework relevant to universities in the global South to act as anchors in their communities. This model emphasises holistic, historicised and contextualised development, ensuring that universities contribute to development beyond their institutional role and economic functions (Ubhayakar et al., 2017). Fongwa's framework presents a hybrid approach that captures four key roles for anchor institutions, whether in urban or rural settings, along with governing principles. Anchor universities have (1) a core institutional role, (2) an economic role, (3) an urban developer role and (4) a public good purpose. The principles include (1) establishing a clear mission and vision towards responsiveness, (2) embracing institutional partnerships, collaboration and networks, and (3) leveraging university resources and expertise for the greater community good. The model further describes the university's primary functions as an anchor, encompassing (1) providing educational services through teaching, conducting research and knowledge production, (2) acting as an innovation hub, (3) supporting human capital development within the region, and (4) nurturing business development and growth.

The implementation of the anchor institution concept has already been adopted by several South African universities as a model for community engagement (Saidi, 2021). In South Africa, universities were historically shaped by apartheid, which significantly influenced their contributions to social and economic development. Universities reinforced the inequalities within their specific regions through charity-based community development activities and by aligning their institutional, teaching and research functions with national policies of the time (Bank, 2018). In the post-apartheid era, a more traditional British university model was adopted, limiting the potential of universities to drive regional development. Instead, bodies such as the National Research Foundation were established to align and guide universities in meeting their development imperatives. The early implementation of these guidelines was particularly focused on teaching a new demographic of students, and on conducting research. However, there is a growing recognition of the need for universities to play a more active role in addressing systemic challenges in their surrounding communities through their core functions (Bell, 2019).

The Economic Contribution of Anchor Institutions

In this paper, the economic role universities can play as anchor institutions is of particular interest. The economic impact of universities can be substantial (Guerrero et al., 2015). This can take various forms, such as the wholesale transformation of institutions to become entrepreneurial universities (Corazza et al., 2024). While this idea is gaining momentum, it is still a contested concept (Garomssa, 2025). Several strategic challenges have also surfaced when implementing the change (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Klofsten et al., 2019). Other forms that the economic role of universities can take are the promotion of inclusive economic development (Dostilio, 2023) and the creation of innovation hubs (Youtie & Shapira, 2008). University research (Harris, 2021), business (Guerrieri et al., 2023) and

education programmes, including service-learning (Kebea, 2019), can also be designed to promote economic growth. Small and medium-sized enterprises have also been the focus of such economic initiatives, but relatively little research has been conducted, and that which is reported often indicates mixed success of these efforts (McCauley-Smith et al., 2022; Wang, 2021). Garton (2021) identifies four types of strategies universities have adopted based on the kind of capital they invest in, namely, financial, physical, intellectual, or human. Financial capital is most often leveraged through intervening in the housing market, prioritising procurement from local businesses, and funding community development (Garton, 2021).

The potential for anchor universities to contribute to economic growth, job creation, skills development and innovation aligns directly with the goals of SDG 8. One way the interrelatedness of the SDG goals has been represented is in the form of the 'SDGs wedding cake', with the three tiers of the cake representing the economy, society and the biosphere (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016). The focus of this paper is SDG 8, which is contained within the top economic layer of the 'SDGs wedding cake'. SDG 8 promotes "sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" (UN, 2015, p. 19). Among several concerns, it recognises the prevalence of informal jobs without social protections and the challenge of high levels of unemployment, particularly among youth, and identifies employment and income-generating programmes as important means to eradicate poverty (UN Division for Sustainable Development, 1992; UN, 2012). Furthermore, it recognises the importance of infrastructural development to support sustained economic growth, poverty eradication, and employment creation (UN, 2002).

The emphasis on place-based development, community engagement and utilising institutional resources for the benefit of the local community further supports the idea that anchor institutions play a vital role in achieving the aims of inclusive economic growth and decent work (UN General Assembly, 2015). Universities can also contribute to SDG8 by aligning knowledge and innovation policies to development objectives (Dellve et al., 2025; Kaplan, 2008).

Just Anchor Institutions and Social Justice

In this study, a social justice perspective is adopted, viewing the university as a just anchor. In creating the concept of a just anchor, O'Farrell et al. (2022, p. 2406), combine the concepts of an anchor institution with that of visibility and a civic university, and describe a just anchor as "institutions with the capacity for long-term strategies to deliver progressive social, economic and epistemic impacts, using the university as an archetype". By implication, just anchor institutions should have economic, social, and democratic impacts. This position combines the anchoring and civic (Goddard et al., 2016) roles of universities, acknowledging that transformation is needed both within universities and in the surrounding communities to strengthen a participatory culture and democratic

processes, including community participation in knowledge production (O'Farrell et al., 2022). Visibility is a central consideration for a just anchor institution, which should not only maintain a physical presence in its communities but simultaneously should be accessible to the public (O'Farrell et al., 2022). In analysing the economic activities of a just anchor institution, the following principles guide socially just activity.

The first principle is shared value. As an anchor institution, the university shares economic value to benefit the community (Ehlenz, 2016; Rodin, 2005). The idea of the creation of shared value has been defined as "the strategic process through which corporations can solve a social problem which is aligned to their value chain while pursuing economic profits" (Menghwar & Daood, 2021, p. 473). The creation of shared value also contributes to a positive reputation (Menghwar & Daood, 2021). While the concept has had its share of criticism (Crane et al., 2014; Menghwar & Daood, 2021) it is useful here in describing the mutually beneficial outcomes that anchor institutions pursue when tackling local social problems, including those related to the SDGs (Saenz, 2023). By creating shared value, a just anchor university therefore repositions the university and addresses critiques of it as an 'ivory tower' while also eroding the perceived divide between 'town and gown' (Hornby & Maistry, 2025; Saidi & Boti, 2021).

The second principle is accessibility and visibility. Genuine access to the university space, its resources and opportunities, is required to give meaning to the idea of shared value. By implication, in pursuit of justice, universities must seek ways to remove the invisibility that marginalised community members may have encountered in their interaction with the university and its spaces, due to power imbalances, prejudice or university structures (O'Farrell et al., 2022). In this paper, it is argued that accessibility extends beyond the university as a physical space and that to promote inclusive economic growth, economic opportunities should also be accessible. Legislation and university policy can serve as a vehicle for promoting accessibility. Specifically, the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act was first promulgated in 2003 and then amended in 2013 (Forbes & Rust, 2019). Its aim was to achieve economic transformation through increasing the inclusion and economic participation of black people in economic activity. The Act also provides for the development of a scorecard consisting of eight weighted elements, including skills development, preferential procurement, and enterprise development (Arya & Bassi, 2011). This scorecard, therefore, incentivises organisations to set aside funds for empowerment initiatives.

The third principle is empowerment. To promote shared value and access to economic opportunities, universities need to empower the broader community through human capital development. Garton (2021) highlights the importance of universities investing in intellectual or human capital. Furthermore, Fongwa (2021) highlights the importance of anchor institutions supporting the development of human capital.

This paper analyses the case of a university as a just anchor institution that has expanded its economic role to ensure a more inclusive and holistic approach to sustainable development. The study describes how the Masakhe Project, implemented at Rhodes University, has

leveraged its financial capital, targeted microenterprises and collaborated with existing initiatives to contribute to SDG 8 in its local community. The Masakhe Project provides the opportunity to analyse the development of partnering relationships within Rhodes University, as a higher education institution, with community partners and beneficiaries. This study employs a justice perspective of anchor institutions as a framework to analyse the structuring of the university's contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular focus on SDG8. To better understand Rhodes University's contribution to SDG8, this study examines the role that Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) plays in positioning the university as a just anchor institution through the Maskahe Project. The study is further concerned with whether RUCE through the Masakhe project contributes holistically and collaboratively to the sustainable development of Makhanda, particularly its inclusive economic growth.

Research Aims and Objectives

The aim of this research is to analyse, from the perspective of the theory of just anchor institutions, how Rhodes University, through the Masakhe Programme, has contributed to the upliftment of Makhanda in a sustainable and holistic manner. Specific research objectives are:

1. To describe the approach adopted by Rhodes University to the sustainable development of the city.
2. To describe and analyse the role of community engagement in positioning the university as a just anchor institution for sustainable development.
3. To describe the formation and operation of the Masakhe Project to promote inclusive economic growth.
4. From a social justice perspective, to analyse the outputs and outcomes of the Masakhe Project regarding the social, economic, physical, and educational wellbeing of residents of Makhanda.

Research Method

This study employs an exploratory case study method, which utilises an inductive approach to build understanding through the analysis of data (Yin, 2014). This interpretivist approach to understanding Masakhe ESD as a case study enables a nuanced investigation of how stakeholders in the project understand and conceptualise it. The research was initiated by the project committee to investigate the project's progress and identify areas for improvement, and was conducted by two committee members. Before collecting data, ethics approval was obtained from the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number: 2024-8114-9176).

Data were collected through eleven qualitative interviews, with interviewees purposefully selected. Interviewees included members of the Masakhe Programme committee, suppliers, and project beneficiaries. Three members of the committee were interviewed because they were involved in initiating the programme, were responsible for procurement in the university, or represented the community partner responsible for identifying potential beneficiaries from the local community. The interviews with committee members gathered data on the project's origin, decisions regarding its structure, agenda, functioning, record-keeping and future plans. The researchers were somewhat familiar with some of this information, but not all of it, and the insights they already had served as a common point of reference to build rapport and a common understanding of the project's origins, membership, and functioning. Interviewees also included a representative from the Department of Health, three individuals who had benefited from supplier development as existing suppliers, and three beneficiaries who had received enterprise development. In the case of beneficiaries, the interviews focused on the history of the enterprises, the challenges they had encountered, the needs that had been identified, the type of support and resources received through the project, and the project's impact on the enterprises. Here, too, the researchers had some background knowledge of the support given to the enterprises, which served as a common point of reference.

The researchers had also met most of the interviewees on at least one prior occasion. At the start of the interview, the researchers reminded the interviewees that they were members of the project committee. Power relations were therefore evident, as the beneficiaries were informed that the researchers had been involved as committee members in making decisions about the allocation of project resources and support to them. The researchers, therefore, carefully explained that while they were there to gather information on the project's impact on the beneficiaries, the support they had received would not be prejudged by the findings. Equally, the researchers were cautious not to set any expectations of future direct benefits for participating in the research, and explained that the findings focused on identifying ways to improve the project in general, rather than constituting an analysis of the future needs of the enterprises. At the same time, they did undertake to convey any specific feedback the beneficiaries wanted to highlight to the committee.

The interview data were complemented by analysing documentation related to the project, including concept documents, meeting minutes, logos, and brands developed for beneficiaries, as well as other social media related to the project. Documentation played a significant role in shaping an understanding of the project's structure and its outputs. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse both the interview and documentation data to address the research aims and objectives of this study (Bryman, 2004). Qualitative content analysis combines openness with theory-guided investigation to understand data generated through mixed methods (Kohlbacher, 2006). The inductive analysis aims to discover underlying themes or patterns and begins without defined categories (Elo et al., 2014; Spiggle, 1994; Vears & Gillam, 2022). A process of reading and rereading the data was followed by a process of determining emerging themes. The data was further analysed using

Notebook LLM software to refine the emerging themes (Krippendorff, 2004). Four themes emerged and are presented in the following section.

Findings

This section of the study's findings begins by describing the context of the programme, followed by an analysis of Rhodes University's role in addressing SDG 8 and the Community Engagement Division's role as an anchor institution. Finally, the operation of the project and its outcomes are analysed from a social justice perspective.

Local Context of the Programme

Rhodes University is a public university situated in a largely rural setting in the city of Grahamstown (now known as Makhanda) in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. In the 2022 census, the city had an estimated population of about 100 000 (Lang, 2023). Unemployment is estimated to be around 75% (Matai-Sigudla & Masuku, 2024), with most (i.e. 86.5%) of the Gross Value Added (GVA) within the city's municipality coming from the tertiary economic sector, which includes Rhodes University and private schools (Makana Municipality, 2022). Currently, significant hindrances to local economic development include poor governance, inadequate service delivery, limited state support, and a small industry base. SMMEs consider the municipality's performance in governance, financial management, and service delivery to be "abysmal," having a negative impact on business performance and revenue (Nyaku & Morrow, 2024). The Makana Municipality has regularly received disclaimed audit opinions (Auditor-General South Africa, 2025). The Executive Mayor and Municipal Manager have been subpoenaed to appear before the South African Human Rights Commission due to service delivery failures (South African Human Rights Commission, 2025). The degree of dysfunction of the municipality has a knock-on effect on the establishment, operation and sustainability of enterprises in the city.

The Role of RUCE in Positioning the University as an Anchor Institution

To meaningfully fulfil its community development mandate and to respond to its community's challenges, Rhodes University established a division for Community Engagement in 2010 (Dano, 2015). Recognising the inextricable realities and futures of the university and Makhanda, Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) aims to align the university's resources with the needs of the local community in Makanda (Matyobeni and Maistry, 2023). In effect, RUCE exercises the anchor institution roles and functions on behalf of the university. The relationship between RUCE and the community-based partner organisations evolves over time. Participants in the study describe RUCE as an initiator, facilitator, and strategic partner of projects, serving as a resource for

community engagement activities across its campus and in Makhanda. For example, one community-based participant describes how access to the university has evolved through their initial relationship with RUCE:

> *Initially, we used to work with [RUCE] predominantly. Now it has grown to working with different departments - the Psychology Department, the Linguistics Department, the School of Journalism and Media Studies, and the Business School, just to name a few. It has matured ... Now, we go directly to [Rhodes] departments and request what we need... We continue to work with Community Engagement, and we're convinced they're a strategic partner for us.*

RUCE programmes tend to be categorised under one of four interrelated forms of community engagement: engaged research, service learning, engaged citizenry, and social innovation and enterprise development (RUCE Strategic Plan 2020–2025). Engaged research is an approach to knowledge construction that is collaborative and involves community members at various aspects of the research design and process. Service learning involves co-designing teaching programmes with communities to facilitate practical learning experiences for students. Engaged citizenry involves extra-curricular opportunities for students to volunteer at a community-based organisation in a structured programme. These programmes are designed to holistically contribute to the development of community organisations and student volunteers. Social innovation and enterprise development was adopted in 2019 as a pathway for changemakers to build their skills and competencies and to establish commercially viable, sustainable enterprises and social organisations. Through these forms, RUCE seeks to embed community engagement activities in academic and support departments and divisions, as well as support community-based organisations and local enterprises.

The Sustainable Development Goals have been pivotal in the development of RUCE programmes and partnerships. In 2017, the division implemented its Knowledge Project, which provided a framework for assessing the impact of, and improving communication about, contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals in Makhanda. The Knowledge Project is aligned with the 17 SDGs with the African Union's *Agenda 2063*, the South African *National Development Plan* and the Rhodes University *Institutional Development Plan*. The purpose of this is to contextualise and localise the SDGs, and provide a unified framework for assessing how University projects are contributing to the 17 goals. It further enables the development and implementation of data-driven and sustainable programmes.

SDG 4 is about quality education (UN, 2015). In 2015, Rhodes University committed to establishing Makhanda as a city of educational excellence. The Vice-Chancellor's Education Initiative was established in 2015, led by RUCE, the Faculty of Education, and the Centre for Social Development, as well as a community-based NPO, GADRA Education. The Vice-Chancellor's Education Initiative was established to leverage community-university partnerships to achieve a shared goal of improving educational outcomes in Makhanda, and enhancing the chances for local high school learners to eventually enrol in Rhodes University. An Education Summit held in 2024 reflected on the initiative and set a vision

for the city of Makhanda to emerge as the leading academic and educational centre and city in South Africa (Rhodes University, 2024). To contribute holistically to the Makhanda ecosystem, Rhodes University extended this education-focused model to establish partnerships in economic development and health. The Masakhe Project is the primary initiative related to economic development.

The Formation and Operation of the Masakhe Project

SDG8 is focused on decent work and economic growth, which is also supported by infrastructure development (United Nations, 2002). In 2022, Rhodes University implemented the Masakhe Enterprise and Supplier Development Programme (ESDP) to address inclusive economic growth through enterprise development and supplier development. Through Masakhe, provisions of the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act (B-BBEE) serve as a vehicle for the investment in skills development, supplier development and enterprise development in Makhanda. Given that the mandate of the Masakhe project and the source of funding were related to B-BBEE, the Committee sought ways to develop existing suppliers to Rhodes University, as well as to foster other enterprises that may become suppliers in the future. This focus on supplier and enterprise development was complemented by skills development initiatives aimed at enhancing skills related to managing suppliers and enterprises. The Committee outsourced the delivery of skills training to various training providers. While the programme primarily aims to contribute to the revitalisation of the economy by investing in small businesses, the project includes infrastructural and educational components.

Masakhe originated from the strategic thinking within RUCE to improve the university's impact on community development, specifically in the area of economic empowerment. Initial informal discussions between RUCE and Rhodes University Infrastructure and Operations division (I&O) highlighted several concerns impacting the economic sector in Makhanda. Firstly, there was no coordinated system for reporting on university-wide initiatives and contributions to economic and supplier development, which was impacting the university's capacity to improve its B-BBEE rating. Further, there is a limited number of statistics and academic research collected about Makhanda, which would inform the development of data-driven development programmes. Finally, obtaining funding to conduct research and implement projects was a challenge. The B-BBEE rating ultimately provided a lever to invest in the community, focusing on developing local suppliers and enterprises. One of the university-based participants noted the impact of the university's rating on academic functions:

> When the impact of Rhodes being non-compliant [one] year started having an impact on the academic departments, specifically in terms of fundraising for them for their research, there was a huge request for the university to prioritise this rating.

When funding to improve enterprise and supplier development was eventually made available to I&O, they partnered with RUCE and formed the Masakhe ESDP Committee, which is led by the Infrastructure and Operations Division. Other partners include the Rhodes Business School and the Assumption Development Centre (ADC), a socio-economic development NGO. The ADC (of which Rhodes is a founding member) contributes a strong network within the local community and existing relationships with businesses. The committee, comprising representatives of the partner entities, meets regularly to identify potential projects, coordinate project activities, monitor their implementation, and review outcomes. The committee also acts as a conduit, helping businesses navigate the requirements for becoming university suppliers, including registration processes and understanding procurement procedures. While more time-consuming, this collaborative and strategic process is central to the programme. For instance, one participant noted,

> *It would have been very easy to just take the R1.6 million and just choose three suppliers, write them each a check and say, 'Okay, report the spend.' But this was what we wanted - for it to make an impact.*

Masakhe operates through a collaborative framework among the committee and its stakeholders. The ADC plays a crucial role in identifying existing small businesses within the Makanda community that could benefit from the project. These are often businesses with which the ADC has already established a relationship and a level of trust. For example, the owners of some of the businesses may have participated in capacity-building programmes at the ADC or RUCE. The ADC has criteria that help to determine eligible businesses. These include the entity having existed and operated for some time, being a legitimate business, and having the potential to grow. The unique and specific needs of these businesses are then investigated by the committee. This can include requirements for equipment to improve their services or production, training to improve business skills, and support for branding and marketing to increase visibility and professionalism. The ADC is central to this needs assessment, often through ongoing communication and understanding of the businesses' challenges and aspirations. Furthermore, the ADC was contracted to help identify prospective businesses and assist with the project's administration, including contracts, quotations and reports. The Masakhe ESDP committee then facilitates the provision of various forms of support based on the identified needs. In some instances, the committee has provided funding for renovations to business premises to create a more professional and conducive working environment. The role of the ADC is central to the Masakhe programme, which involves maintaining a network of small township-based enterprises. For example, one of the business owners involved in the programme recalls the ADC as being recommended to him by members of the community:

> *I met a guy who has a restaurant who was part of the ADC. He advised me to go to the ADC to get some support because I struggled with admin... I went to the ADC, and I was blown away*

with all of the services that they had. They decided to adopt me as one of the businesses that they work with and put through their programmes.

Conducting this research, and interviewing beneficiaries and partners, is part of the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the Masakhe Project. This research, therefore, contributes to identifying areas for improvement and informing future strategies. Feedback gathered from this research is also shared with the Masakhe ESDP committee to refine the project's approach and ensure it continues to address the evolving needs of the businesses.

The Outputs and Outcomes of the Masakhe Project

Several project outputs can be measured or observed. Firstly, over its first two years, the direct financial contribution to the local economy has totalled R2.6 million. Secondly, community infrastructure has been upgraded, specifically through the renovation and expansion of the Joza Clinic (an R800 000 investment), a government health facility that ensures patient privacy and confidentiality. The renovations to the Joza Youth Hub's building are currently under construction. The Joza Youth Hub offers facilities utilised by several local NGOs. Investment in infrastructure has also benefited the small businesses. One owner commented, *"Our space was small, and we didn't have the funds to make the space big. And then here comes Masakhe! They gave us the chance to renovate the place."* Thirdly, several businesses have been upgraded, and some have received new equipment. A number of training courses were delivered, including a financial literacy course for artists, enterprise development and business development consulting short courses, and a hospitality and culinary course for 14 youth, who also received work placements for experiential learning. Branding was described as *"one of the challenges that businesses are facing in the township. We can't easily see that there is a business there if there's no board outside."* A total of 14 SMMEs received marketing and branding support, as well as business marketing materials, including 12 that received large Chromadek signs. Sixteen early childhood development centres underwent site upgrades and were also provided with branded school stationery materials, including report cards, certificates, and report folders. This is described as *"huge for the kids,"* as it contributes to professionalising and generating income in an under-subsidised sector. Three sports coaches working with primary schools each received a monthly financial support of R5,000.

Some of the outcomes of the Masakhe Project are evident, including the growth of several businesses in terms of customer numbers and sales revenue, with at least three of them each employing two additional employees through the Skills Employment Fund (SEF) programme. One owner notes that the SEF employees also benefit from ADC programmes that target youth. *"I do hire youth; they go through the ADCs programmes themselves."* The Joza Clinic is now able to better serve the Joza community, with various health services being enhanced, including maternal child and women's health services, a dedicated office for confidential HIV counselling, and dedicated space for allied services (including dieticians,

physiotherapists, and occupational therapists), which improves *"confidentiality and privacy"* for patients who previously had to receive services in the passages of the clinic. Finally, an outbuilding was provided for the primary healthcare team to conduct their administrative work, so they no longer had to use the kitchen for this purpose. Not surprisingly, the expansion and upgrading of the Joza Clinic has had a positive effect on staff morale and *"restores dignity"* for patients.

While some positive outcomes are emerging from the Masakhe Project, the enterprises still face challenges to their growth. For example, infrastructural problems remain, such as an unreliable or inadequate electricity supply. There is also a limited local market for goods and services. Furthermore, some enterprises are also struggling to formalise their business and have inadequate financial administration, record-keeping and reporting. This means that they have not yet been able to secure a tax compliance certificate and, therefore, do not yet qualify to be a supplier to the university or other large organisations and government departments.

Discussion

Four issues are discussed here, namely, (1) positioning Rhodes University as an anchor institution through its Community Engagement (RUCE) division, (2) the contribution of higher education community engagement to addressing the SDGs, (3) the approach to funding the Masakhe project, and (4) the Masakhe Project as giving effect to the university as a just anchor.

The research findings describe how RUCE has positioned Rhodes University as an anchor institution to contribute holistically and collaboratively to the sustainable development of Makhanda, including its inclusive economic growth. Drawing from Fongwa (2021), four aspects of this positioning are discussed. Firstly, the case study demonstrates how, through its diverse range of programmes, RUCE has enabled Rhodes University to serve as an anchor institution in its community by fulfilling public purposes and economic roles in addition to its core institutional role (Ehlenz, 2018). Very evident in the Vice-Chancellor's Education Initiative, Rhodes University fulfils a public good role (Fongwa, 2021). This and other activities are coordinated by RUCE but occur throughout the University. In this way, through RUCE, the University leverages its core institutional role (Fongwa, 2021) to contribute to community development. Furthermore, through some of the construction projects approved by the Masakhe Committee, such as the expansion of the Joza Clinic and the renovation of the Joza Youth Hub, the University is fulfilling its role in urban development (Fongwa, 2021). However, it should be noted that its main contribution as an urban developer is as a major landowner and the real estate developer of its campus, which is located on the western side of the city, away from the poorer economic areas. Consequently, from a city-wide perspective, urban development is limited and unequal. Finally, the economic engine role (Fongwa, 2021) is being developed through the Masakhe

Project. In summary, there is evidence of all four dimensions of Fongwa's (2021) place-based development.

As a second issue, the research findings also highlight contributions to some of the SDGs, particularly SDGs 4 and 8. The case study has illustrated the economic role a university plays as an anchor institution by promoting inclusive economic development (Dostilio, 2023), supported by educational programs (Kebea, 2019), and by investing in financial, physical, intellectual, and human capital (Garton, 2021). Furthermore, the range of activities that are included in the Masakhe Project illustrates a holistic approach to inclusive economic development. While not all 17 SDGs have been considered here, from the perspective of the 'SDGs wedding cake' (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016), community engagement has so far emphasised the economic and societal tiers, with the biosphere largely neglected. This presents an opportunity for future development of community engagement initiatives. For example, clean water and sanitation (i.e. SDG 6) are a priority, given the prolonged water crisis that has arisen in Makhanda due to poor service delivery and infrastructure failure in the city (Baliti, 2024; Mbatha, 2025). In addition, it has been argued that universities have unique opportunities to address climate action (i.e. SDG 13) and climate injustices (Kinol et al., 2023).

Thirdly, by using B-BBEE as a vehicle for inclusive economic growth, Rhodes is positioning itself as an economic engine (Fongwa, 2021) in Makhanda, having amended its procurement policies to prioritise local procurement as a means to stimulate community revitalisation (Ehlenz, 2018). Furthermore, by linking economic development to funding that is channelled through the application of B-BBEE, the university has developed a unique funding model for community engagement activities of an economic nature. However, this approach could also limit the range of economic activity that is possible. That is, given that the source of funding is linked to B-BBEE, supplier and enterprise development activities are prioritised, and the logic adopted is to formalise these enterprises. Recent debates have highlighted the value of South Africa's informal economy, which is estimated to be worth R900 billion annually (Blaauw, 2025; Mkentane & Khumal, 2025). This raises questions of how to attain the SDGs in developing economies and whether the local economy is best served by stimulating informal economic activity or formalising it (Afful et al., 2025).

Finally, the Masakhe Project is discussed as giving effect to the concept of a just anchor. The initiation of the Masakhe Project is, in itself, an acknowledgement of the university's role as a just anchor institution, and its commitment to the revitalisation of the local economy (Ehlenz, 2016; Rodin, 2005) and of creating shared value (Menghwar & Daood, 2021). Furthermore, RUCE has developed a particular approach to its community engagement activities. The conception and implementation of projects are characterised by the formation of collaborative partnerships, or collective impact initiatives (Allen et al., 2017; Kania & Kramer, 2011), with partners both within the Rhodes community and in the city more generally, thereby upholding the principle of accessibility and visibility. It should be noted that the B-BBEE scorecard has not been approached from a mere compliance perspective or treated as a 'tick-box exercise'. Instead, there has been a sincere attempt

to adopt a broad-based approach to developing and supporting a range of enterprises on a long-term and relational basis. However, many of the beneficiary enterprises are still struggling to formalise their business so that they can access Rhodes University and other large organisations. While these attempts to promote access to the university are reflective of being a just anchor, the fact that this is proving to be a bridge too far for some enterprises raises concerns about aligning the capacity of informal businesses with the stringent university requirements. Similarly, in other settings, formalised institutional procedures of universities have been identified as an obstacle to the more informal and agile needs of community organisations, impeding access (Barry et al., 2025). These concerns question how the principle of empowerment can be strengthened in the Masakhe Project, and the appropriateness of the enterprise formalisation approach that has been promoted.

Conclusion

The case study illustrates how, as an anchor institution, university resources can be leveraged holistically by using community engagement as a base to build community (Jeffrey, 2025). Rhodes University has implemented community engagement as a vehicle for achieving some of the SDGs and demonstrating its role as a just anchor institution, following principles of creating shared value, promoting accessibility and visibility, and empowering community members. Through its Community Engagement Division (RUCE), Rhodes University implements a holistic and collaborative approach in a wide range of programmes, fulfilling its core institutional role as well as its public purpose, urban development, and economic roles (Fongwa, 2021). This study further demonstrates how, in a funding-constrained environment, the B-BBEE legislation can be used as a vehicle to channel funding towards broad-based economic and community development. The study also contributes to the understanding of anchor universities, and the holistic role universities in South Africa can play in the development of their broader communities.

With SDG 8 in mind, the Masakhe Project has also promoted inclusive economic development through the collaborative efforts of Rhodes University, the ADC, and other partners. This project has provided various forms of support to small businesses in Makanda, resulting in tangible benefits, including improved visibility and professionalism, formalisation of businesses, increased income, and job creation. The project has also contributed to broader community development through the development of infrastructure.

However, challenges have also been encountered, and several implications for the project arise from the study. The project requires ongoing monitoring and support to ensure its long-term viability and realise its diverse impacts. Relationship-building is central to the process, enabling the leveraging and sharing of resources. Additionally, ongoing support for businesses is necessary beyond the initial project phase, given the multifaceted challenges they face. Developing a log frame, as well as monitoring and evaluation and learning structures, is also necessary. Finally, adopting a more comprehensive approach to

contributing to the SDGs and extending the focus of Masakhe to address the biosphere can strengthen the outcomes and impact of the Masakhe Project.

More research is also recommended. Economic studies of Makhanda can contribute to a better understanding of the local economy, including its informal dimensions, which in turn will enable more strategic and focused actions to be identified that will advance SDG 8 in Makhanda. Additionally, a longitudinal study of the Masakhe Project would provide insight into whether the ongoing support to enterprises translates the project's outputs and outcomes into longer-term impacts. Finally, to better understand the role of Rhodes University as an anchor institution and the holistic approach to development adopted by the university, more comprehensive research on RUCE and its programmes is recommended.

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Community-Based Participatory Research as a Driver of Social Enterprise Development: A Case Study from a South African University

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Abstract

In recent years, South African universities have been called upon to address socio-economic challenges through forms of engaged scholarship that integrate teaching, research, and community partnership. Using a case study approach, this paper explores how a community-oriented student organisation at the University of the Free State (UFS) in Bloemfontein approached the academic facilitator and students of an entrepreneurship module with a request to help them become a viable and sustainable social enterprise as a means to combat unemployment and improve the graduate employability of its members. This request necessitated the formation of a community-university partnership (CUP) that employed community-based participatory research (CBPR) and participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) to support the development of a social enterprise. The partnership formed part of an experiential learning initiative embedded within entrepreneurship education at UFS. Through the use of CBPR and PALAR, the student organisation was assisted in identifying its strengths and weaknesses, and an action plan, based on a social enterprise business model canvas (SEMC), was designed to help the organisation achieve its goals. Findings reveal that engaging students in CBPR and PALAR through their partnership with the student organisation facilitated deep, experiential learning. The paper also reveals how collaborative knowledge production can generate mutual benefits for students, communities, and the institution.

Keywords: *Community-based participatory research (CBPR); social enterprise development; community-university partnership (CUP); participatory action learning and action research (PALAR); entrepreneurial education*

Introduction

In South Africa, youth unemployment remains persistently high, and small, micro, and medium enterprises (SMMEs) continue to face significant survival challenges (Tlhagale & Nyoka, 2025). Given these circumstances, universities are expected to play a transformative role in equipping students with entrepreneurial skills while simultaneously contributing to community development (Pee & Vululleh, 2020). Over the past decade, universities have been called upon to demonstrate their relevance to society by addressing complex socio-economic challenges through community engagement initiatives (Machiha, 2025; Magaiza, Mukwada, Lutabingwa & Dube, 2025).

In response to this call, and to address socio-economic challenges in the community, the Department of Business Management at the University of the Free State (UFS) has integrated community-based participatory research (CBPR) into its entrepreneurship modules. This integration provides students with experiential opportunities to work alongside community partners, particularly social enterprises and SMMEs, in identifying and addressing context-specific challenges. Such partnerships extend beyond traditional volunteerism to embrace principles of co-creation, reciprocity, and mutual capacity building, where students, academics, and community stakeholders jointly design and implement interventions (Green, 2024; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker & Donohue, 2003). Thus, this case study reports on a community-university partnership between ACCESS (Active Community Citizens through Engaged Scholarship for Sustainability), a community-oriented student organisation at UFS, and UFS itself.

Background and context

Thirty one years after the demise of apartheid, South Africa continues to grapple with challenging socio-economic issues, including a high unemployment rate (33.2%), youth unemployment (46.1%), graduate unemployment (12.2%) and persistent inequality (StatsSA, 2025a; StatsSA, 2025b). Despite the commitment of the government, the private sector, and entrepreneurs to create jobs, the public sector and entrepreneurial ecosystems are limited and cannot absorb the current labour force or the growing number of graduates (Fraser, 2023; Goyayi, 2022; Jacobs, 2025). Thus the government's clarion call to young people to consider starting their own businesses instead of waiting for employment (Chabalala, 2025). It is within this context that universities are increasingly called upon to play a transformative role by educating and training people, most especially the youth, to be able to identify business opportunities, or create employment opportunities, or establish viable and sustainable businesses, which is of utmost importance in the country (Chabalala, 2025; Jacobs, 2025).

The study was conducted in the Free State province, which has the sixth highest unemployment rate among nine provinces (StatsSA, 2025c); therefore, creating employment opportunities or establishing viable and sustainable businesses in the province is of the

utmost importance. Unemployment negatively impacts a country's economic development, increases poverty, and fosters a breeding ground for other social vices, such as crime, in the community. The establishment of viable SMMEs may create more employment opportunities for the community.

Literature Review

Community-University Partnership

Community-university partnerships (CUPs) are defined as "collaborations between community organisations and institutions of higher learning for the purpose of achieving an identified social change goal through community-engaged scholarship that ensures mutual benefit for the community organisation and participating students" (Curwood, Munger, Mitchell, Mackeigan & Farrar, 2011, p.16). According to Magaiza et al. (2025) and Venter (2022), institutions of higher learning can serve as catalysts for transformative social change by engaging meaningfully with diverse communities. These authors emphasise that effective CUPs must be grounded in mutual respect, dialogical engagement, and collaborative knowledge production. Such partnerships are most impactful when driven by locally identified needs and when they foster shared ownership of both the process and outcomes of the engagement. In line with these principles, a collaborative partnership was formed between students enrolled in the entrepreneurship module and the social enterprise Active Community Citizens through Engaged Scholarship for Sustainability (ACCESS). According to scholars, effective CUPs should demonstrate the features presented in Table 1.

Table 1: *Features of effective CUPs*

Feature	Brief description
Mutual benefit	All partners should gain from the collaboration, be it resources, capacity building, or knowledge (Suarez-Balcazar, Davis, Ferrari, Nyden, Olson, Alvarez, Molloy & Toro, 2004; Curwood, Munger, Mitchell, Mackeigan & Farrar, 2011).
Shared decision-making	Research and project agendas are co-created, and power is equitably shared (Magaiza, 2025; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004).
Trust and respect	Partnerships thrive on trust, open communication, and mutual respect (Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Curwood et al, 2011).
Sustainability	Keys to success are long-term commitment, stable funding, and institutional support (Northmore & Hart, 2011).
Readiness and capacity	Institutions must be ready to collaborate, both in mindset and infrastructure (Curwood et al., 2011).
Community Empowerment	Emphasis is placed on empowerment, and the community is recognised as a knowledge producer and not a passive subject (Magaiza, 2025; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004; Curwood et al., 2011).
Integrated Learning	CUPs are often aligned with academic programmes through community-based research (CBR) and community service learning (CSL) (Curwood, et al., 2011).

In the Global South, CUPs are recognised as transformative mechanisms for addressing complex socio-economic challenges. Therefore, they are seen as vehicles for social and economic development (Preece, 2013), decolonising knowledge and practice (Tagutanazvo, 2025; Preece, 2013; Hall, 2010), platforms for engaged scholarships and service learning (Preece, 2013; Boyle & Silver, 2005), instruments for addressing structural inequities, and strategic responses to global agendas such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is an inclusive and collaborative research approach that actively involves community members, academics, practitioners, students, activists and stakeholders in all stages of the research process. Unlike traditional academic research, which often positions communities as subjects of study, CBPR seeks to conduct research with and for communities, ensuring mutual ownership, relevance and benefit (Strand, 2000; Strand et al., 2003; Gallagher, Johnson, O'Dowd, Barret, Richardson & McNally, 2017). As Koch, Selim and Kralik (2002), and Gallagher et al. (2017) emphasise, CBPR is grounded in the principles of co-learning and shared power, aiming to address issues of concern to the community and promote collective well-being.

Kingwill, Todd, Davy, and Pama (2024) argue that CBPR should not be defined as a method but rather viewed as a research approach or orientation toward research that utilises a combination of qualitative, quantitative, or indigenous research techniques to ideate, conceptualise, and collaboratively address issues faced by a community. They also emphasise that adopting this research orientation requires actively including community members who have first-hand experience of the issues being studied. Thus, CBPR promotes a co-learning process in which all partners contribute and mutually benefit from each other's knowledge, skills, and insights (Walker & Boni, 2020). However, while CBPR presents significant opportunities for deepening community engagement and advancing engaged scholarship, scholars (Marovah & Mutanga, 2024; Appiah, 2020; Polanyi & Cockburn, 2003) have cautioned that it is not without challenges. They, for instance, highlight potential pitfalls, including power imbalances, knowledge hierarchies, tokenistic participation, limited capacity development, and ethical or cultural concerns. To address these risks, Appiah (2020) argues that authentic, equitable partnerships between researchers and community members must be intentionally built from the beginning of the research process. Similarly, Maistry and Lortan (2017) and Hall and Tandon (2020) suggest that when the participatory and collaborative principles of CBPR are genuinely upheld, they can help reduce hierarchical barriers and power imbalances by valuing and integrating the lived experiences, worldviews, and knowledge systems of the communities involved.

Furthermore, Walker and Boni (2020) argue that meaningful participatory processes must be grounded in a decolonial ethical orientation, one that actively confronts colonial-era power imbalances in knowledge production, challenges Western-centric

epistemologies, advances epistemic justice for marginalised groups, and places community self-determination at the centre of research priorities. This viewpoint is echoed by Lepore, Hall, and Tandon (2020), who argue that both academics and community-based knowledge practitioners can contribute to the advancement of the UN SDGs by co-creating knowledge that is rooted in local realities but globally relevant. Marovah and Mutanga (2024) further support these perspectives, asserting that for CBPR to achieve conceptual clarity and methodological rigour, it must embrace decolonisation and draw on the Ubuntu philosophy. They describe decolonisation as the removal of practices and traditions that overlook or exclude local knowledge systems, culture, and ways of knowing. In this regard, they posit that Ubuntu provides a hopeful and democratic foundation for knowledge co-creation, particularly within African research contexts. Therefore, to ensure that CBPR is conducted appropriately, researchers should follow the foundational principles outlined by Israel, Schulz, Parker and Becker (2001), adapted here to suit social science research contexts on which this case study is situated. The key principles are that researchers should (i) recognise the community as a unit of identity; (ii) build on strengths and resources within the community, (iii) facilitate collaborative, equitable involvement of all partners in all phases of the research; (iv) integrate knowledge and action for mutual benefit of all partners; (v) promote a co-learning and empowering process that attends to social inequalities; (vi) involve a cyclical and iterative process; (vii) disseminate findings and knowledge gained to all partners and (viii) involve a long-term commitment by all partners.

Social Enterprise Development

A social enterprise is defined as "an organisation or venture that achieves its primary social or environmental mission using business methods", usually by operating a revenue-generating business (Katz & Page, 2010, p. 59). Social enterprises are recognised as vehicles for addressing pressing societal challenges, such as unemployment, environmental issues, drug abuse, illiteracy, and social inequality (Rankhumise, 2020). Yet, despite their potential, they often face numerous challenges due to their distinct profile, including limited resources, inadequate formal structures and a lack of strategic planning capacity. Through CUPs, universities can provide valuable support to build enterprise capabilities, foster innovation, enhance organisational competencies, and improve access to knowledge and networks. This case study, therefore, positions social enterprise development not as an act of charity but as a process of reciprocal engaged scholarship, in which the enterprise, students, and academic facilitator collaboratively co-create strategies that respond to community needs.

ACCESS is a student-led, co-created, action-learning initiative affiliated with UFS, dedicated to leadership development, skills training, and promoting engaged scholarship. The organisation mobilises students who are passionate about addressing critical societal issues under three themes – environmental affairs, social justice for impact and health and wellbeing – through collaborative, community-based action. The organisation is

situated in the Division of Student Affairs and supported by the Directorate of Community Engagement. ACCESS, though a student enterprise, is considered a 'community enterprise' within the context of community engagement, because it also accommodates community members who are not UFS students, particularly environmental champions and local social entrepreneurs who share their expertise on sustainability with the students. Additionally, some graduates have chosen to remain involved as ACCESS members even after completing their studies. Furthermore, the organisation actively partners with and serves the community outside the university to address needs, promote social responsiveness, and facilitate mutual learning and knowledge exchange. Also, the organisation regularly engages in community-focused activities and operationalises its mission through a range of sustainability-focused initiatives, collectively referred to as Living Labs. These include innovative programmes such as vermiculture (worm farming), urban gardening, earth building, recycling, menstrual health management, soap and candle making, advocacy, volunteerism, and entrepreneurship. It also spearheads awareness campaigns such as #KovsiesCare, which addresses gender-based violence (GBV) and other community health concerns, aligning with the broader aims of community engagement.

Through participation in these initiatives, UFS students engage in participatory action learning and action research (PALAR), gaining meaningful, hands-on experience beyond the traditional classroom setting. Thus, CUPs enhance teaching through experiential learning, providing students with real-world experience in applying their skills (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). This form of engaged scholarship not only enriches their academic and professional development but also contributes directly to sustainable community development. The organisation was established in 2023 and was just a year old at the time of this project in 2024. Yet, despite its young age, it was already gaining traction on campus. By the end of 2024, more than 600 students had participated in ACCESS-related activities, demonstrating the programme's growing reach, relevance, and impact across the university and its surrounding communities (ACCESS, 2024; Bolleurs, 2025).

Research Design and Methodology

This paper discusses the process of establishing a community-university partnership to support the development of a social enterprise. The study involves a project which is embedded within the Entrepreneurship curriculum at the University of the Free State (UFS). This module was intentionally redesigned to move beyond traditional, theory-driven approaches, incorporating experiential learning pedagogies that aim to equip students with practical, real-world skills. In line with this shift toward applied learning, the curriculum emphasised active engagement with local entrepreneurs and community-based organisations. Rather than undertaking conventional summative assessments such as written examinations, students were required to complete group-based consultancy projects. Each group, typically comprising five to six students, was partnered with a small, medium, or micro enterprise (SMME) operating in the local community. These partnerships

enabled students to address authentic business challenges faced by the entrepreneurs, thereby applying theoretical knowledge to practical contexts.

Research aim and objectives

The primary aim of the study was to investigate how community-based participatory research (CBPR) facilitated the development and strengthening of ACCESS, a social enterprise within a community-university partnership in South Africa.

The study was guided by three primary objectives:

i.   To examine how CBPR shaped the processes and dynamics of the community-university partnership.

ii. To analyse the ways in which CBPR contributed to strengthening the organisational capacity and sustainability of ACCESS.

iii. To explore how power, agency, and reciprocity were negotiated within the community-university partnership.

Participant selection

In previous iterations of the group-based consultancy project, participating enterprises were typically for-profit SMMEs. However, for this project, ACCESS was included as one of the six enterprises with which students would engage. ACCESS was the only social organisation in the cohort. Its inclusion was informed by two intersecting circumstances. First, prior to the commencement of the semester, ACCESS approached the academic coordinator for support in transitioning into a sustainable social enterprise. Second, the academic coordinator was enrolled in the Knowledge for Change (K4C) Consortium UNESCO African Centre CBPR Mentor Training Programme, which required participants to implement a CBPR project within their immediate community. These two developments created a strategic opportunity to integrate ACCESS into the module's consultancy project as a CBPR case.

A group of six students from the entrepreneurship module, who expressed an interest in working with a social organisation, were purposefully allocated to ACCESS. The remaining students were assigned to various for-profit enterprises. The ACCESS-assigned group functioned as business consultants, supporting the organisation in strengthening its operational capacity and developing pathways toward sustainability as a social enterprise. In contrast, the other student groups engaged in traditional business consultancy tasks using analytical tools such as SWOT analysis, the TOWS matrix, and the BCG matrix. As these groups did not participate in the CBPR-oriented component of the project, they fall outside the scope of this study.

ACCESS was represented by eight founding student members, referred to as 'champions', who had prior exposure to the PALAR process through internal training

within the organisation. Additional participants included the academic coordinator of the entrepreneurship project and the two ACCESS coordinators. A total of 17 participants were involved in the CBPR process. Through this collaboration, students and ACCESS members formed an action learning group, thereby establishing a structured community-university partnership for the project's purposes.

Research design

A qualitative case-study design was adopted, underpinned by CBPR and PALAR. This approach was selected because it aligned with the values of co-creation and participatory engagement. Also, it facilitated a contextual exploration of partnership processes, as well as supported mutual learning among students, academics, and the social enterprise. PALAR was chosen to align with the CBPR ethos of reciprocal engagement between the university and community partners, while also fostering reflective and action-oriented learning among students.

PALAR as Participatory Pedagogy

Participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) methodology is a collaborative and democratic approach that prioritises mutual learning, co-inquiry, and empowerment among all stakeholders (Wood, 2020). As a participatory pedagogy, PALAR is particularly effective in engaging communities in processes that support their own sustainable development, as it positions all stakeholders as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients (Wood & Zuber-Skerrit, 2013).

The research process adopted in this study was guided by PALAR principles and processes, which operate in a cyclical and iterative manner. These include relationship building, negotiating shared vision and ethical considerations, collaborative data generation and analysis, and the development of action-oriented solutions (Wood, 2020; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015; Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). Each principle shaped the dynamics of the community-university partnership and structured the participatory learning experience.

Relationship Building:

The participatory nature of PALAR promotes the building of relationships between academic researchers and community members by fostering trust and creating equal partnerships that challenge traditional power dynamics. The '3Rs' of PALAR – relationships, reflection and recognition – highlight the importance of establishing relational foundations that challenge hierarchical power dynamics.

In this project, the relationship between ACCESS and the student consultancy group was established during a series of meetings. Initial meeting sessions focused on building trust, clarifying expectations, and jointly creating the framework for the research partnership. ACCESS introduced its student 'champions' and one coordinator to the student consultancy

group, delivering a presentation on the organisation's mission and community impact. During this initial encounter, ACCESS outlined its operational needs and challenges, which later informed one of the study's research objectives. In turn, the student consultancy group met with ACCESS to discuss roles, agree on shared goals, and establish plans for ongoing collaboration, formally initiating the community-university partnership.

Vision and Ethics Negotiation:

A second core principle of PALAR is the co-negotiation of a shared vision and ethical framework. Rather than imposing pre-defined research agendas, PALAR requires that goals, expectations, and ethical commitments be negotiated collectively, ensuring transparency and shared ownership.

In the subsequent meetings, the student consultancy group and ACCESS collaboratively crafted a shared vision and articulated a common purpose for the partnership. This included negotiating the focus of the consultancy work, agreeing on ethical considerations such as confidentiality, representation, and decision-making processes, and setting boundaries regarding the roles of the student consultancy, ACCESS members, and the academic coordinator. The participants also co-developed an ethical agreement, clearly outlining the roles, responsibilities and expectations of both parties. This negotiation ensured that the project aligned with ACCESS's self-identified needs while also meeting the pedagogical aims of the entrepreneurship module and the requirements of the CBPR framework.

Data Collection and Analysis:

These activities are integral parts of the observe/evaluate and reflect stages of the cycle. The process involves collecting various forms of data (often qualitative) and collaboratively analysing them to generate new knowledge relevant to the community's context. Data gathering and collaborative analysis occurred during the second and third meetings. The data collection was guided by the overarching project question: What strategies can be implemented to enhance the sustainability and survival of ACCESS?

In response, ACCESS submitted a series of requests outlining its operational needs and challenges. These were refined into the following project objectives:

i. To assist ACCESS in registering formally as a social enterprise.

ii. To identify key resources required to build organisational capacity for sustainability and growth.

iii. To position ACCESS for greater market impact and the creation of measurable social value.

– A SOAR Analysis (strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results) was conducted to identify strategic priorities for ACCESS's development. This analysis occurred during the PALAR process, which was facilitated by ACCESS champions.

- A focus group discussion was facilitated using Blackboard Collaborate to facilitate dialogue and the collection of data between the students and ACCESS champions.
- A business model canvas for social enterprise was completed together to map out ACCESS's value proposition, customer segments, competitors, revenue streams, cost structures, and other core business elements. The Canvas presentation was facilitated by the students' consultancy group.
- Based on the data gathered, the student consultants compiled a strategic analysis plan and produced a short consulting video presenting the proposed solutions and implementation steps to the research objectives ACCESS had outlined.

Figure 1: *The PALAR research process. Source: Wood (2020, p. 106)*
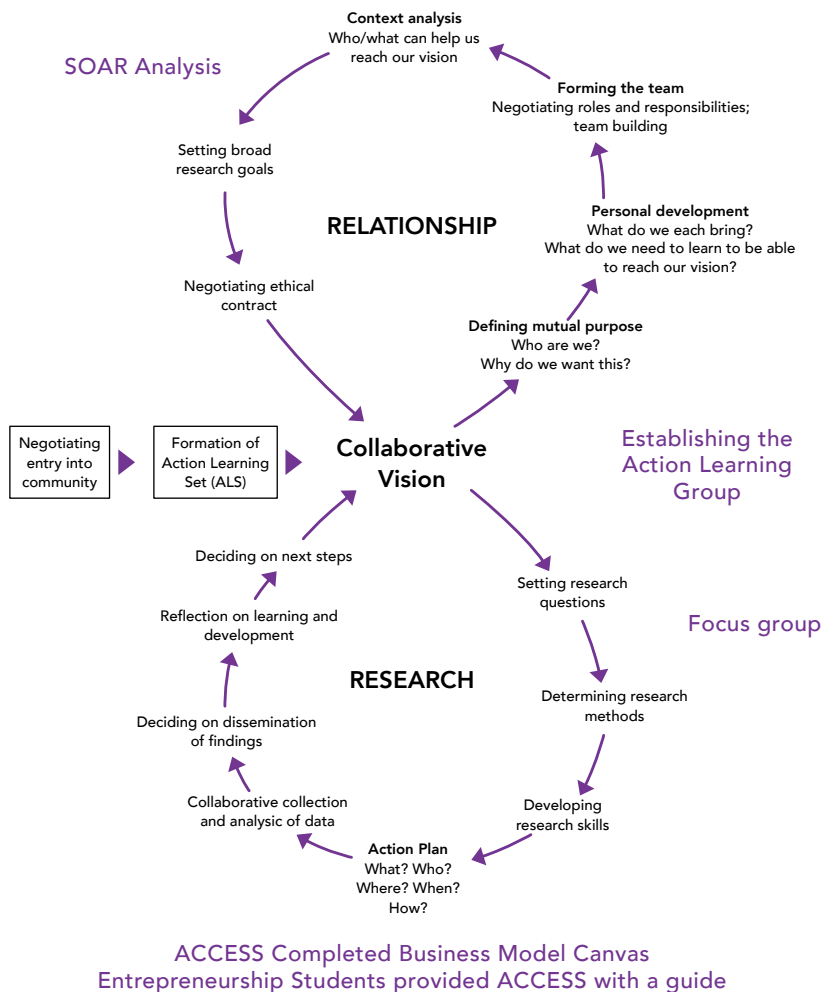
Action-Oriented Solutions:

The final principle of PALAR is the development of action-oriented solutions that support real-world change. This is the core purpose and outcome of the entire PALAR methodology. The action learning cycles move from reflection to planning, action, observation, and further reflection, ensuring that solutions are contextually relevant and practically implementable.

In the fourth and final meeting, the student consultants presented ACCESS with strategic recommendations focused on formalisation, resource mobilisation, and market positioning. These solutions were designed to enhance the sustainability and social impact of the enterprise while offering the students a meaningful opportunity to apply business and management principles in a real-world context, thus, reinforcing principles of experiential learning and reciprocal community engagement.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully embedded throughout the CBPR process. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Free State's General Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC). All participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose, process, and scope of the study, and informed consent was obtained. Participants were assured of their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time, and were informed about issues related to confidentiality and data protection. The ethical approach adhered to the core principles of research ethics as stated in the Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979):

- Respect for persons: recognising the autonomy and dignity of all participants.
- Beneficence: ensuring that the study contributes positively to participants and the broader community.
- Justice: ensuring fair and voluntary participation, particularly in the selection of the student consultancy group, which was based on classroom volunteering.

To maintain anonymity, no personal identifiers such as names or symbols were collected. Instead, pseudonyms or numerical codes were used to distinguish individual contributions during data collection and analysis.

Findings and Discussion

At the end of the semester, the student consultants and ACCESS champions were invited to reflect on the partnership and their experiences with the CBPR process. An open-ended questionnaire was uploaded to the university's learning management system, Blackboard, to ensure convenient access for all participants. The reflections formed the basis of the analysis, which explored participants' learning, engagement, and perceptions of the project (Wood & Zuber-Skerrit, 2013; Curwood et al., 2011). To facilitate clear and systematic

interpretation, the findings are organised into key themes that shaped participants' overall views of the CBPR partnership.

Exposure to a new research paradigm

Members of the student consulting group expressed strong appreciation for the CBPR approach. They noted that the process differed significantly from their usual engagement, which was predominantly quantitative research methods. Student consultant 2 stated that:

…we use qualitative technique. I now know how to conduct focus group interviews where everybody has a voice and it is recognised….

The data suggested that for all students involved, the project represented their first exposure to qualitative data collection, participatory inquiry, and collaborative problem-solving. Working directly with ACCESS enabled them to learn about the PALAR process, witness its practical application, and co-create solutions grounded in the organisation's self-identified needs. Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2004) advocate for the use of both quantitative and qualitative research strategies, emphasising that community researchers value not only numerical indicators but also the rich narratives and participant voices that explain and contextualise those numbers.

Development of interpersonal and collaborative skills

Students reported that participating in the CBPR project enhanced their interpersonal, reflective, and collaborative competencies. They emphasised that the process taught them to engage respectfully with diverse perspectives, remain open to alternative viewpoints, and work collectively toward shared goals. Student consultant 1 stated that:

I learned to listen to ACCESS and appreciate their viewpoints. When you work with a client, you do not have all the answers. Listen to them too, you can learn from them. They know a lot about community work.

The data above suggests that the PALAR approach, in particular, encouraged students to listen attentively, question their assumptions, and embrace the value of *'learning with'* rather than *'learning about'* community partners. This finding aligns with Wood (2020), who emphasises that collaboration is a defining feature of PALAR due to its participatory nature. Similarly, Fam, Smith and Cordell (2017) highlight communication-related competencies, such as active listening, relationship management, trust-building, consensus-building and negotiation, as core skills that underpin all participatory action research.

Application of theory and enhancement of employability

The student consultants also expressed appreciation for the practical orientation of the entrepreneurship module. They noted that the project provided a meaningful opportunity to apply theoretical concepts in a real organisational setting, thereby deepening their understanding through experiential learning. Student consultant 3 stated:

I liked the fact that as a project we were given real life companies to work with thus giving us practical experience and I also liked the fact that the module has no exam.

Student consultant 4 remarked:

I liked the practical aspects of the module. The practical sessions and the group assignment helped dive into a pragmatic experience, and taking what we learn theoretically and turn it into skills.

In this instance, the student consultants noted that working with a live enterprise enhanced their confidence in using business tools and strengthened their problem-solving and consultancy skills. They felt that this hands-on experience contributed significantly to their employability by exposing them to authentic workplace dynamics and enabling them to demonstrate applied competence beyond traditional classroom assessments. This finding is consistent with Magaiza et al. (2025), who argue that youth participation in social entrepreneurship can generate accessible and viable employment opportunities.

Capacity building among ACCESS champions

The ACCESS champions similarly reported substantial learning gains from the partnership. They indicated that they acquired new business knowledge from the student consultancy group, particularly related to business modelling and strategic planning. ACCESS champion 2 stated:

We taught the business management students about PALAR and they reciprocated and present to us a business model canvas, and analysis plan to make ACCESS be a sustainable enterprise.

Another ACCESS champion remarked:

We learned from business management, and they learned from us. Now I know strategic analysis plan and business model canvas.

Through the collaborative sessions, they learnt how to correctly complete a business model canvas and how to formulate business strategies aligned with ACCESS's sustainability goals. The champions reflected that these skills strengthened their organisational capacity and provided practical tools for advancing ACCESS as a social enterprise. This aligns with Polanyi and Cockburn's (2003) assertion that CBPR fosters learning and builds the capacity and commitment of participants to collectively address real-world challenges. Moreover, Northmore and Hart (2011) emphasise that genuine reciprocity and mutual learning are key characteristics of sustainable partnership working, principles clearly reflected in the collaborative relationship established between the students and ACCESS.

Increased awareness of social issues and social enterprise models

The project also exposed the student consultants to alternative, socially oriented forms of business. Through their engagement with ACCESS, they became more aware of social

challenges within their communities, and began to recognise the potential role of social enterprises in addressing such issues. Student Consultant 3 stated that:

> One key lesson I took from their journey is the commitment to helping others, they receive very little funding but they still carry on with the lessons they give to communities.

Student Consultant 1 stated:

> ...it is important to give back to the community in order to uplift your community and its members.

Student Consultant 4 said:

> If you become an entrepreneur, you don't actually need to benefit yourself, but you should look to provide a solution to the people around you.

In this instance, the students demonstrated a shift from a profit-driven to a socially responsive view of entrepreneurship. They noted that the experience broadened their understanding of how business tools can be used not only for profit generation but also for social impact. They further reported that the partnership deepened their awareness of ACCESS's work and its contribution to student development and community upliftment on the university campus. This finding supports Magaiza et al. (2025), who states that involvement in social entrepreneurship offers a meaningful pathway for youth development.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions

Despite its valuable contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted with a relatively small group of participants, being six student consultants and eight ACCESS champions, within a single university-community partnership. While this provided rich qualitative insights, the findings may not be easily generalised across diverse institutional contexts or social enterprises. Second, the study was limited to one academic semester, which restricted the extent to which long-term outcomes, sustainability trajectories, or shifts in organisational capacity could be observed over time. Third, because the reflections were collected through open-ended questionnaires rather than in-depth interviews or focus groups, opportunities for deeper probing or follow-up clarification were limited. Finally, the dual role of the academic coordinator, as both facilitator of the module and participant in the K4C CBPR programme, may have introduced positionality influences, despite efforts to maintain reflexivity and promote equitable participation.

These limitations provide avenues for future research where studies could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how community-university partnerships evolve over multiple semesters and how the skills, mindsets, and organisational changes generated through CBPR projects are sustained over time. Comparative studies across different universities, social enterprises or disciplinary fields could also help determine how contextual factors shape the effectiveness of PALAR and CBPR methodologies. Additionally,

incorporating mixed-method or participatory evaluation techniques, such as focus groups, narrative inquiry, or participant-led documentation, could deepen the understanding of the relational, decolonial, and humanising dimensions of such partnerships. Finally, future research may explore policy-level implications by examining how institutional structures, curriculum frameworks and community engagement strategies can more effectively support the integration of CBPR in entrepreneurship education across the Global South.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research paper presents the findings from a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project that integrated participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) within an entrepreneurship module, examining how a student consultancy group and the ACCESS social organisation collaboratively engaged in co-learning, organisational capacity building, and action-oriented problem-solving through a structured community-university partnership. The study demonstrated that CBPR, when embedded within entrepreneurship education, creates a meaningful space for reciprocal learning, critical reflection, and the co-creation of sustainable solutions.

The data revealed that the project broadened students' exposure to new research paradigms, particularly qualitative and participatory methodologies, and enhanced their capacity for collaboration, problem-solving, and respectful engagement. The student consultants also gained first-hand experience in applying theoretical business concepts to real-world organisational challenges, thereby strengthening their employability. Importantly, the partnership also heightened their awareness of social issues and deepened their understanding of how social enterprises function as vehicles for community upliftment.

For ACCESS, the project contributed to organisational strengthening by enhancing the operational skills of its champions, refining its business model canvas, and supporting the development of practical business strategies. The PALAR approach ensured that knowledge and solutions were co-created, grounded in ACCESS's lived realities, and aligned with its sustainability goals.

The findings also reflect broader principles of decolonisation and Ubuntu. By engaging students and ACCESS champions in a participatory process, the project disrupted traditional academic-community power dynamics and promoted a decolonised mode of engagement rooted in reciprocity and shared agency. The partnership was centred around co-learning rather than hierarchical knowledge transfer between universities and communities. Instead of positioning academic knowledge as superior, the PALAR and CBPR approaches created a space where lived experiences, community insights, and academic tools were equally valued and collectively applied to address real challenges. This aligns with decolonial scholarship that calls for shifting from extractive research to reciprocal, context-driven collaboration.

At the same time, the partnership embodied Ubuntu through its emphasis on mutual respect, collective problem-solving, and the recognition that knowledge emerges through

shared effort. The students' increased awareness of social issues and ACCESS champions' strengthened organisational capacity illustrate how Ubuntu-informed engagements can advance socially responsive entrepreneurship while affirming the dignity, agency, and contributions of all stakeholders involved.

In view of the above findings, it is recommended that universities institutionalise CBPR and PALAR methodologies in entrepreneurship curricula, as they could deepen experiential learning and encourage critical reflection (Wood, 2020). Also, social enterprises, particularly emerging student-led organisations like ACCESS, should proactively collaborate with universities to access business expertise, strategic insights, and human resource support. Such partnerships can enhance organisational capacity and contribute to long-term sustainability. Given that many students are more familiar with quantitative approaches, lecturers should provide structured guidance on qualitative inquiry and PALAR principles before implementing CBPR projects.

In conclusion, the objectives of the study were met. How community-based participatory research (CBPR) shaped the processes and dynamics of the community-university partnership has been established, and the ways in which CBPR contributed to strengthening the organisational capacity and sustainability of ACCESS has been analysed. Lastly, how power, agency, and reciprocity were negotiated within the community-university partnership has been explored.

Notes on Contributor

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Language, Relationality, and Career Guidance: A Community-Engaged Psychology Perspective

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Abstract

The importance of career guidance in enabling learners to make informed decisions about their futures cannot be overemphasised. Learners in under-resourced schools often face limited opportunities for meaningful support, with English-only career guidance restricting comprehension and engagement. Guided by the Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF), this study explores how language and relational dynamics shape career guidance within a community-engaged service-learning initiative involving Organisational Psychology honours students at Rhodes University. Learner focus groups were used to gather data from high school students, and reflections were used to gather data from career psychology honours students participating in a service learning programme. The results demonstrated that learner comprehension, confidence, and participation were significantly impacted by the use of language and relational strategies. Student reflections highlighted the importance of adapting theory to local contexts, integrating career construction and life-design principles, and navigating multilingual challenges. Students' professional adaptability, reflective practice and cultural responsiveness were further enhanced through service-learning experiences. Findings validate the RCCF as a useful framework for operationalising multilingual, relational, and Ubuntu-informed pedagogies, supporting equitable, socially responsible career guidance in under-resourced schools. Findings also suggest that the RCCF can inform institutional community engagement strategies, providing guidance for culturally responsive, relationally grounded, and ethically oriented service-learning programmes.

Keywords: *Career guidance, service-learning, multilingualism, relational-contextual framework, Ubuntu, community engagement*

Introduction

Background and Context

Career guidance plays an important role in helping young people think through their educational and work pathways. For learners in under-resourced communities, practical advice about careers can open up opportunities, influence social mobility, and contribute to their overall well-being (Conley, 2010). In South Africa, however, these services are usually offered in English, which creates particular difficulties for learners who speak other home languages. In multilingual areas such as Makhanda, and especially in schools with limited resources, many learners find it hard to engage fully with the information and processes presented in career sessions (Msimanga & Lelliott, 2014). At Rhodes University, this challenge is taken up in the Career Psychology Honours module, where service-learning placements require students to provide career guidance in local high schools as part of their community engagement training. This approach enables students to apply theoretical knowledge, reflect critically on their practice, and contribute meaningfully to the local community. Unlike traditional classroom methods prioritising theory and memorisation, service-learning fosters experiential learning, dialogue, and collaboration. Through this model, both students and learners are positioned as co-constructors of knowledge.

Problem Statement

While career guidance offers important opportunities for supporting young people, its value is often diminished by the dominance of English as the main language of delivery. For many learners in under-resourced schools, this creates barriers to understanding and reduces their ability to engage meaningfully with the process. Sessions conducted only in English can restrict learners' participation, limit reflection on possible career paths, and make it harder to build self-insight. At the same time, honours students facilitating these sessions are not always equipped to work confidently in multilingual settings, frequently relying on English in both preparation and presentation. This mismatch highlights persistent challenges around fairness, cultural relevance, and the responsibility of higher education to advance inclusive and socially just forms of community engagement.

Existing scholarship demonstrates that language plays a decisive role in shaping learners' access to, and engagement with, educational interventions. Research on translanguaging demonstrates that incorporating learners' home languages can build confidence, encourage active participation, and strengthen understanding (Mateus, 2014; Parra & Proctor, 2023). In parallel, career construction and life-design studies from the Global South show that these approaches can be adapted effectively in multilingual environments (Savickas et al., 2009). Within the field of service-learning, scholars also point out that engaging students in community-based work supports the growth of civic professionalism, intercultural awareness, and reflective habits (Mtawa & Nkhoma, 2020). At the same time, African-centred pedagogies, including Ubuntu, emphasise the ethical and relational responsibilities

of educators to foster inclusive, context-sensitive approaches (Kotze, 2025; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Despite these insights, a gap remains in understanding how learners in disadvantaged, multilingual contexts experience career guidance interventions, and how student facilitators navigate linguistic and cultural challenges. This study responds to that gap by examining the role of language in career guidance, focusing on both high school learners' experiences and honours students' reflections in a service-learning context.

Research Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Explore how language influences learners' experiences of career guidance interventions in underprivileged high schools.
2. Investigate how service-learning can enhance psychology students' capacity to deliver contextually relevant and culturally responsive career guidance.
3. Examine the pedagogical benefits and challenges of integrating multilingual practices into service-learning.
4. Contribute to the scholarship of community engagement by proposing a relational-contextual framework for localising career theories in psychology education.

Research Questions

1. How do high school learners experience career guidance when it is delivered exclusively in English compared to when it includes isiXhosa?
2. In what ways does incorporating service-learning into the Career Psychology module prepare honours students to engage more effectively with multilingual and culturally diverse learners?
3. What challenges and opportunities arise in adapting career guidance to be more responsive to learners' linguistic and cultural contexts?
4. How can relational-contextual approaches (drawing on social constructionism, career construction, life design, and Ubuntu) inform the localisation of career guidance pedagogy in psychology?

By integrating relational, linguistic, and ethical dimensions, the study not only addresses learner-level outcomes but also offers insights for institutional community engagement frameworks, highlighting how universities can structure service-learning programmes that are inclusive, socially responsible, and culturally responsive

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: The Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF)

The study uses the Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF) as its guiding framework. The RCCF is an integrative lens that combines relational social constructionism, career construction and life design, and Ubuntu-informed approaches. Through these collective perspectives, careers are positioned as relationally, contextually, and ethically shaped.

Relational social constructionism (Endres & Weibler, 2017; Gergen & Gergen, 2015) foregrounds how meaning, knowledge, and identity are co-constructed through language and interaction. The choice of which language the career service will be provided in plays a central role in how learners access knowledge and make sense of career possibilities. Career construction theory and the life design paradigm (Savickas, 2013) enables learners to navigate uncertainty and to flexibly author their own career stories by emphasising adaptability, agency, and narrative meaning-making. Within the RCCF, Ubuntu is presented as the guiding ethic. It highlights values of relational dignity, belonging, and shared agency, while recognising indigenous languages and cultural resources as strengths for career development rather than as barriers (Kotze, 2025; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Taken together, these ideas position career guidance as a dialogical process that is shaped by culture and context. It therefore provides a coherent rationale for this study's focus on bridging language barriers, enhancing learners' experiences, and preparing honours students to engage responsively in multilingual, relational contexts.

Figure 1 presents the Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF), the theoretical lens underpinning this study. By integrating relational social constructionism, career construction and life design, and Ubuntu-informed perspectives, the framework presents career guidance as a process that is grounded in relationships, context, and ethics. The concentric design of the figure illustrates how the framework moves from a core concern with relational, contextual and ethical practice through its foundational theories to applied dimensions such as multilingualism, service-learning, and localised life-design practices, culminating in the intended research outcomes. This visualisation is significant because it highlights the interconnectedness of language, pedagogy and cultural ethics in shaping learners' experiences of career guidance. It also demonstrates how RCCF provides a coherent rationale for addressing language barriers, advancing learner engagement, and preparing honours students for adaptive, culturally responsive and socially responsible practice in multilingual contexts.

Multilingualism, Translanguaging, and Learners' Experiences (Research Question 1 & Research Question 3)

According to Padayachee et al. (2018), in the post-apartheid era South African higher education has become increasingly multilingual, with institutional reforms and student movements pushing for curriculum transformation and decolonisation. To improve epistemological access, national policy like the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (DHET, 2020) requires the intellectualisation of African languages (Siziba & Nhongo, 2024). Webb (2012) emphasises that lecturers and students enter higher education with diverse linguistic backgrounds and varying proficiencies, which complicates learning, teaching, and assessment. Therefore, pedagogical strategies accommodating multiple languages and proficiencies – including translanguaging that enables learners to utilise their full linguistic repertoire for comprehension, expression, and meaning-making – are necessitated by this diversity (Lasagabaster & Garcia, 2014).

Empirical evidence has shown that shown that multilingual pedagogies – including translanguaging, code-switching, and utilisation of multilingual resources – boost student engagement, deepen conceptual understanding and foster a sense of belonging (Adams et al., 2024; Mawonga et al., 2024). Incorporating students' linguistic repertoires into instruction improves conceptual understanding, preserves dignity, and advances decolonial objectives (Mawonga et al., 2024). Translanguaging is an instructional method that fosters learners' identities, supports epistemological access and challenges monolingual ideologies that marginalise students with multiple identities (Cummins, 2021; Somlata, 2022). However, challenges like limited disciplinary registers in isiXhosa, underdeveloped assessment practices and resource constraints persist (Mawonga et al., 2024).

RQ1 and RQ3 are directly informed by this evidence. It appears that the levels of engagement of students who seem to struggle with instruction solely in English rise when isiXhosa is utilised (Adams et al., 2024; Mawonga et al., 2024). Similarly, Mawela (2024) shows that while parents and educators often prioritise English for mobility and global opportunities, learners value isiXhosa for expression, engagement, and belonging. Learners who draw on their full linguistic repertoire for improved comprehension and participation can make use of translanguaging practices including mixed-language discussions, home-language storytelling, and collaborative meaning-making.

From the RCCF perspective, these tensions highlight that language choices in career guidance are relational (shaped by family and institutional expectations), contextual (mediated by socio-economic and cultural positioning), and ethical (linked to Ubuntu values of dignity and justice).

Practical lessons from this body of work suggest that career guidance delivered in multilingual settings should:

- Enable learners to express ideas in their home language before co-translating into English or disciplinary language.

- Employ multimodal and multilingual resources (podcasts, glossaries, translated slides) to scaffold understanding.
- Train honours students to facilitate translanguaging and reflect on language-mediated relational dynamics (Mawonga et al., 2024; Steele et al., 2022).

Service-Learning and Professional Adaptability (Research Question 2)

According to Choi et al. (2023), service-learning is widely acknowledged as a pedagogy that promotes civic identity, reflective practice and professional adaptability. Through structured service-learning, combined with mentored reflection and ongoing community partnerships, academic theory is translated into employable skills like flexibility, self-directed learning, and civic professionalism (Lattanzi, 2025).

Within the RCCF, service-learning provides the relational and experiential mechanisms through which career construction and life-design goals, adaptability, narrative identity and agency, are enacted in practice. For honours students, supervised reflection, coaching on engaging multilingually, and ongoing feedback with community partners boost professional preparedness and grow their ability to engage ethically and responsively with learners from diverse backgrounds. Applied to RQ2, this literature suggests that integrating multilingual and relational strategies into service-learning prepares psychology students to become more flexible and culturally attuned practitioners, aligning their development with the RCCF's emphasis on contextual and relational career pedagogy.

Life Design and Career Construction in Multilingual/Global South Contexts (Research Question 3 & Research Question 4)

Life design theory (Savickas, 2013) emphasises adaptability and narrative meaning-making in career development. Empirical studies show that these approaches can be adapted successfully in multilingual, resource-constrained contexts. Group-based life-design interventions in rural South Africa improve clarity, agency, and career decision-making by tailoring narrative exercises to local languages and cultural repertoires (Jude & Maree, 2024). This evidence aligns with RQ3 and RQ4. It demonstrates that career construction approaches are not fixed to Western, English-dominant contexts but can be localised through translanguaging, narrative prompts in isiXhosa, and group-based reflective tasks. The RCCF thus operationalises life-design methods in ways that are relationally grounded, contextually relevant, and ethically responsive to learners' linguistic and cultural identities.

Ubuntu and African Relational Pedagogies (Research Question 4)

Scholars drawing on Ubuntu, including the notion of ubuntugogy, remind us that education is not only about individual achievement but also about shared responsibility and solidarity. In classroom practice, these approaches have been shown to encourage a stronger sense of belonging, invite wider participation and support the growth of collaborative ways of learning and being together (Makalela, 2023). Importantly, translanguaging case studies

link Ubuntu principles to multilingual practice, showing how legitimising learners' home languages affirms dignity, belonging, and shared knowledge creation.

In the RCCF, Ubuntu provides the ethical anchor: career guidance practices such as code-switching, home-language storytelling, and community co-production of resources are framed as acts of respect and social repair. This directly informs RQ4 by demonstrating how relational-contextual approaches can guide the localisation of career guidance pedagogy in ways that are not only effective but also just and humanising.

Integration and Synthesis Across Strands

Integrating multilingual/translanguaging strategies with Ubuntu-informed relational pedagogy and life design practices can provide a relational-contextual pathway for more equitable career guidance. In a study on Ubuntu translanguaging, Sefotho (2022) shows that when schools adopt translanguaging as part of their pedagogical approach, learner participation and understanding improve significantly. Similarly, life design research in South Africa, such as Maree (2015), demonstrates that when learners are encouraged to narrate their careers, identify values, interests, and strengths in culturally negotiated ways, they experience greater agency and hope. Multilingualism, service-learning, life design and Ubuntu are all integrated into the RCCF, which offers a lens through which to view these components both independently and in combination. This directs relational, contextual and ethically based interventions.

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that service-learning fosters professional adaptability (RQ2), multilingual pedagogies improve epistemological access and belonging (RQ1), and career construction and life design approaches can be modified for multilingual Global South contexts (RQ3). Ubuntu provides the ethical grounding to integrate these strands into a cohesive, relationally anchored pedagogy (RQ4).

Yet, despite these advances, the literature remains fragmented: multilingualism, service-learning, life design, and Ubuntu have typically been explored in isolation rather than as interconnected dimensions of career guidance. This fragmentation obscures how relational contexts between learners, student facilitators and communities shape career guidance's process and outcomes. In particular, the intersection of language barriers, relational pedagogy and professional development in under-resourced South African schools has received little empirical attention. The RCCF thus stands on firm empirical ground as a framework for localising career guidance in psychology, bridging language barriers and preparing both learners and students for adaptive, relational and socially responsible career development. These theoretical threads and applied dimensions are presented in Figure 1, which uses a layered-circle model to illustrate the RCCF.

Relational-Contextual Career Framework

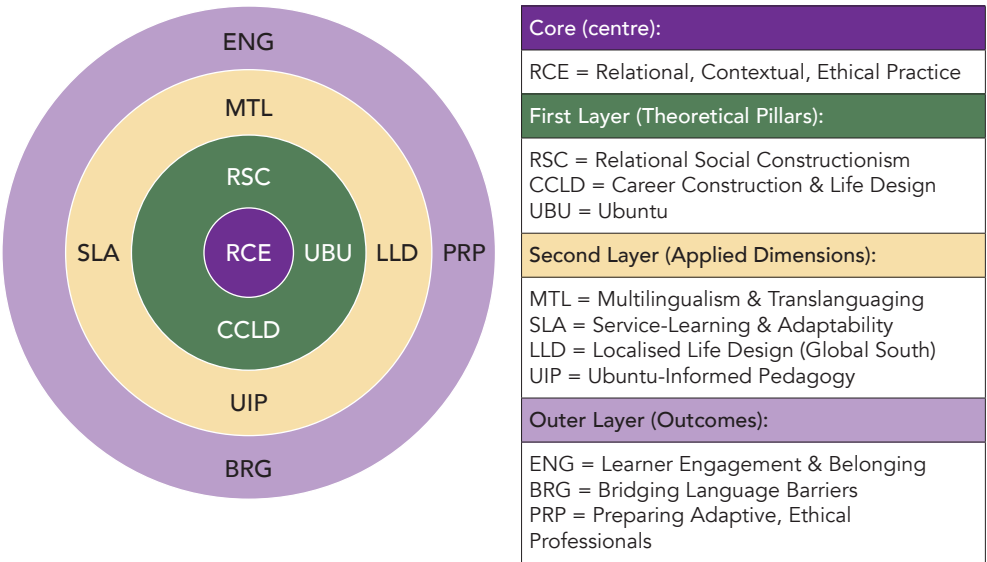| Core (centre):		
RCE = Relational, Contextual, Ethical Practice		
First Layer (Theoretical Pillars):		
RSC = Relational Social Constructionism CCLD = Career Construction & Life Design UBU = Ubuntu		
Second Layer (Applied Dimensions):		
MTL = Multilingualism & Translanguaging SLA = Service-Learning & Adaptability LLD = Localised Life Design (Global South) UIP = Ubuntu-Informed Pedagogy		
Outer Layer (Outcomes):		
ENG = Learner Engagement & Belonging BRG = Bridging Language Barriers PRP = Preparing Adaptive, Ethical Professionals		

Figure 1: Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF). RCE represents the core principle of career guidance as relational, contextual, and ethical practice. The theoretical pillars (RSC, CCLD, UBU) inform applied dimensions (MTL, SLA, LLD, UIP), which in turn connect to the intended research outcomes (ENG, BRG, PRP)

Figure 1 illustrates the guiding lens for this study, positioning career guidance as fundamentally relational, contextual and ethical. At its core, the framework emphasises relational, contextual and ethical practice, supported by three theoretical pillars: relational social constructionism, career construction and life design, and Ubuntu. These pillars inform applied dimensions, multilingualism and translanguaging, service-learning and professional adaptability, localised life design, and Ubuntu-informed pedagogy, which, in turn, shape the intended outcomes, bridging language barriers, fostering learner engagement and belonging, and preparing honours students as adaptive, ethical professionals. This layered-circle model visually captures how theory, practice, and outcomes converge, demonstrating the coherence and relevance of the framework for addressing language, contextual and ethical challenges in career guidance within the South African context. The RCCF extends beyond existing service-learning frameworks by integrating relational ethics, multilingual inclusivity, and Ubuntu-informed pedagogy as central design principles. This positions it as a novel, community-engaged psychology framework that situates language and relationality at the heart of ethical, decolonial career guidance practice.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, grounded in the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR). CBPR provided the foundation for collaboratively engaging both the high school learners and the Rhodes University honours students as participants whose voices and perspectives were central to the research process. The study was grounded in CBPR principles in three ways:

1. **Participation:** Learners and honours students were positioned not merely as research subjects but as co-constructors of knowledge, contributing their lived experiences and reflections.
2. **Relational engagement:** The research built on an existing service-learning partnership between Rhodes University and Ntsika Senior Secondary School, thereby embedding the study within an ongoing reciprocal relationship.
3. **Contextual relevance:** By situating the inquiry in a previously disadvantaged schooling context in Makhanda, the study foregrounded the importance of local realities, language, and cultural practices in shaping the career guidance process.

This design was chosen to ensure that both groups, learners receiving career guidance and honours students providing the intervention, were represented in ways that captured the relational, contextual, and dialogical dimensions of the career guidance process.

Research Context and Positionality

This study was conducted through a partnership between Rhodes University and Ntsika Senior Secondary School, serving learners from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. The focus was on career guidance challenges, particularly language barriers, limited exposure to higher education, and relational factors affecting participation. As a researcher and course facilitator, I coordinated the service-learning programme, supported honours students, and conducted focus groups. My perspective, informed by relational social constructionism, emphasised valuing participants' voices, cultural and linguistic knowledge, and co-construction of meaning. This positioning ensured the study remained ethically grounded and contextually sensitive.

Participants and Context

The study was conducted in Makhanda, Eastern Cape, South Africa, at Ntsika Senior Secondary School, a school serving learners from previously disadvantaged backgrounds.

- Learners: A total of 75 learners participated in the study. These learners took part in 10 focus groups, with group sizes ranging from 7 to 8 learners each.

- Honours students: Thirteen honours students were enrolled in the Organisational Psychology service-learning course at Rhodes University. Of these, 8 students provided informed consent for their written reflections to be included in the study.

The service-learning project formed the practical context of the study. As part of their coursework, the honours students facilitated career guidance sessions with high school learners, after which they submitted reflective assignments. These reflections, together with learner focus group data, formed the dual sources of qualitative data.

Honours Students' Engagement and Reflection

Honours students enrolled in the Career Counselling service-learning course were responsible for delivering career guidance sessions to Grade 9 learners. Prior to the sessions, students engaged in structured preparation activities, which included familiarising themselves with the RCCF, researching the school's cultural and linguistic context, and collaboratively planning session activities. Students were organised into groups, ensuring that each included at least one isiXhosa-speaking member, facilitating translanguaging and culturally responsive engagement.

During the sessions, students implemented interactive exercises, icebreakers, and collaborative discussions to build rapport, establish trust, and encourage active learner participation. After each session, students completed reflective assignments documenting their experiences, challenges, and insights. Reflections captured observations on learner engagement, relational dynamics, language use, and the effectiveness of pedagogical adaptations. These reflections served both as research data and as a tool for professional development, fostering students' ethical practice, cultural sensitivity, and responsiveness to community needs.

Data Collection

Two forms of qualitative data were collected:

1. Focus Groups with Learners

- A total of 10 focus group sessions were conducted: 5 on 26 August 2025 and 5 on 28 August 2025.
- Each focus group included 7–8 learners, generating rich discussions about their experiences.
- Focus groups were facilitated in both English and isiXhosa, enabling learners to express themselves in their preferred language.
- Guiding questions explored learners' perceptions of the accessibility, engagement and relevance of the career guidance sessions, with particular emphasis on the role of language in shaping understanding.

2. Honours Students' Reflections

- Written reflections were drawn from assignments submitted by honours students as part of their service-learning course assessment on or before 23 May 2025.
- These reflections captured the students' perspectives on challenges and opportunities encountered in delivering career guidance, especially regarding navigating language barriers and building rapport with learners.

Community Engagement and Research Process

Participants were purposively selected through the existing Rhodes University-Ntsika partnership to align with the aims of the service-learning programme. Grade 9 learners were chosen for their career decision-making stage, and honours students participated as part of their accredited course. Engagement occurred in three stages – preparation, facilitation, and reflection – supported by semi-structured focus group guides and reflective assignments. Data were analysed thematically, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach and interpreted through the RCCF lens. Consistent with community-based participatory research (CBPR) principles, collaboration with school staff ensured alignment with community priorities, contextual relevance and shared interpretation of findings, reinforcing reciprocity, co-learning, and ethical integrity.

Data Analysis

Data, from both focus groups and written reflections, were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach:

1. Familiarisation with the data.
2. Generating initial codes.
3. Searching for themes.
4. Reviewing themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the report.

Themes were generated inductively from the data but were also interpreted through the lens of the RCCF, which guided the study's analytic orientation. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, that is, when no new themes or insights were emerging from the focus group discussions and the reflective writings. After the tenth focus group, recurrent ideas and patterns were consistently observed, signalling that thematic saturation had been achieved.

Triangulation was achieved through the integration of two complementary data sources: learners' focus group narratives and honours students' written reflections. Comparing these perspectives allowed for cross-validation of themes and strengthened the study's rigour by highlighting convergences and contrasts in how both groups experienced the relational and linguistic dimensions of the career guidance process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from Rhodes University on 30 May 2025 (Ethics Approval Number: 2025-8389-9753). A subsequent approval to include honours students' written reflections as a research data source (with informed consent) was granted on 11 August 2025.

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Grade 9 learners (ages 16-18) completed assent forms, and parental/guardian consent was obtained, in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving minors. Honours students provided written informed consent for their reflective assignments to be included as research data. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were securely stored and accessed only by the research team for research purposes.

Results

The focus group data revealed consistent themes around learners' experiences of language use, accessibility, and relational dynamics during career guidance sessions facilitated by Rhodes University honours students. The facilitators of the focus groups themselves came from diverse linguistic backgrounds; some were monolingual English speakers, while others were multilingual and encouraged learners to use isiXhosa or English. This diversity provided contrasting yet complementary insights into the ways language and facilitation shape learner engagement.

The reflections of honours students revealed consistent themes around their preparation, pedagogical adaptations, and management of language dynamics during career guidance sessions at underprivileged high schools. In their class preparation, all materials were initially developed in English, but students actively localised career theories to align with the learners' cultural, linguistic, and developmental contexts. To address potential language barriers, students were organised into four groups, each including at least one isiXhosa-speaking member whose mother tongue facilitated translanguaging during sessions. The groups also conducted research on the learners' school culture and community context, aiming to provide career guidance that was meaningful and relevant. Among the honours students were students who did not speak isiXhosa; they therefore learned basic isiXhosa phrases, such as greetings, to build rapport and accommodate learners' linguistic needs. During the sessions, introductions and explanations initially began in English, but

facilitators flexibly switched to isiXhosa as required, ensuring that learners could engage fully and comprehend the guidance provided.

Language and Accessibility (RQ1 & RQ3)

Focus Groups – Learners

Learners repeatedly emphasised that English-only facilitation limited their participation: learners hesitated, struggled to express themselves, or relied on peers for translation. For example, one learner said:

> I wanted to say something, but I didn't know how to say it in English, so I stayed quiet.

Multilingual sessions created an environment that encouraged isiXhosa usage. Learners reported increased comprehension and confidence:

> When we spoke in isiXhosa, it was easier to ask questions and understand what they were saying.

Reflections – Honours Students

Students recognised that language facilitated self-discovery and engagement:

> When I met them at their level of understanding, I found that they were able to engage more even in their home language. The sessions became more than just giving them information and advice, but also sessions of self-discovery.

Translanguaging was a critical strategy, though initial nervousness emerged when using languages in which students were less fluent:

> I was feeling nervous due to the language barrier. I am English and Setswana speaking, and not fluent with isiXhosa, which is the preferred language of communication among students at Ntsika.

These findings contribute to decolonisation discourse by demonstrating how multilingual facilitation and the inclusion of learners' cultural and linguistic knowledge challenge the dominance of English-only pedagogies, validating local languages and epistemologies in educational practice.

Relational Dynamics and Confidence (RQ3)

Focus Groups – Learners

Peer support and collective problem-solving enhanced confidence:

> When my friends helped me explain what I wanted to say, I felt part of the group and not afraid to talk.

Reflections – Honours Students

Creating a warm, interactive environment facilitated learner engagement:

> *To ease the tension and create a warm atmosphere, we played a few ice breakers. These ice breakers allowed us to give them insight on what we were there to do, so that they could relax and engage freely.*

Awareness of learners' backgrounds enabled tailored guidance:

> *The class was given an interactive exercise… This exercise taught me how to apply both traditional and modern career theories to create career interventions for the learner.*

By foregrounding learners' cultural and linguistic contexts, and integrating Ubuntu-informed relational practices, this study highlights how career guidance can be decolonised through participatory, contextually grounded approaches that prioritise local knowledge and relational equity.

Service-Learning and Professional Adaptability (RQ2)

Reflections – Honours Students

Preparation and mentorship feedback strengthened professional skills:

> *The feedback we received from our mentors and lecturer during the preparation phase played an important role in us delivering excellent work… It also gave me insight on how to use my personality to my advantage – linking my social personality type and being able to gel well with the grade 9s and build a good rapport.*

Service-learning helped translate theory into practice and build confidence:

> *Initially, the thought of going there for this career guidance experience made me nervous… The days leading up to meeting the grade 9s, the nervousness subsided a bit because of all the practice and communication within my group and with the rest of my class.*

Career Construction, Life Design, and Practical Guidance (RQ3 & RQ4)

Reflections – Honours Students

Applied career theories enabled learners to connect their interests, strengths, and values to career options:

> *The self-exploration exercise using career theories, the role-playing career guidance scenario, and the creation of an interactive career guidance activity… taught me that career guidance is a collaborative process between the client and the counsellor.*

Learners requested more practical examples beyond Rhodes University offerings:

> *I wanted to know about careers like medicine in other universities, not just Rhodes. We need to see all the options.*

Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

Reflections – Honours Students

Time constraints, variability in learners' participation and language proficiency were challenges:

> *I feel as though if we had longer sessions with them, we would have been able to answer more questions and do more reflective exercises.*

Adaptation strategies included session restructuring, peer mediation and translanguaging:

> *Even with these challenges, these activities clarified how theory can be used in practice. I now recognise this as a necessary skill for future client interactions.*

Key Pedagogical Insights

Reflections – Honours Students

Career guidance as self-discovery:

> *Career guidance allowed the grade 9s to think beyond what their circumstances allow them, to understand that success is not a one-size-fits-all but rather subjective based on their self-concept.*

Experiential preparation and integration of theory into practice:

> *The self-exploration exercise, the role-playing, and the creation of an interactive career guidance activity… taught me that career guidance is a collaborative process between the client and the counsellor.*

Cultural and relational responsiveness:

> *Creating a safe environment in a career guidance experience is essential, as it gives the individual room to feel free exploring their self-concept without fear of judgement.*

The findings of this study are summarised in Table 1, which aligns the results with the research questions and highlights key insights derived from both learner focus groups and honours students' reflections. The table presents a structured overview of how language dynamics, service-learning experiences, life design practices and Ubuntu-informed relational approaches shaped the inclusivity and effectiveness of career guidance interventions. For instance, learners noted that "when we could speak in isiXhosa, I felt confident to ask questions," while students reflected, "Translanguaging allowed me to meet the learners at their level of understanding." By organising the findings in relation to each research question, the table offers a concise lens through which the interplay between linguistic, cultural, and relational factors can be understood.

Table 1: Summary of Key findings

Research Question 1: How do language barriers shape learners' access to career guidance?	
Key Finding(s)	English-only facilitation created hesitation, silence, and disengagement; translanguaging increased comprehension and active participation.
Illustrative Evidence	Learners responded more confidently when explanations and questions were given in isiXhosa alongside English: *"I wanted to say something, but I didn't know how to say it in English, so I stayed quiet"* (Learner Focus Group 1, P1); *"When we spoke in isiXhosa, it was easier to ask questions and understand what they were saying"* (Learner Focus Group 3, P2)
Contribution/ Implication	Confirms that language is both a barrier and a resource. Supports calls for multilingual pedagogies in career guidance.
Research Question 2: How does service-learning shape students' professional adaptability?	
Key Finding(s)	Students developed flexibility, resilience, and cultural sensitivity in responding to linguistic and relational dynamics.
Illustrative Evidence	Students reported that navigating translation and relational complexities improved their facilitation skills: *"The feedback we received from our mentors and lecturer during the preparation phase played an important role in us delivering excellent work… It also gave me insight on how to use my personality to my advantage – linking my social personality type and being able to gel well with the grade 9s and build a good rapport"* (S5); *"Initially, the thought of going there for this career guidance experience made me nervous… The days leading up to meeting the grade 9s, the nervousness subsided a bit because of all the practice and communication within my group and with the rest of my class"* (S3)
Contribution/ Implication	Service-learning strengthens employability and professional adaptability in multicultural contexts.
Research Question 3: How can life design and career construction approaches be adapted to Global South, multilingual settings?	
Key Finding(s)	Learners engaged more meaningfully when narrating career stories in their own language and when cultural values were acknowledged.
Illustrative Evidence	*"The self-exploration exercise using career theories, the role-playing career guidance scenario, and the creation of an interactive career guidance activity… taught me that career guidance is a collaborative process between the client and the counsellor"* (S2); *"I wanted to know about careers like medicine in other universities, not just Rhodes. We need to see all the options"* (Learner Focus Group 4, P2)
Contribution/ Implication	Life design approaches must be adapted for collective, culturally grounded understandings of career in the Global South.

Research Question 4: What role does Ubuntu play in shaping relational and ethical dimensions of career guidance?	
Key Finding(s)	Ubuntu principles (respect, mutuality, care) were evident in learner–facilitator interactions and shaped trust-building.
Illustrative Evidence	Learners described feeling 'seen' and 'valued' when facilitators acknowledged their background and language: *"Creating a safe environment in a career guidance experience is essential, as it gives the individual room to feel free exploring their self-concept without fear of judgement"* (S6)
Contribution/ Implication	Ubuntu provides an ethical grounding that integrates language, life design, and service-learning into RCCF.

Broader Implications for Community Engagement Across Disciplines

Although this study was situated within Psychology, its findings hold wider relevance for community engagement (CE) practice across disciplines. The emphasis on language inclusion, relational responsiveness and contextual understanding provides transferable insights for disciplines such as Education, Health Sciences, Social Work, and Linguistics, where engagement often occurs across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The study demonstrates that multilingual, relationally grounded and participatory approaches enhance accessibility, trust, and mutual learning between universities and communities. By integrating principles of Ubuntu, co-learning, and contextual relevance, CE projects in other fields can similarly foster ethical, inclusive, and sustainable partnerships that recognise and value local knowledges.

Discussion

'This study explored the experiences of honours students delivering career guidance to grade 9 learners in a local underprivileged high school, focusing on the role of language, service-learning, multilingual practices, and relational-contextual pedagogies. Using the RCCF as a guiding lens, the findings are interpreted in relation to each research objective.

Language as a Barrier and a Resource (RQ1 & RQ3)

It became evident that the language used in career guidance sessions strongly influenced how learners took part and made sense of the content. In sessions conducted only in English, some learners appeared hesitant, chose to remain silent, or relied on classmates' assistance to understand the material. When facilitators included learners' home languages, however, participation became more confident and discussions were livelier, with learners engaging more deeply with the ideas being explored. Learners' quotes, such as "When we spoke in isiXhosa, it was easier to ask questions and understand what they were saying", exemplify this relational and cognitive impact.

From the RCCF perspective, language is far from neutral. It acts as a relational and contextual tool that shapes access to knowledge, self-expression and social inclusion (Gergen & Gergen, 2015; Endres & Weibler, 2017). The results further align with research on translanguaging. Using learners' home languages in teaching seemed to make understanding easier, and gave learners a greater sense of dignity. It also helped them engage with new ideas more confidently (Mawonga et al., 2024; Adams et al., 2024). These findings point to the importance of including home languages in career guidance, not just for practical learning, but as a way to respect and affirm students' cultural identities.

Relational Dynamics and Learner Confidence (RQ3)

What emerged from the study was that learners' confidence and sense of agency were closely tied to the social context around them. In practice, when classmates helped one another, when translations were done together, and when facilitators fostered multilingual, supportive spaces, learners were more willing to speak up and explore ideas. These interactions allowed them to make sense of concepts collaboratively, rather than individually: *"When my friends helped me explain what I wanted to say, I felt part of the group and not afraid to talk."*

Similarly, honours students noted that establishing rapport and interactive engagement strategies, such as icebreakers, allowed learners to relax and engage fully. This relational responsiveness aligns with the RCCF's emphasis on the social construction of career knowledge, where meaning emerges through interaction, mutual recognition, and culturally attuned facilitation (Savickas, 2013; Jude & Maree, 2016). Silence in English-only sessions reflects the relationally constructed barriers that limit agency, whereas inclusion of home languages and peer support embodies Ubuntu-informed pedagogies by affirming dignity, belonging, and collective problem-solving (Makalela, 2016).

Service-Learning and Professional Adaptability (RQ2)

Engagement in service-learning enhanced honours students' professional adaptability, reflective practice and culturally responsive facilitation. Students' reflections highlight the role of preparation, mentorship and feedback in translating theoretical knowledge into contextually relevant guidance: *"The feedback we received from our mentors… gave me insight on how to use my personality to my advantage – linking my social personality type and being able to gel well with the grade 9s and build a good rapport."*

These findings confirm prior literature demonstrating that structured service-learning strengthens professional skills, civic professionalism and reflective capacities (Johnson et al., 2021). Within the RCCF, service-learning functions as the relational and experiential mechanism through which students enact career construction and life-design principles in real-world settings, integrating adaptability, narrative meaning-making, and ethical engagement.

Career Construction, Life Design, and Relational Context (RQ3 & RQ4)

Students' use of career theories to guide learners reflects the adaptability of life-design approaches in multilingual and resource-constrained contexts: *"The self-exploration exercise using career theories… taught me that career guidance is a collaborative process between the client and the counsellor."* Learners' requests for more practical examples illustrate the importance of contextualising guidance beyond institutional limitations.

This aligns with the RCCF, which situates career construction as relationally and contextually embedded. Meaningful engagement requires that career guidance be co-constructed with learners, acknowledging their linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic realities. Translanguaging, interactive exercises and narrative exploration operationalise life design principles ethically and relationally, allowing learners to author coherent career narratives while developing self-awareness and agency (Savickas, 2013).

Ubuntu and Ethical Relational Pedagogies (RQ4)

Ubuntu-informed principles were evident in learners' collective support, peer translation, and the inclusive classroom climate fostered by honours students: *"Creating a safe environment in a career guidance experience is essential, as it gives the individual room to feel free exploring their self-concept without fear of judgement."* These practices affirm communal identity, dignity, and relational equity, resonating with African pedagogical frameworks that emphasise ethical, socially responsible education (Makalela, 2023).

Within the RCCF, Ubuntu provides the ethical anchor for career guidance, highlighting that relational and multilingual strategies are not merely instrumental but central to fostering equity, confidence, and meaningful engagement.

Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that:

1. **Language choice shapes comprehension and engagement** – translanguaging is critical in multilingual contexts.
2. **Service-learning strengthens professional skills and reflective practice** – enabling students to deliver contextually responsive guidance.
3. **Career construction and life-design approaches are adaptable** – relational and culturally grounded facilitation enhances learners' agency and self-understanding.
4. **Ubuntu-informed pedagogies provide an ethical framework** – promoting dignity, belonging, and collective meaning-making.

The study validates the RCCF as a coherent framework for operationalising relational, contextual, and ethical career guidance in under-resourced multilingual contexts. It extends the literature by demonstrating how translanguaging, relational facilitation, and ethical

considerations can be integrated into service-learning practices, supporting culturally responsive and humanising career guidance in Global South settings.

Table 1 illustrates that career guidance outcomes were strongly shaped by the linguistic and relational context of the sessions. Learners' engagement and comprehension improved markedly when translanguaging was incorporated, confirming the role of multilingual strategies in promoting epistemological access and belonging. Honours students demonstrated enhanced professional adaptability through service-learning, navigating relational dynamics and reflecting on their practice: one student noted, *"The feedback from my group and mentor helped me engage more meaningfully with learners."* Life design approaches were successfully adapted to multilingual, culturally grounded settings, allowing learners to author career narratives aligned with their values and aspirations, as one learner expressed: *"I could explain what I like and want to do, and they understood me."* Finally, Ubuntu-informed practices reinforced the ethical and relational dimensions of career guidance, fostering dignity, collective support, and belonging. These findings collectively substantiate the RCCF as a robust framework for designing career guidance interventions that are relationally, contextually, and ethically responsive

Conclusion

Theoretical Innovation and Global Contribution

The Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF) represents a theoretical innovation by explicitly integrating relational, contextual, and ethical dimensions within career guidance and service-learning pedagogy. Unlike traditional career development models that often emphasise individual agency or linear skill acquisition, the RCCF foregrounds the co-construction of meaning, multilingual engagement, and Ubuntu-informed ethics as central to professional practice. By connecting its core theoretical pillars—relational social constructionism, career construction and life design, and Ubuntu—to practical applications and intended outcomes, the framework shows how relational, language-sensitive and culturally responsive approaches can actively support learners' participation, foster inclusion, and nurture social responsibility. This innovation has relevance beyond the South African context, offering a conceptual model for globally situated community engagement and career guidance that is culturally responsive, ethically grounded, and adaptable to multilingual, diverse learning environments, thus subsequently contributing to decolonising and equity-oriented theories of practice. In addition, the RCCF not only informs classroom practice but also has the potential to guide institutional community engagement frameworks, promoting ethical, relationally grounded and inclusive service-learning initiatives across universities.

Contributions and Added Value

This study made contributions to both theory and practice by empirically validating the RCCF. It showed how relational, contextual and ethical considerations could be operationalised in multilingual career guidance. A practical model for service-learning pedagogy was provided, integrating language-sensitive facilitation, life design, and career construction approaches in Global South contexts. The study highlighted the importance of valuing learners' linguistic and cultural resources as assets for inclusive, equitable, and socially responsible career guidance. Beyond the immediate classroom context, the RCCF offers guidance for institutional community engagement strategies. By foregrounding relational, linguistic, and ethically grounded practices, universities can design CE initiatives that are inclusive, culturally responsive and socially accountable, ensuring that service-learning programmes contribute meaningfully to both student development and community needs

Implications for Policy and Curriculum Development

The findings of this study offer practical guidance for higher education institutions seeking to strengthen community engagement programmes. By demonstrating how relational, language-sensitive and ethically grounded approaches enhance learner participation and honours students' professional development, the RCCF provides a blueprint for curriculum design, facilitator training and programme structure in service-learning initiatives. Institutions could integrate RCCF principles into CE curricula to ensure that programmes systematically promote inclusive, culturally responsive and socially accountable practices, while also preparing students to navigate diverse community contexts effectively.

Limitations

The following limitations were identified in the study:

- Limitation of generalising findings since data is based on a single high school context.
- Participants' responses could be influenced by social desirability, particularly given the relational nature of the intervention.
- Language proficiency among honours students varied, and the study did not measure the impact of varying levels of multilingual competence on learners' engagement systematically.
- Finally, the relatively short duration of the career guidance sessions constrained the depth of longitudinal impact assessment.

Strengths

The study presented data employed from both learner focus groups and honours students' reflections, therefore providing data from various perspectives. The study demonstrated the use of translanguaging and localisation of career theories, bridging theory and practice.

An ethically grounded, culturally responsive approach that aligned with contemporary calls for decolonising education and career guidance in multilingual contexts was highlighted by embedding Ubuntu-informed relational practices.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study offers several recommendations:

1. **Curriculum and Pedagogical Training:** Higher education institutions should provide explicit training for service-learning facilitators and guidance counsellors on translanguaging, audience-sensitive communication, and culturally responsive career guidance.

2. **Structured Language Support:** Facilitators should be equipped with resources and strategies to manage language diversity, including basic proficiency in learners' home languages and multimodal materials.

3. **Longer and Iterative Engagement:** Career guidance interventions should allow for extended and iterative sessions to deepen engagement, reflection, and learner self-concept development.

4. **Ubuntu-Informed Practices:** Career guidance should integrate relational and ethical principles that foreground collective learning, mutual respect, and learner dignity.

5. **Scaling and Transferability:** Future research should test the applicability of these approaches across multiple schools and contexts to evaluate transferability and long-term outcomes.

6. **Higher education institutions:** Higher education institutions may consider embedding RCCF principles into formal CE policies and staff development programmes to strengthen relational and context-sensitive approaches to community engagement.

Summary

This study explored how honours students delivering career guidance to grade 9 learners in underprivileged high schools navigated language barriers, relational dynamics, and contextualised pedagogies. Guided by the Relational-Contextual Career Framework (RCCF), the findings highlight that language, relational sensitivity, and culturally responsive facilitation are central to effective career guidance. Translanguaging emerged as a critical strategy, enabling learners to participate meaningfully and co-construct understanding, while service-learning supported honours students' professional adaptability, reflective practice and ethical engagement. Ubuntu-informed practices further underscored the importance of relational dignity, collective learning, and learner inclusion in career guidance.

AI-Use Declaration

The author affirms that ChatGPT was used solely for language editing and improving clarity. All research design, analysis, interpretation and conclusions presented in this article are entirely the author's own work.

Notes on Contributor

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South-South Networks Catalysing Social Responsibility in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article interrogates epistemic injustice in global development discourse, challenging dominant narratives that define progress through a singular lens. Drawing inspiration from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) caution against "the danger of a single story," we explore how universities – often positioned as knowledge authorities – (re)perpetuate these injustices by privileging Western epistemologies in defining development. We argue for the recognition of diverse aspirations and culturally embedded understandings of the good life, as articulated by scholars such as Catherine Odora Hoppers, who critiques the systemic marginalisation of Indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems.

Anchored in the Knowledge for Change (K4C) Global Consortium, a Global South-led initiative in Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR), this article presents a conceptual and practical framework for decolonising research through the creation of regional CBPR training centres in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Using narrative inquiry, we reflect on our lived experiences as coordinators of these centres, analysing personal stories to uncover themes of cultural negotiation, institutional challenges, and transformative potential.

We aim to demonstrate how these centres can serve as hubs for epistemic justice, fostering methodologies rooted in collaboration, equity, and contextual relevance. By embedding CBPR within higher education institutions in its training and research capacities, we envision a shift toward research led and sustained by the Global South, reframing development through cognitively diverse and participatory knowledge-making processes. Ultimately, we advocate for a pluralistic approach to development – one that honours multiple stories, cosmologies, and pathways to progress.

Keywords: *Epistemic justice, community-based participatory research, knowledge 4 change, social responsibility in higher education*

Introduction

The history of higher education institutions is deeply rooted in the broader history of social civilisations, and it cannot be defined or confined to a single civilisation. Knowledge flows through the development of various civilisations and should not be treated as a commodity predominantly used for commercial purposes. The knowledge development process must be connected to contextual development and social building, rather than being solely focused on product innovation purposes. Knowledge should be stored and shared by society and used to liberate society and future generations from any form of colonisation and domination, whether from within the society itself or from outside. Therefore, a global social connection of higher education must be promoted in order to produce a more balanced situation of knowledge production between society, academia, and industrial players. Society should not be treated as the recipients of knowledge and innovations as strongly exists in the world of consumerism but society must be involved in the knowledge production process. In our perspective, higher education institutions should be spaces of learning that catalyse social and ecological wellbeing.

However, the idea of nurturing a learned society and an enlightened generation has never been as tightly dictated as it is today. This emerging trend, often referred to as the post-modern higher education ecosystem, is increasingly governed – if not entirely guided – by global education standards shaped by colonial ideologies, and assumptions of development. Azhar (2020), in his book *Emancipated Education*, challenges this domination by emphasising the need to liberate higher education, and education in general, from capitalist ideologies. He advocates instead for a model that prioritises meaningful engagement between academia and society. Yet universities often struggle to offer practical solutions to strengthen this engagement.

The values and objectives of university-society engagement are inherently long-term, but they are frequently reduced to short-term outputs or deliverables. As a result, many universities depend on an output-based higher education ecosystem, promoted by commercial entities such as global university ranking agencies, reduced core funding, and short term grants. In the Global South, universities are caught in this colonial-capitalist quagmire, with academics seeking to demonstrate their academic merit through hyper-traditional practices that they hope will enter them into the gaze of the powerful ranking systems and funders, while trying to navigate local more relational accountabilities that embed learning and knowledge in shared action for long term social and ecological flourishings. In this article, we will present a movement for social responsibility in higher education that is driven by southern epistemologies, and we think provides a more realistic and pluralistic vision for the development of healthy societies, through community based participatory research and the Knowledge for Change Consortium.

This article grapples with epistemic injustice concerning the historical, social, and geopolitical power(full) narratives that drive constructions and decisions of development; or, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie puts it in her popular TED talk from 2010, the danger

of a single story. In this article, we are interested in exploring the role of universities in (re)perpetuating epistemic injustice through claims of knowledge, particularly in formulating decisions about development and what development is. We believe that there are diverse aspirations and definitions of what entails a good life, and we contest the single American narrative and assumption of what the good life is, and what, consequently, development is needed. Professor Catherine Odora Hoppers, in her introduction to the edited book Bridging Knowledge Cultures (Lepore, Hall & Tandon, 2023), succinctly brings together the relationship between knowledge systems and narratives of 'development' and 'progress' through an epistemic lens:

> On entry to the system that associates the non-Western, the non-'developed' with 'bad', it quickly becomes known to indigenous and African children that what is relevant for the West, its insights, its values, its tastes and eccentricities alike, becomes the model for the world. From then on, everything one does and thinks is defined and compared using Western norms, leaving all else bundled together as the 'rural other', the 'non-urban', often equated with 'community'. This 'other' is the cosmologies of Africa, the Native American, Saami from Scandinavia, Asia, and Latin America – otherwise collectively known as the 'Third World' (np).

Ultimately, we agree with epistemic scholars such as Odora Hoppers (2021), Lepore, Hall & Tandon (2023), Ndawula (2017), Ibhakewanlan & McGrath (2015), Ndlovu-Gadsheni (2017) and many more, who have made strong cases that knowledge and knowledge construction is spiritually and ontologically embedded in social and geographical spaces and time. It is alongside these great scholars that we seek to share our small contribution towards change through our collaborative work in the Knowledge for Change Global Consortium, a Global South-led movement in community-based participatory research. The failure of higher education institutions to acknowledge diverse sources of knowledge, restricted from conventional academic practices, can be considered as 'epistemicide', which Hall and Tandon (2017, p.7) define as "the killing of knowledge systems". Hall and Tandon used epistemicide as a critical lens to describe how dominant systems, especially those shaped by colonial and capitalist histories, actively marginalise, suppress, or destroy entire knowledge systems that do not align with the Euro-Western worldview. The knowledge considered as valid from this system is often biased and only follows euro-centric procedures of knowledge creation. This has caused various tradition-led disciplines of knowledge, such as indigenous knowledges, to be forgotten, and not properly highlighted by academia. The issue is more damaging when the euro-centric approach of knowledge creation is also influenced by the capitalistic-industrial approach of higher education.

Higher education researchers have voiced their concern of this bias recognition of scientific knowledge and methodology. UNESCO for example, from its recommendation of Open Science (2021), highlighted four main pillars of equitable and open knowledge or science, including open scientific knowledge, open science infrastructure, open engagement of societal actors, and open dialogue with other knowledge systems. Among these four pillars, pillar three and four seem to be easily forgotten.

Open science represents a new paradigm that brings science closer to society, and makes scientific knowledge openly available, accessible and reusable for everyone, increasing scientific collaboration and sharing of information for the benefit of science and society, and opening the processes of scientific knowledge creation, evaluation and communication to societal actors beyond the traditional scientific community (UNESCO, 2021, p. 7).

Scholars like Riyadh Shahjahan (2025) have successfully linked the issue of epistemic injustice to various contemporary higher education phenomena, especially university global rankings. In one of his recent works, he used the term 'decolonial chronopolitics' which means, "a framework critiquing dominant temporalities underpinning the coloniality of knowledge" (p.1). He came out with a clear argument that academia and society should resist the monopoly of colonial temporalities, not only by avoiding the use of colonial definitions of time such as in clocks and calendars, but the *entire cultural, institutional, and political apparatus* that defines what counts as timely, productive, and legitimate knowledge. Challenging this euro-centric definition of knowledge requires a strong commitment and openness to the existence of various knowledge systems.

The Knowledge for Change (K4C) Consortium was introduced to provide a legitimate platform for many learners within or outside academia to promote knowledge co-creation. The creation and strengthening of CBPR training centres in the Knowledge for Change (K4C) Consortium framework is a fundamental strategy for decolonising research and fostering self-determination in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. We will explore how the foundations of the three K4C Regional Training Centres are building a network of localised 'hubs' (explained later) co-defining community flourishing and co-creating pathways to get there. The centres promote methodologies that prioritise collaboration, equity, and contextual relevance, as well as dialogue between and across the hubs in each region. Our objective is to provide a conceptual framework and practical recommendations to strengthen existing CBPR training initiatives within higher education institutions, as well as to inform the design and implementation of these initiatives, to catalyse a new era of research led and sustained by the Global South itself.

We employ a narrative inquiry approach (Groom, R., Nelson, L., Potrac, P., and Smith, B., 2014) to deeply reflect on our lived experiences of creating and organising the three K4C regional centres (Africa, Asia, and Latin America) for training and networking of CBPR hubs and researchers in their respective regions. Narrative inquiry is particularly suited for capturing personal stories and understanding how individuals construct meaning around their experiences, especially in complex organisational and intercultural contexts. The aim is to analyse the stories of these coordinators to uncover themes related to challenges, successes, decision-making processes, cultural considerations, and the overall impact of their efforts within the framework of the Knowledge for Change Consortium. Our question for this article is: What are the opportunities and challenges of creating regional CBPR centres in the Global South? To answer the question we first had some discussions online, and agreed to develop independent reflections about the processes of setting up our centres,

as well as the challenges and opportunities we face. Following this we read each other's accounts and left comments and questions to each other using Google Docs.

We then met again online to discuss the reflections. Here, we had an extended discussion on the process of developing as southern networks without funding of any kind, and while continuing with our regular work. We saw it as both a challenge and an advantage, and most certainly aligned with the CBPR principles which emphasise long term relationships, not only when there is funding for a project. Another shift we made in this analysis session was to agree that we need to strongly root our reflections in the K4C foundations, and more firmly in the context of our hubs. This was again adjusted after reviewers' comments to make clear the difference between hubs and the regional centres. We all in fact coordinate both local hubs and regional centres. Elsewhere we have written and presented about our local hubs; here we are reflecting on the significance of regional centres, which coordinate the network of hubs. Another core adjustment we made in the reflective analysis of our writing was adding our own relationship, which we have purposefully been developing as we work together in developing each of our hubs. We see this relationality as fundamentally aligned with the development of our regional centres: we are very different, but we have shared values, and we see each other's success as directly connected to our own successes, despite being geographically far apart. Therefore, contributing towards the development of each other's centres is as important as developing our own. After the reflective analysis, we returned to editing directly in a shared document, using comments and suggestions to communicate and refine our work. Much of what we did was online because of the difference in timezones. We see the process of writing this paper as very much a part of our ongoing efforts to form our regional centres.

We, the authors, have worked closely with each other and with the founders of the K4C Global Consortium, first participating in the early mentorship *training* p*rogramme* and developing K4C hubs in our respective institutional locations (Uganda, Malaysia, Colombia), and now, as the consortium has grown and decentralised, establishing regional *centres* to sustain the network of existing local hubs and support the mentorship of socially responsible researchers and the development of new hubs in each of our regions. The regional centres that we coordinate are new developments in the K4C consortium, and at present we are the first and only regional centres. It is our collective development of these regional centres that we reflect on in this paper. We feel there is significance in the deep relationship we have developed across the oceans that has sustained the creation of our respective centres and which is embodied in this shared reflection.

There is also significance that the initial regional centres emerged in the Global South, and this is what has driven our interdependence and intertwined successes. We begin by briefly explaining the history and goals of the K4C consortium and the conceptual grounding of CBPR. We then each include a reflexive narrative of our distinct regional training centres, before returning to our collective reflection on how we hope, as knowledge ambassadors, to reframe single-story narratives of development and progress through participatory and cognitively diverse knowledge-making processes.

Historical Framework of the Knowledge for Change (K4C) Consortium

The Knowledge for Change (K4C) Global Consortium is a global initiative created in 2017 as part of the UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, established in 2012 by Dr Rajesh Tandon (PRIA, India) and Dr Budd Hall (University of Victoria, Canada). As Lepore, Hall, and Tandon explain:

> *The K4C Consortium aims to develop research capacities for the co-creation of knowledge through collective action by community groups and academics working together in training hubs around the world on issues related to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, such as Indigenous wellbeing, water governance, poverty and inequality, climate action, gender equality, and violence against women (Lepore et al, 2021, p. 349).*

The strategy through which the K4C Consortium initiated the training of the next generation of CBPR researchers is the mentorship training programme. The MTP's pedagogical approach proposes training in three main areas: the first focuses on learning the theoretical and epistemological foundations of CBPR and the methods used to conduct research, the second focuses on the organisation of local nodes and the design of courses to be taught, and the third is the development of fieldwork that involves conducting research with a community as a partner (Tandon, Hall, Lepore & Singh, 2016).

The "nodes" Tandon, Hall, Lepore and Singh (2016) refer to are what we now call hubs, which are partnerships between a university and at least one community organisation. The K4C is thus a consortium of local hubs committed to bridging knowledge cultures and collaboratively negotiating shared futures. To join the mentorship training programme, one must be in the process of developing a hub (with an existing formal agreement committed to training both university and community), or part of an existing hub. The MTP is designed to support local hub leadership in the promotion of CBPR. Once trained, the local hubs develop their own training programmes for both university and community members. The K4C consortium has developed a network of 27 hubs in 16 countries, promoting community-based participatory research (CBPR) through collaboration between higher education institutions and community-based organisations (Sodhi, 2025).

During the World Higher Education UNESCO Conference (WHEC), held in Barcelona, Spain, on May 14-20 2022, the K4C Global Consortium had several meetings with the global hubs coordinators. One of the agreements made at this meeting was the need to decentralise the MTP to address the diversity that exists in the different regions of the Global South. This marked the beginning of the creation of three regional centres, representing Africa (Gulu, Uganda), Asia (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia), and Latin America (Bogotá, Colombia) whose purpose is to address the specificities of language, economic resources, and the possibility of connecting with more countries in each of these regions.

These centres were chosen because of their institutional commitment to the principles and practice of knowledge co-creation.

In October 2023, at the Engaged Scholarship International Conference, held in East Lansing, Michigan (October 4-5 2023), representatives from Africa, Asia, and Latin America were invited as a keynote panel to share their experiences as part of the K4C Global Consortium (Mercy, 2023). We used the opportunity of being together in person to extend the possibility of regional training centres. It was agreed that having regional centres adapt their training programmes and research activities to local, national, and regional needs and contexts was the best possible response to the ongoing increased interest in the K4C model of institutional CBPR capacity-building (Mercy, 2023). Through meetings over several days, chaired by Budd Hall, the initial structure of the regional centres was passionately co-constructed with the regional coordinators. Rajesh Tandon joined us online. We (the proposed regional coordinators) returned with great hope to our respective institutions to present our plans to our leadership and regional hubs, and to begin the hard work of establishing the regional centres. Since then, we have had countless online meetings to support each other as we have developed our curricula, facilitated courses, and shaped our regional networks.

Community Participatory-Based Research (CBPR) as a Pillar of Local Development

Research, at its core, seeks to understand and transform realities. However, traditional research models have often perpetuated asymmetrical power dynamics, especially in regions of the Global South. Africa, Asia, and Latin America, rich in cultural diversity and possessing immense human potential, have historically been recipients of externally generated knowledge, which has often resulted in decontextualised solutions or the underutilisation of local knowledge (Hall, 2023; Tandon et al., 2023). To address complex challenges such as poverty, climate change, social inequality and health crises, it is imperative to shift toward an approach that not only recognises but also empowers communities in generating knowledge relevant and applicable to their realities.

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is a collaborative research approach that equitably engages community members, researchers and other stakeholders in the research process, recognising the unique strengths each brings (Hall, 1985). CBPR seeks collaboration between university-based academics and communities to address everyday life challenges, emphasising lived and experiential knowledge to guide the research process (Tandon, Hall, Lepore & Singh, 2016; Monk et al., 2020). The goal of CBPR is to combine knowledge and action to generate positive lasting social change and epistemic justice (Flores, Astaiza, González & Lopera, 2023).

CBPR goes beyond being a simple methodology; it is a philosophy that conceives research as a collaborative and horizontal process, where the subjects of the study become active co-researchers and partners (Tandon, Hall, Lepore & Singh, 2016). Rather than being

mere informants, communities, local leaders, marginalised groups, and other relevant actors are actively involved in all stages of the research process, from problem identification through research design, data collection and analysis to the dissemination of results and the implementation of resulting actions (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). An important differentiation we would like to emphasise in CBPR is that it is not about individual research projects that involve the community, but rather it is based on long-term relationships and networks of people and institutions who are interested in improving their community. Thus, research does not originate primarily in research or project grants; community improvement is a never-ending process that requires planning and social action.

It is this ongoing community development work that can inform and enhance research and grant writing to enhance longer-term visions and immediate community needs. The position of the researcher and institutions is one of consistent participation in the community, not only when funding is available. This is an important distinction. On the other hand, there is a specific goal of finding ways to integrate a diversity of knowledge into the community. This approach is particularly crucial in developmental contexts such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America, because of their rich diversity of multiple systems of knowledge creation. They are also seen through the gaze of the so-called developed world, which is trying to decide on their behalf what they should aspire to in terms of living well (development) through assumptions that countries in the Global North have achieved healthy systems of living and that everyone, including the Global South, should aspire to this model.

In other words, the northern story is the baseline for measuring living well, and development is seen as their story. Additionally, they assume that their version of industrialisation is the only way to get there. Of course, this egotistical assumption is based on the cultural and religious values underpinning a knowledge system that emphasises individuality and competition, centering and separating the human from the universe, and valuing worth through 'power over' (*puissance*), and in comparison with others, in a very hierarchical fashion. It is this world view that has brought the entire world to its knees. This is the danger of the single story. In the Global South, there exists a rich diversity of knowledge systems, largely driven by ontologies, such as Ubuntu, which value relationships between humans and respect and connections to other species. Thus, we see the following key potentialities of the CBPR movement:

Contextual Relevance:
Allows us to address problems from the perspective of those who directly experience them, ensuring that research questions are meaningful and that proposed solutions are culturally appropriate and sustainable.

Empowerment and Ownership:
Promotes community ownership of knowledge and solutions, strengthening the capacity to critically analyse their environment and mobilise for change.

Trust Building:
Bridging the gap between 'researchers' and 'communities' by building relationships of mutual trust and respect for ancestral knowledge and lived experiences.

Long-Term Sustainability:
By developing local capacities, the foundation is laid for research and innovation to continue beyond specific projects or the presence of external actors.

Ethics and Equity:
By promoting ethical practices that ensure genuine informed consent, data protection, and equitable distribution of research benefits.

In this sense, participatory research training centres are not mere academies, but catalysts for social transformation, where theory and practice intertwine to empower individuals and communities in the co-creation of a more just and equitable future. In the following section each of the authors reflects on the formation of the K4C regional training centres they have participated in developing. The regional centres emerged out of local K4C hubs, and thus each reflection includes the context of the regional hubs from which the centres emerged.

Knowledge for Change (K4C) Regional Training Centre – Imparting Local Hubs' Practices to Produce Regional K4C Mentors

K4C African Regional Training Centre – Gulu Hub

The African Regional Training Centre is hosted by Gulu University, and emerged as a result of the leadership in CBPR practice in the Gulu Hub. The director of the Centre is the Vice-Chancellor of Gulu University, Professor George Openjuru, who is a leader in the K4C and a global visionary in the movement for bridging knowledge cultures and social responsibility in higher education.

The Gulu hub was established in 2018 after the mentorship training programme in Arusha, Tanzania. The hub's work is linked to the university's mandate 'for community transformation' oriented toward serving the geographic space of Northern Uganda. It is a somewhat unique hub, because most of its activities are generated through informal community partnerships and networks.

Placing relationships first is at the core of the Gulu hub's multi-layered sense of community and research. The academic members of the hub use relationships with the community to advocate for a participative culture of research and learning within the university. Linked to this is the university's efforts to create enabling institutional policies for community engagement. The university promotes indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) through programme development and utilising IKS as the foundational culture of

community university engagement (CUE). This knowledge distinction is important to note in the context of community engagement by the Gulu hub, because the Gulu community is diverse, with influences from both IKS and Ameripean[1] (Ndawula, 2017) epistemic paradigms.

An IKS-based understanding of community engagement positions the university as one (important) actor within a learning ecosystem – an important departure from objective and linear understandings of research and the role of universities, which typically centre the university, or position it as the only ('uni') actor (Visvanathan, 2006). Odora Hoppers (2021) explains that universities (generally) associate knowledge production with university experts, and thus purposefully separate the university and its research from the lifestyles and lifecycles and cosmologies of the communities in which they are embedded. This separation fractures relationships and isolates universities. In contrast, IKS-based research and community engagement is relational and relies on shared experiences, transdisciplinarity and mutuality (Ndawula, 2017; Odora-Hoppers, 2021). IKS recognises research and knowledge production as a shared community responsibility emerging from deeply entangled relationships based on respect and reciprocity with all species, both now and in the future. Thus, using IKS as a framework for CUE repositions the university as 'multi' rather than 'uni', with a focus on relationships, participation, and actively seeking to promote cognitive justice.

This sense of interconnectedness provides a continuity of shared experience whereby the traditionally separated knowledge generation, validation and diffusion are entangled and shared as part of a longer term project of community wellbeing. Finding ways of integrating the useful technical elements of this 'conventional' research regime into a paradigm of democratic knowledge requires careful interpersonal and intercommunity communication (Monk et al., 2023). The African regional training centre has three core functions related to the K4C movement for social responsibility in higher education: We train the next generation of engaged scholars in community-based participatory research, we engage in regional and international policy dialogue and activism for CBPR, and we nurture a network of engaged researchers that are committed to promoting and learning from diverse knowledges.

The African regional training centre stands as a testament to the transformative power of relationships, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) into its core functions. At the heart of our mission is the commitment to train the next generation of engaged scholars in community-based participatory research (CBPR). This training is not merely a transfer of skills but a co-creative process whereby hubs across the African region actively shape the curriculum, contribute multilingual materials and facilitate training sessions. By embedding IKS into these processes, we ensure that the knowledge shared is not only diverse but deeply rooted in the lived realities of the communities we serve. As

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1   Ndawula (2017) uses this term to reflect the shared hegemony of White European and American epistemic cultures.

part of our training and network, we are actively seeking to develop rich local language and locally rooted case studies to strengthen the local learning materials and research examples available.

Our approach to regional and international policy dialogue and activism for CBPR is similarly grounded in relational values. The centre's policy engagements are informed by the collective wisdom of our network, and the centre nurtures an engaged network of researchers as a relational learning ecosystem. Mentorship, knowledge exchange, and solidarity are structured around reciprocity and co-learning, not extractivism. Just as the Gulu hub relies on informal community partnerships, the centre maintains and expands this model in both training and movement building. This participatory ethos ensures that our advocacy is not only inclusive but also reflective of the epistemic diversity that defines our region. Decision-making within the centre involves not only academic actors but also community representatives or regional collaborators, modelling deliberative and inclusive processes.

Thus far, we have delivered one cohort of training, with the residency taking place in Gulu. The two-week residency is the core space of learning from each other and building a network. It is here that we practice art-based inquiry and learn primarily through local knowledge practices, which are mostly experientially-based. It is a rich and dynamic learning environment where participants really set the foundations for their projects and plans at their hubs when they return. We are presently getting started with the second cohort; the residency will take place in South Africa to maintain our commitment to learning from the diversity of our hubs. We also see this shifting residency as an opportunity to bring international visibility to the work of the local hub. We are also developing a French cohort, likely to begin in 2026.

The core challenges that we face are time and funding to support participants to join the course, particularly for community partners. We find that while institutions are interested in the concept of CBPR, often they are not willing, or do not have the resources, to prioritise training of faculty. Likewise, the centre does not have core funding to support running the centre, recruitment of hubs, or the development and delivery of our curriculum. However, these core challenges also happen to be the core sources of our potential and opportunity. Because we do not have time or positions allocated for this work, we have to rely on the distributed leadership and experience that is within our network. This creates a space of negotiated and ongoing learning based on diversity, trust, and strong relationships, which is making our centre thrive. Likewise, not being dependent on a donor ensures that we are able to work with a long-term vision, and on our terms. We also see that those who join our programme do so out of passion and remain important contributors to our centre and to our training programme.

In essence, the African regional training centre is more than an institution; it is a movement for greater inclusion and participation across language and knowledge cultures. By valuing each other as people and embracing the messiness of co-creation, we are building a richer and healthier society.

Mizan Knowledge for Change (K4C) Hub, University Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM)

Mizan K4C Hub conducts academic training and research with regard to the field of village (rural and urban) sustainability, indigenous studies, leadership and spirituality, community engagement, and youth development. Our focus is to cater to the needs of the community from various backgrounds through multidisciplinary perspectives.

Mizan K4C Hub was established as a result of a collaborative research partnership between Mizan Research Centre (MRC), Faculty of Leadership and Management, USIM, with various community, private, and government-based organisations in Malaysia since 2014. Some of the research projects conducted by Mizan Research Centre (MRC) are the study of the indigenous community of orang asli, village sustainability, and community leadership and values. In 2017, the lead researcher of Mizan Research Centre, Dr. Mahazan Abdul Mutalib, was introduced to the UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education through a community confluence organised by the UNESCO Chair and team at Jinja, Uganda. This introduction to K4C has strengthened the engagement of Mizan Research Centre (MRC) with its partner organisations, namely Malay Agricultural Settlement of Kampong Bharu (MAS), Malaysia Youth Council (MBM), and National Centre of Excellence for Indigenous Pedagogy, Institute of Teacher Education, Tengku Ampuan Afzan Campus, Pahang, Malaysia (IPGKTAA), and also the Association of Indigenous Community Malaysia (POAM) when the centre officially joined UNESCO K4C consortium beginning 2019.

The university-community engagement structure is more visible after the official registration of Mizan and USIM in the UNESCO K4C network, and this has attracted many other organisations in Malaysia to participate with Mizan. Since 2022, International Youth Centre Kuala Lumpur (IYCKUL), an international youth training and community development centre, has joined Mizan and UNESCO K4C networking and has contributed significantly by hosting and arranging various K4C mentor residencies at the global and regional level. The structure is stronger since IYCKUL, through its connection, has linked Mizan and the UNESCO Chair to the Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia, as well as other NGOs such as Benevolent Malaysia and MyHumanitarian.

This organised arrangement is now creating more impact through the support that the 'team' has continuously received from the UNESCO Chair, UVic, and Pria. In 2024, USIM and Mizan K4C hub were appointed as a UNESCO Chair regional training centre (RTC), and now the hub and its partner associations (i.e, IYCKL and MBM) are organising the first UNESCO K4C CBPR Mentor Training Programme (MTP) for the Asia region (28th August 2024 to 23rd December 2024). Our first Regional K4C Residency will be held at IYCKL from 5-13 October 2024. The first Asia CBPR – MTP participants are among academics and civil society practitioners who come from Asian countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, Cambodia, Taiwan and South Korea. Meanwhile, for cohort 2 MTP, Mizan K4C hub has received participation from some universities in Central Asia in addition

to existing networks. It is always important for the Mizan K4C hub to analyse how the partnership between USIM (Mizan K4C *hub*), IYCKUL and MBM could be strengthened and become the 'catalyst' to support knowledge sharing and development of other independent/ non-government-based community associations in Malaysia, such as the Association of Indigenous Community Malaysia (POAM).

The 'visible structure and governance' of Community-University Research Partnership (CURP) should acknowledge the different nature and governance structure or objectives of each community organisation involved in the partnership. Malaysia's National Blue Ocean Strategy (NBOS), which was introduced in 2009 to reform public service delivery (including public universities) to break the culture of working in silos, has faced some major problems due to its structure, bureaucracy, and understanding. Therefore, a specific small to medium scale case study conducted through the boundary spanning project in the context of CURP is timely for us. We can showcase how collaborative partnerships can be effectively conducted through the guides and experiences of the UNESCO Chair and other hubs across the globe. The Mizan boundary spanning case study will cover specific dimensions of CURP such as the importance of community engagement training and knowledge (we mostly get this from the CBPR approach), mutual understanding of university and community partners/ individuals, governance and structure, methods of setting up community-university projects, sharing of thoughts, ideas, and ownership and shared values. The case study will involve stakeholders such as USIM and community partners leadership/management, representatives from related ministries, major stakeholders of the engagement/partnership, or selected community members.

IAPaz Hub Colombia - K4C Latin American Regional Center for Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

The K4C Latin America Regional Center was founded in November 2024, with the support of the Vice Presidency for Research and Creation and the Faculty of Education of the University of Los Andes. After a year of negotiations with these university entities, the centre began operations. Although there are three hubs in Latin America that are part of the K4C consortium, Colombia, Cuba, and México, only the Colombia hub has participated in the creation and consolidation of the centre. This has been a major challenge for the centre, as a single hub requires more work to organise the mentor training programme (MTP) and recruit mentors. On the other hand, while Latin America has a strong tradition of working with communities using the participatory action research paradigm, this approach is not recognised within universities as a reliable way of producing knowledge. Conservative approaches to research from a rather extractive perspective prevail in many universities.

That is why the mission of the Latin American regional centre is to strengthen community-based participatory research (CBPR) capacities in the region. Through the training of mentors, the development of national and local hubs, and the generation of applied knowledge, we seek to promote social transformation and community work, in

coordination with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The center is organised into three strategic areas: training, research, and the dissemination and social appropriation of knowledge. This centre aims to establish itself as a benchmark in participatory research in Latin America, connecting higher education institutions and community organisations for the co-creation of knowledge and new national and local hubs. Through innovative learning strategies and an approach committed to the democratisation, decentralisation, and decolonisation of knowledge, we seek to generate impact on community development and strengthen research capacities.

The objectives of the centre are as follows:

1. To offer the MTP in Spanish as a certified microcredential,
2. to create and strengthen local participatory research hubs in various countries in the region,
3. to develop national-level IPBC training programmes adapted to the Latin American context,
4. to promote support networks between universities and community organisations in Latin America and with the other regional centres in the consortium,
5. to develop digital learning platforms for IPBC training and
6. to promote ethics and social responsibility in community research.

In the constitution of the centre, we defined the following ethical principles that guide the training, research, and strengthening of the K4C consortium network:

- *Respect for the community*: All research is conducted in collaboration with the community, respecting their knowledge, cultures, and needs within the framework of their rights in the case of indigenous communities.
- *Use of information:* All information generated within the centre must be used exclusively for the centre's research and training purposes. The information will not be used for personal, commercial, or purposes unrelated to the centre's mission.
- *Social commitment:* Working at CBPR is an option for social and political commitment that implies dedication, responsibility, and consistency with the values of social transformation. Participation in the centre requires a genuine and sustained commitment to both the communities and the processes.
- *Co-creation of knowledge and reciprocity*: The work is based on a co-creation process with the communities, ensuring that participatory research is an exercise in dialogue and co-construction. This implies that all research must be of direct use to the community, breaking with the traditional model in which only the researcher benefits from the results.

- *Relationship between the K4C consortium and the UNESCO Chair*: Any strategic or representative decision must be aligned with the guidelines of the consortium and the Chair to ensure consistency with the overall principles and objectives of the programme. The person authorised to make decisions on behalf of the centre is the director, who acts under the guidelines established by the UNESCO Chair and its co-chairs.
- *Accountability and transparency*: Work at the centre is based on good faith, trust, and mutual respect. All training, research, and collaboration processes are carried out based on the agreed-upon agreements and the principles of established ethical standards and social commitment. All decisions, actions and results must be communicated openly and accessible to all stakeholders.

In respect of the MTP, the design of the course we offer through UAndes Continuing Education at the University of Los Andes is based on the original proposal of the K4C Consortium Mentor Training Programme (MTP), but adapted to the needs of the Latin American Region. The centre started its first cohort of mentors in June 2025 with 15 participants from five countries: Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Spain (Basque Country), and Mexico. The MTP maintains the 21-week training structure, which includes a week-long face-to-face meeting held at the Universidad de Los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia. The centre is also conducting research processes such as a systematisation of experiences from the training courses offered by the Colombia hub through UAndes Continuing Education, as well as the Flourishing CBPR Capacity Building course offered at the Universidad de Ibagué, Tolima, Colombia. We are also conducting research with young Indigenous people from the INGA Awa in the region of the Putumayo Department, Colombia, in Villagarzón village. This research is a CBPR process to co-construct strategies that empower these young people's Indigenous identity and to identify alternatives to strengthen their territory. Finally, we are seeking funding opportunities outside the university by identifying potential funders interested in supporting the centre's operations.

Recommendations: Key Strategies for Implementation

The creation of CBPR training centres in Africa, Asia, and Latin America has grown on similar timelines, with similar goals, but in different contexts. Our curricula, including our 10-day residency, have been developed and adapted together, with significant input from the UNESCO chairs. As we write, we are all in our second training cohort, and we are trying to find space for our mentors in training to meet and learn from each other as part of this cohort's learning programme. Some differences exist in the foundations of the centres. The Asian centre is more firmly located within the University. It is also the only centre with an official community partner – something the other two centres are reflecting on. The Ugandan centre takes an approach of distributed leadership with all regional hubs driving decisions, and co-facilitating training. To this end, it also relocates the residency

in different hub locations with each cohort. The Latin American centre is the only centre offering credits for the courses they offer.

In what follows we bring together some of our shared reflections that we deem important, which are based on our individual presentations above and our collective discussions related to the individual presentations. We see them as learning points in our ongoing development.

Contextualised and Flexible Curriculum Design

Modular approach:
Develop training modules that can be adapted to the specific needs of each region or country, including topics such as participatory methodologies (participatory action research, participatory mapping, participatory rapid analysis), research ethics, community project management, effective communication of results, and advocacy skills.

Active and experiential pedagogy:
Prioritise practical learning based on real-life projects and case studies from the regions themselves. Encourage learning by doing, and by critical reflection on experiences. Getting out of the academic space is essential to learn differently together. The residency is the core of this programme, but the design of the curriculum forces practice in the community.

Integration of local knowledges and languages:
The curriculum must actively validate and integrate indigenous, ancestral, and local knowledges, recognising them as legitimate sources of knowledge and a basis for research. This requires encouraging the use of mother tongue languages as much and wherever possible; this can be done with the use of translation. Having mentors create case studies in local languages will build a repository of resources that can be used in the training programme. Having non-university participants in the course is also essential to learning grounded in local knowledge-making approaches.

Integrating facilitation techniques:
CBPR is deeply connected to collective learning. Facilitation skills are therefore important. Mentors also need support in developing their own training programmes, and learning how to facilitate them. Arts-based inquiry methods need to play a major role here as they shift the way we feel and engage in the world.

Training of Local Trainers and Network Building

Invest in facilitation capacity:
Prioritise the training of local facilitators and mentors who understand the cultural and social dynamics of their communities. These trainers will be key to replicating and scaling up training programmes. Mindfulness of the CBPR movement as being a partnership of

university and communities requires purposefully including communities in training and leadership.

Creation of communities of practice:
Establish networks of CBPR researchers at the regional and transcontinental (South-South) levels to facilitate the exchange of experiences, methodologies, and resources. These networks can function as platforms for mutual support and collaboration on research projects. Relationships of care are what drive the CBPR movement. Developing strong relationships locally and across regions is therefore as important an objective as the training programmes.

Innovative Sustainability and Financing Models

Strategic partnerships:
Seek collaboration with local universities, civil society organisations, governments and development agencies that share the vision of participatory research.

Engaging policy makers and funders:
Policy makers and funders need to be convinced about the impact of CBPR. They also need recommendations on aligning funding to be inclusive of indigenous knowledges and longer term partnerships, rather than short term research grants. To this end our participation in UNESCO Open Science positions and African Union higher education convenings has been valuable. We need to showcase more on the value of CBPR both as a methodology and an approach to higher education.

Diversification of funding sources:
Explore funding models that include support from international foundations, national development funds, community co-financing mechanisms, and, potentially, income generated from consulting services or specialised training. The goal is to reduce dependence on a single source of funding.

Not everything has to be about money:
We have significant experience, passion and knowledge across the K4C network. This is our greatest resource, and it is what has driven us this far. We should continue to build on it, as it functions both as a form of internal relationship building and engagement which is vital for the network, and makes our regional centres stronger.

Challenges and Opportunities in the Creation of Participatory Training Centres

The ambitious task of establishing and sustaining training centres for participatory researchers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America is not without its obstacles. However, each challenge also presents a unique opportunity for innovation and local capacity building.

Challenges

Resistance from traditional research paradigms:
Entrenched academic institutions and funding schemes often privilege conventional methodologies. Changing this mentality requires a concerted effort to demonstrate the value and rigour of participatory approaches.

Institutional and human capacity gaps:
In many regions, existing research infrastructure is limited, and there may be a shortage of facilitators with expertise in participatory methodologies and transformative pedagogies.

Language and cultural barriers:
The inherent diversity of these vast regions means that adapting training materials and methodologies to multiple languages and cultural contexts can be complex and costly.

Financial sustainability:
Securing stable, long-term financing is a persistent challenge. Many projects rely on temporary external funding, making it difficult to maintain training programmes.

Recognition and validation:
Knowledge generated through participatory research, especially when integrated with local knowledge, faces difficulties being recognised and validated in dominant academic and political circles.

Opportunities

Potential for social innovation:
Participatory research fosters creativity and adaptability, which is crucial for developing innovative solutions to complex local problems, from natural resource management to community health promotion.

Strengthening South-South networks:
The creation of these centres can catalyse greater horizontal collaboration between countries and regions in the Global South. Sharing experiences, methodologies and resources between Africa, Asia and Latin America can exponentially enrich learning and have a profound impact.

Community empowerment and local governance:
By empowering communities to lead their research, their capacity for informed decision-making and public policy advocacy is strengthened, promoting more participatory and equitable governance.

Research relevance and pertinence:
By ensuring that research questions and solutions stem from local needs and priorities, the resulting research is inherently more relevant and more likely to generate positive and sustainable impact.

Attracting funding with a focus on impact:
Donors and development agencies are increasingly interested in projects that demonstrate tangible impact and a focus on local empowerment. Participatory training centres, by generating capacity and solutions from the bottom up, align perfectly with these priorities.

Influencing the development of public policies:
Aimed at developing community engagement programmes and projects through CBPR, popular education, and lifelong learning.

Conclusion

In this paper we have claimed that universities should be spaces of diverse knowledge production oriented towards designing socially just and flourishing societies. We feel that to do this practically, universities need to diversify their knowledge approaches and be more inclusive in their processes. The vision of our K4C movement is a future where research can be a tool for local empowerment and social transformation in Africa, Asia and Latin America. As we reflect on our regional centres in this paper, we can see that they have an important role to play in strategically achieving this vision. The regional training centres are significant because they are driven by the rich stories of southern epistemologies and thus based in relationality, transdisciplinarity and interdependence. As we have argued, these centres are not merely educational institutions, but catalysts for change that dismantle traditionally Western knowledge hierarchies and validate the rich diversity of knowledge emanating from these regions.

By investing in contextualised curricula, active pedagogies, the training of local trainers and the development of robust networks, we can overcome the inherent challenges and capitalise on the vast opportunities these contexts present. Participatory research, at its core, is an act of epistemic justice, empowering communities to define their agendas, generate their solutions, and claim their place as active agents in knowledge production. The K4C CBPR movement is more than just a methodological approach to research however. It is a movement for more inclusive societies and a call for collaborative and diverse participation in the articulation of what we want our futures to be as well as the many pathways to getting there.

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Carefully Navigating the Messiness of Community-Engaged Feminist Internet Research

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Abstract

Community-engaged feminist internet research is often complex, as researchers navigate the needs of communities alongside institutional expectations to produce knowledge that meaningfully serves local digital realities. Rather than viewing this complexity – or 'messiness' – as a weakness, this paper argues that it is a productive and necessary dimension of rigorous, care-centred research. Drawing on two recent studies, the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project and The Left Out Project, the article illustrates how methodological uncertainty, ethical negotiation, and shifting contextual conditions shape feminist internet research in practice. Embracing and making visible this messiness enables greater reflexivity, supports more inclusive and accountable knowledge-making, and strengthens the ethical foundations of engaged research. The paper concludes with three recommendations for navigating the complexities of community-engaged feminist internet research: practising ongoing reflexivity, building communities of practice, and grounding research in an ethics of care.

Keywords: *community-engaged feminist internet research; engaged research; internet research; feminist research; messy research*

Introduction

"I know research has always been messy… And it's a challenge to address it and work it out in your theory" (FIRN Research Partner 1).

Community-engaged feminist internet research sits at the intersection of relational practice, situated knowledge-making, and the shifting dynamics of working alongside communities whose digital and offline lives are shaped by structural inequality. Because of these conditions, such research rarely unfolds in linear ways. Instead, it demands responsiveness to context, to participants, to risk, and to the politics of knowledge production. Yet in

academic publication, these complexities are often tidied away, giving the impression that rigorous research follows an orderly, predictable path. This article argues the opposite: that the complexities and disruptions encountered in community-engaged feminist internet research are not only inevitable but central to ethical, reflexive, and transformative research practice.

To ground this argument, the paper draws from two recent feminist internet research projects carried out within the Feminist Internet Research Network: the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project (McLean, 2022) and The Left Out Project, which explored online gender-based violence against transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse (TNBGD) people in four African countries (McLean & Cicero, 2023). Across these projects, researchers encountered methodological uncertainty, ethical dilemmas, shifting access conditions, and unexpected findings, each revealing the kinds of 'messiness' that typically remain absent from final research reports.

Rather than treating these moments as problems to overcome or conceal, this article approaches them as sites of insight that illuminate how knowledge is co-created, negotiated, and shaped through care-full engagement. The next section therefore offers a conceptual grounding by defining *messiness* as a methodological and ethical condition within research, before moving to examples from the two studies. Through these reflections, the article demonstrates how embracing and making visible the messiness of community-engaged feminist internet research strengthens both rigour and care, and why doing so is vital for researchers committed to justice-oriented digital inquiry.

Defining Messiness in Research

Messiness is an inherent and unavoidable feature of research (Bloyce, 2004; Cook, 2009; Clark et al., 2007), yet it is frequently absent from published accounts. Despite researchers informally acknowledging being 'in a mess' at various stages of a project, academic writing often presents research as linear, predictable, and neatly structured (Cook, 2009, p. 279). This tendency reflects the longstanding association of 'messiness' with poor rigour, lack of discipline, or methodological weakness, an assumption reinforced by dominant research cultures that privilege order, coherence, and authority. Feminist, queer, and community-engaged researchers, particularly women and gender-diverse scholars, feel this pressure acutely, often working within disciplinary environments shaped by masculinist norms that reward detachment and certainty (Dadas, 2016).

However, messiness is not a methodological flaw but a generative space within which learning, reflexivity, and conceptual refinement occur (Cook, 2009; Dadas, 2016; Law, 2004). As Bloyce (2004) and Cook (2009) argue, attempts to eliminate complexity restrict what research can reveal: they encourage researchers to report what fits rather than what is, foreclosing the possibility of deeper insight. When researchers acknowledge unexpected turns, shifting participant needs, analytic uncertainty, or institutional constraints, they not only strengthen transparency but also validate the realities of knowledge-making as

lived rather than idealised practice. Messiness is therefore both methodological and ethical: it invites researchers to recognise the relational, situated, and evolving nature of inquiry, and to remain open to what emerges when neat categories break down.

Importantly, messiness is not merely the residue of challenges encountered during fieldwork; it is also enacted through the need to adjust research designs, rework research questions, negotiate positionality, and respond to ethical dilemmas (Billo & Hiemstra, 2012; Edwards & Mauthner, 2012). In community-engaged feminist internet research, where power, care, and participation are central, these disruptions become especially instructive. Messiness in this context signals attentiveness to participants' realities, responsiveness to context, and willingness to reconsider frameworks when they do not align with lived experience. Rather than impeding rigour, such openness strengthens the trustworthiness and transformative potential of engaged feminist scholarship.

Messiness, then, should not be concealed but invited (Elden, 2012). It is a site of possibility where new knowledge, ethical clarity, and collaborative insight can emerge. By naming and examining messiness, researchers contribute to a culture of transparency and care, modelling practices that support both emerging and experienced scholars in navigating the complexities of engaged research.

Engaged Research

Engaged research begins from the recognition that knowledge-making is neither neutral nor detached from the social worlds in which it is produced (Key et al., 2019; Tandon et al., 2016). Rather than treating research as an individual pursuit, or the property of academic institutions, engaged research positions knowledge as a public good shaped through reciprocity, dialogue, and accountability to communities. At its core, it emphasises co-creation: building knowledge *with* communities, not *for* them (Holliman, 2017). This ethos aligns closely with feminist internet research, which grounds inquiry in the lived experiences of those most marginalised in digital and socio-technical environments, including transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse (TNBGD) people.

Engaged research is best understood as a spectrum of approaches united by participation, responsiveness, and collaboration (Key et al., 2019). Its strength lies in maintaining stakeholder involvement throughout the research process, from shaping questions to interpreting findings. Feminist internet research amplifies these commitments by insisting that the standpoints of those excluded from dominant digital narratives are not ancillary but central to understanding online harms and imagining more just digital futures (McLean, 2020). This shared orientation toward relational and contextual knowledge production foregrounds the responsibility researchers hold in shaping what becomes visible, whose voices are centred, and how power circulates through inquiry.

A range of theoretical traditions help clarify this grounding. Ecosystems theory highlights that communities are embedded within interconnected social, cultural, political, and technological systems, an especially useful lens for understanding online

gender-based violence, which moves fluidly across digital and offline spaces (Tandon et al., 2016). Critical theory, particularly in feminist and postcolonial scholarship, deepens this lens by interrogating how power structures shape both research relationships and the digital landscapes under study. Feminist internet research extends this by emphasising reflexivity, recognising that researchers' identities and positionalities influence not only data interpretation but also the conditions of participation itself (Billo & Hiemstra, 2012).

African philosophical traditions further enrich engaged research. Ubuntu centres relationality, interdependence and ethical responsibility (Letseka, 2012; Metz, 2014), reminding us that knowledge is inherently communal and bound to questions of dignity and care. Decolonial and Indigenous research paradigms similarly foreground epistemic freedom, social transformation, and the co-production of knowledge (Chilisa, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). These perspectives call attention to the structural hierarchies, inclusive of colonial, racialised and gendered, that shape whose knowledge is valued and how research proceeds. As Nyamnjoh (2019) argues, confronting these hierarchies is essential if research is to move beyond extractive engagements toward meaningful participation.

Within this landscape, community-based participatory research (CBPR) is often regarded as one of the fullest expressions of engaged research. CBPR emphasises mutual respect, shared decision-making, and equitable distribution of benefits (Mosavel et al., 2005). It recognises the expertise held in lived experience and seeks to embed research outcomes in community priorities to ensure sustainability and impact. In feminist internet research, these principles become vital for addressing the unique harms and possibilities of digital life, particularly for communities rendered vulnerable through online surveillance, harassment, or exclusion.

Despite its transformative potential, engaged research does not unfold seamlessly in practice. Scholars caution that institutional precarity, rigid bureaucratic systems, and entrenched hierarchies can constrain genuine collaboration (Heney & Poleykett, 2022; Rose & Kalathil, 2019). Even when researchers and communities are committed to shared power, structural conditions such as funding mechanisms, ethics approval processes and institutional expectations can reproduce inequality or limit participation. These critiques highlight that engaged research requires continual negotiation, not simply good intentions.

The ethical imperative of engaged research lies not in achieving perfect harmony, but in remaining responsive, adaptive, and attentive to the evolving dynamics of research relationships. This is especially true within feminist internet research, which extends engaged research into digital and socio-technical contexts shaped by rapid change, surveillance, and shifting forms of risk. In this sense, feminist internet research does not replace engaged research but deepens it - offering methodological, ethical, and epistemological tools for navigating complexity while remaining grounded in relational accountability, care, and justice.

Feminist Internet Research

Feminist internet research is a transdisciplinary approach that positions digital inquiry as both political and emancipatory. Drawing from feminist theory and praxis, it foregrounds lived experience, standpoint, and reflexivity as means of contesting the patriarchal, racialised, and colonial power structures that shape the internet.

Anchored in standpoint theory (Harding, 2004; Wylie, 2003), feminist internet research holds that knowledge is socially situated, and that those marginalised by systems of oppression may possess 'epistemic privilege' through the insight of lived experience. It is also deeply intersectional, following Crenshaw's (1989) and Collins' (1990) work in showing how overlapping oppressions co-constitute experience. Drawing on Haraway's (1988) critique of "neutral vision" and Mohanty's (2003) call for Global South women to "tell their own stories", feminist internet research actively resists extractive research logics. Through a feminist ethic of care (Blakely, 2007), it centres accountability, reciprocity, and the well-being of participants, making feminist internet research both a methodology and a politics of transformation.

This emphasis on relational accountability also echoes African humanist philosophies such as Ubuntu, which foreground interdependence and ethical responsiveness within community life (Letseka, 2012; Metz, 2014). These shared values situate care and collaboration not only as feminist practices but as part of broader African epistemological traditions that understand knowledge as inherently communal and responsibility-bearing.

Drawing on feminist epistemologies, it insists on reflexivity, intersectionality, and care as methodological principles. However, as Rose and Kalathil (2019) remind us, calls for co-production and shared power often remain aspirational when institutions of knowledge production continue to privilege Eurocentric, rationalist, and white epistemologies. Without confronting these hierarchies, engagement risks reproducing the exclusions it seeks to resist.

Feminist internet research does not stand apart from engaged research but rather deepens it, offering methodological, ethical, and theoretical tools to ensure that engagement is not only collaborative and rigorous but also attentive to intersectionality, digital realities, and the transformative possibilities of research for equity and justice. Importantly, it extends the idea of 'community' to include online collectives and counter-publics, highlighting how digital and offline spaces are intertwined (McLean, 2018).

To illustrate how this plays out in practice, the discussion turns to two feminist internet research projects: The Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project and The Left Out Project. These examples show how inviting in the mess enriches both theory and practice in community-engaged feminist internet research.

Defining Community-Engaged Feminist Internet Research

Community-engaged feminist internet research brings together the principles of engaged research and feminist internet research to form an approach grounded in relationality, participation and justice. While feminist internet research offers the theoretical and ethical grounding – foregrounding standpoint, intersectionality, and the politics of digital life – community engagement extends these commitments into collaborative research practice. This approach centres the lived experiences, knowledges, and priorities of marginalised communities, particularly women, transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse people, as co-creators of digital knowledge.

Rather than treating research participants as data sources, community-engaged feminist internet research emphasises co-creation, care, accountability, and ongoing reflexivity. It attends to power dynamics, challenges extractive research logics, and works toward building more just and inclusive digital worlds. In doing so, this approach operationalises feminist ethics within participatory research processes, making explicit how feminist epistemologies shape research design, relationships, and outcomes.

Positioning the two projects that follow within this framework clarifies how they enact feminist theory in practice. Both projects draw on feminist and participatory principles to navigate complex digital, social, and political contexts while co-producing knowledge that centres the needs and experiences of communities most affected by digital harm.

Feminist Internet Research Network

The Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project and The Left Out Project were both projects commissioned by the Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN). FIRN (firn.genderit.org) is a collaborative and multidisciplinary research project led by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). FIRN aims to build an emerging field of internet research with a feminist approach to inform and influence activism and policymaking. The focus of FIRN has been on the making of a feminist internet as critical to bringing about transformation of gendered structures of power that exist online and onground. Projects within FIRN strive to bring about change in policy, law, and in internet rights discourse through data-driven and evidence-based feminist research, with a core focus being to ensure that women, gender-diverse and queer people and their needs are included in internet policy discussions and decision-making. Key areas of research of the FIRN projects are access (usage and infrastructure), big data and its impact on vulnerable populations, online gender-based violence, and gendered labour in the digital economy.

The first example, the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project, was a project that sought to explore the methodological processes and ethical practices of the first eight research projects implemented under FIRN. This project sought to study FIRN's own

practices of knowledge-making, create feminist space for dialogue and reflexivity, and to provide a methodological and ethical framework for conducting feminist internet research.

A Brief Note on Methodology and Research Design

Community-engaged feminist internet research requires methodological flexibility, reflexivity, and a commitment to care-full research practice. Research rarely unfolds in a linear or 'neat' way; instead, it is shaped by shifting relationships, evolving questions, and the practical and ethical complexities of working with marginalised communities. This section offers a brief overview of the methodological approaches underpinning the two projects discussed in this article, the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project and The Left Out Project. Both projects sought to address a core research problem through a research design grounded in feminist, participatory and care-centred principles that embrace rather than conceal the messiness of engaged research.

The Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project, conducted between 2020 and 2021, set out to address a key problem: the absence of a methodological and ethical framework for doing feminist internet research in the Global South. Its primary question was: how do FIRN research partners conceptualise, enact, and reflect on feminist methodological and ethical practices in their own projects? This question emerged from the recognition that feminist internet research requires more than applying standard methods; it requires critically examining how research is framed, enacted and negotiated. Drawing on feminist research, standpoint theory, intersectionality, and a feminist ethics of care, the project used document analysis, iterative feminist dialogues (interviews), and thematic analysis to explore methodological processes and ethical practices across eight FIRN studies with 14 research partners. This design intentionally co-created space for partners' own meaning-making, acknowledged shifting power dynamics, and treated reflexivity as a continuous – preliminary – ethical practice. In line with engaged research principles, the project sought to co-create knowledge with partners while openly grappling with the inevitable messiness of researching research itself.

The Left Out Project, conducted between 2022 and 2023, responded to a different but equally urgent research problem: the invisibility of transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse (TNBGD) people in existing online gender-based violence (OGBV) frameworks. Its central research question was: What are the specific experiences, forms, and impacts of OGBV faced by TNBGD people in Botswana, Rwanda, South Africa and Uganda, and how should policy and advocacy frameworks be reshaped to include them? This project required a methodology centred on the lived experiences of those most affected. The research adopted a feminist, community-engaged approach, using feminist dialogues (interviews) with 29 TNBGD participants alongside contextual country analyses. By foregrounding standpoint, intersectionality and care, the study recognised the risks participants navigate and adjusted its design to prioritise safety, anonymity, trauma sensitivity, and relational ethics. This resulted in a research process that was necessarily nonlinear – shaped by access barriers, varying comfort levels, and political constraints – and thus also profoundly rich,

producing knowledge grounded in the realities of those typically left out of digital rights research and policymaking.

Together, these projects demonstrate that community-engaged feminist internet research is inevitably messy but methodologically generative. Both studies show that research problems in the digital gender justice field cannot be addressed through rigid or extractive designs; rather, they require iterative, reflexive, context-attentive approaches that centre lived experience, negotiate power, and embed care as an ongoing practice.

Feminist Internet Research Meta-research Project

Meta-research is the study of research – including its methods, how research is reported and evaluated – in order to understand and improve on research and research processes (Ioannidis, 2018). The Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project formed part of the broader FIRN project and sought to research and analyse the methodological processes and ethical practices of the eight research projects implemented under the broader project.

The Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project created a feminist space for dialogue to explore the complexities of doing internet research through the critical exploration of the research methodological processes and ethical practices of the FIRN research projects. From the very beginning, the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project understood that research on the internet is complex and that current methodological approaches and research tools are not sufficiently reflexive to account for, for instance, feminist perspectives on power relations, positionality, researcher–participant relationships, access to digital data, and related issues.

Understanding that research is already a messy affair, it is thus given that this meta-research project would be even messier. This is because it not only sought to understand the methodological processes of the feminist internet research projects but to also take into consideration the process of doing a feminist internet research meta-research project. This entails considering both the messiness of the individual research projects and also the messiness of the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project in relation to the messiness of the other projects.

For instance, while the overarching focus of FIRN was on the making of a feminist internet as critical to bringing about transformation of gendered structures of power that exist online and onground, the individual projects within the network addressed various areas. The Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project needed to account for the individual projects while also bringing these projects into conversation with each other to be able to propose a guiding methodological and ethical framework for future feminist internet research projects.

The Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project surfaced many different forms of messiness, ranging from methodological uncertainties to ethical challenges and logistical frustrations. Among these, two examples stand out as particularly instructive. The first illustrates how grappling with positionality shaped the process of developing a coherent feminist internet research framework. The second shows how discomfort and critique,

often seen as tensions, can in fact be reimagined as forms of care. Together, these examples reveal how the messiness of feminist internet research is not a weakness to be tidied away but a central component of its rigour and ethics.

Example 1: Grappling with positionality

One of the most visible forms of messiness in the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project emerged in the constant negotiation of positionality. As the researcher, I found myself questioning whether the texts I was engaging with constituted theory, methodology, or literature. Because this was a meta-study of feminist internet research, the boundaries were blurred between what was a theoretical framing, what was methodological, and what constituted literature on the subject, and because of this I often felt uncertain about my own place within the project. This uncertainty, at first experienced as a personal failing, was in fact deeply tied to the politics of location (Rich, 1986). As Rich reminds, knowledge is situated: it matters where one speaks from, and no perspective is ever universal. My grappling with the methodological categories revealed how positionality shapes the very scaffolding of research, from the identification of frameworks to the analysis of themes.

Working through this mess required collaboration. Through discussions with FIRN colleagues and peers, I was able to map which texts would serve as methodological guides and which would be engaged as literature. In practice, this process was not about 'solving' the confusion but about recognising it as part of the labour of feminist research - I came to understand this challenge as providing a richer understanding of doing meta-research and how it could go on to guide and assist others who may encounter a project similar in nature.

FIRN Partner 3 shared their experience of their project's research design and how in the final report it would read that they had set out to do in-depth interviews and case focus groups. But it was not that simple: "that's what it will come across [as] to the readers of the findings but on the ground, a lot of it was developing as the project went along" and that the project "required a lot of improvisation" (FIRN Partner 3).

FIRN Partner 4 described joining a project team after the proposal had already been finalised and struggling to reconcile their own approach with the framework they had inherited. Through discussions with their team, they were able to integrate "some suggestions of mine to be able to do it [the research] myself" (FIRN Partner 4). Their reflections on reworking the project with colleagues revealed how intersectional perspective shaped the project's trajectory, requiring both negotiation and compromise (McLean, 2022).

The eventual outcome of the meta-analysis illustrates how this grappling produced new insights. By sitting with the contradictions in the data and engaging the FIRN team, the analysis moved towards four key pillars of feminist internet research: standpoint; intersectionality; reflexivity; and feminist ethics of care (McLean, 2022). Difference was included in the discussion on ethics of care; this was a critical addition because it ensured that knowledge was not flattened into sameness but recognised diversity within feminist and community perspectives. What began as an often frustrating tangle of frameworks ultimately became a richer, more inclusive articulation of feminist internet research.

In this way, grappling with positionality exemplifies how messiness is not a detour but the substance of engaged feminist inquiry. It is through uncertainty, negotiation, and recognition of difference that feminist internet research grounds itself in the realities of those it seeks to serve.

Example 2: Embracing critique and discomfort as care

A second form of messiness arose from the tension between critique and care. Within feminist research, there is often a strong emphasis on honouring participants' stories and ensuring that their voices are not misrepresented. While central to an ethic of care, this commitment can sometimes make researchers reluctant to apply critical analysis, for fear of misusing power. FIRN Partner 6 described this tension powerfully:

> …when I first started writing and drafting the report, because the stories were so precious to me and I was so conscious of the power [I had] as a researcher, to a point where I actually paralysed myself from giving my own analysis.

This resulted in their first draft being largely descriptive, holding back from drawing patterns or offering critique because "I was fixated on presenting their stories as to this I couldn't quite see the key patterns" (FIRN Partner 6). Only through conversation with the FIRN team and other feminist colleagues did they come to see that their hesitancy to analyse the stories shared with them was due to their recognition that as researchers "we are [in] the position of power, I felt embarrassed to exercise that power" (FIRN Partner 6). Power imbalances in research are inevitable, but what matters is how we think about the power we possess and that we come from a space of care when enacting this power (Gringeri et al., 2010; Hesse-Biner, 2007). The FIRN team and network helped them to realise that stepping into analysis was itself a responsibility: critique could be a form of care.

I experienced a similar hesitation in my Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project. At times, I caught myself softening critique in the name of being 'nice' to research partners or to the data itself. Yet on reflection, I came to see that this avoidance risked doing injustice to what participants had shared. Without critique, we allow existing conditions to persist, and research loses its transformative edge; critical feminist perspectives, even in our own realm, are necessary for growth and continued knowledge building. Care in feminist research, therefore, is not passive or gentle but active and rigorous; it requires us to hold contradictions, challenge assumptions, and remain accountable to both participants and knowledge production.

Other FIRN partners echoed this recognition of discomfort as productive. Partner 7, for instance, described how in the case of the framework their team had opted to use, they came up against difficulties and discomfort in its messy implementation. They went on to state that "at some points [it] can be a little messy. It can get a bit confusing and sometimes we need some days to process a contradiction or to deal with something that we just noticed" (FIRN Partner 7). Rather than dismissing these moments as failure, they framed them as

integral to the research process. Such accounts highlight that critique and discomfort are not obstacles to care but essential to it.

The mess of navigating critique and care underscores a broader lesson: feminist internet research requires reimagining care as something that includes challenge, tension, and even discomfort. To do justice to participants and communities, researchers must embrace analysis as an act of care, ensuring that stories contribute not only to representation but also to transformation. In this way, critique and discomfort become central to the ethic of engaged feminist research.

Taken together, these examples show how the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project illuminated the often hidden labour of feminist research: negotiating positionality, working through contradictions, and reframing critique as an act of care. Rather than being tidied away, these experiences demonstrate that messiness is integral to feminist internet research, shaping both its methodological innovations and its ethical commitments. By embracing such complexities, the project highlights how engaged feminist research can remain accountable to the communities it serves while also challenging researchers to sit with discomfort, uncertainty, and difference. This recognition provides an important foundation for the next case: The Left Out Project, which further demonstrates how messiness emerges in fieldwork and community partnerships.

The Left Out Project

The Left Out Project was another FIRN initiative that explored the experiences of TNBGD individuals in Botswana, Rwanda, South Africa and Uganda (McLean & Cicero, 2023). TNBGD people are often subjected to violence based on their gender identity. Transphobic violence manifests in a number of ways, which can range from verbal to physical abuse, sexual violence, and murder (Müller et al., 2021; Graaff, 2021). The violence experienced by TNBGD people is of critical concern given the rate at which it is increasing worldwide (McLean and Cicero, 2023; Iranti, 2019). The Left Out Project sought to frame the violence that TNBGD people experience on the basis of their gender identity as gender-based violence.

Situated within the broader Feminist Internet Research Network, the project exemplified both engaged research and feminist internet research by working in close partnership with local NGOs, activists, and community members. Its aim was not only to document harms but also to amplify voices often excluded from mainstream digital and policy conversations. In line with engaged research principles, the project was collaborative and responsive, guided by community priorities. It fostered co-production of knowledge through dialogue and reflection while addressing urgent concerns of safety, inclusion, and justice in digital contexts. Grounded in feminist internet research methodologies, it centred reflexivity, intersectionality and care as guiding principles. Researchers navigated complex ethical challenges, constantly balancing the value of visibility with the imperative of protection in contexts where disclosure could pose profound risk to TNBGD participants.

While the project was initially framed around documenting state and societal forms of online gender-based violence, the fieldwork revealed findings that unsettled these assumptions and demanded a deeper, more complex engagement with the lived realities of TNBGD communities. One particularly unexpected finding challenged our initial assumptions.

Example 1: Intra-community violence in Uganda and Rwanda

Violence affecting TNBGD people online was pervasive across the four countries included in the research. Participants described multiple forms of harm, including discrimination from health care professionals, arbitrary arrest and detention, sexual harassment and violence, and being targeted by organised transphobic groups, to name only a few. Online harassment was widespread, with participants reporting both direct attacks and coordinated campaigns aimed at silencing them (McLean and Cicero, 2023).

One of the most striking findings of the Left Out Project emerged in Uganda and Rwanda, where research participants described experiences not only of violence from outside their communities, but also of harm within the LGBTIAQ+ community. Participants shared how members of the broader LGBTIAQ+ community, namely lesbian and gay individuals, would dismiss their lived experiences, refuse to use their pronouns, misgender them, stalk them, and share their images without permission.

This was unexpected, as the project had initially been framed around documenting online gender-based violence by state actors, institutions, and broader society. Yet these accounts of intra-community violence unsettled these assumptions, demanding that the researchers rethink the frameworks of GBV often applied uncritically. It was through this uncomfortable finding that the researchers argued for the interrogation of transphobia within LGBTIAQ+ spaces in order to understand how exclusion and harm can circulate in community contexts, even among groups otherwise marginalised in broader society. Through this interrogation it became clear that lesbian and gay groups were engaging in transphobia as self-preservation. One Rwandan transgender woman shared with the researchers how because there are no legal protections for LGBTIAQ+ people, lesbian and gay people will discriminate against TNBGD people so as not to draw attention to themselves, to protect themselves and their families. An unexpected finding that sadly made sense in its context. The accounts of intra-community violence in Rwanda and Uganda complicated the research assumptions, demanding that researchers re-think frameworks of GBV that are often applied uncritically.

Such findings reveal the productive 'messiness' of engaged feminist internet research: when researchers are willing to hold contradictions and discomfort, new and more nuanced understandings of harm can emerge. In this case, it became clear that GBV cannot be neatly mapped onto an oppressor–oppressed binary, and that harms often intersect with interpersonal, community, and structural dimensions of violence. Rather than treating these stories as anomalies, the project embraced them as opportunities to expand theoretical and activist understandings of GBV. This example illustrates how feminist internet research

both complicates and deepens engaged research by insisting on reflexivity, responsiveness, and the willingness to adapt frameworks in light of participants' lived realities.

This disruption illustrates the necessity of allowing research to be unsettled by participants' realities, rather than forcing their experiences into pre-existing frameworks. Alongside the conceptual disruptions, the project also demanded ethical negotiations shaped by care and responsibility.

Example 2: Ethical and safety challenges in working with TNBGD participants

The Left Out Project also underscored the ethical and safety complexities of conducting research with TNBGD communities, particularly in contexts where visibility can be life-threatening. Ensuring participant safety required more than adhering to institutional ethics protocols; it demanded an ongoing, relational ethics of care. This was evident in several ways. For example, in Uganda, where the risk to participants was particularly acute, researchers adopted pseudonymous identifiers (e.g., 'U1') to avoid any traceable connection to participants. In addition, researchers asked participants not to use the video function in online interviews, reducing the risk of recognition and tracing.

Digital safety was also prioritised. The research team avoided cloud-based storage of recordings, instead saving files directly to encrypted hard drives. Email communication was conducted via Riseup, a secure platform widely trusted by activists, and researchers and participants both used virtual private networks (VPNs) to conceal their locations during interviews. These practices reflect how ethics extended beyond compliance into a continuous labour of safeguarding.

Equally, researchers collaborated closely with LGBTIAQ+ organisations to ensure participants had access to support structures before, during and after interviews. This was especially important when participants described traumatic experiences of Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) and harassment. For example, in East Africa, where surveillance is pervasive, researchers opted to work only through trusted organisations rather than open calls on social media, acknowledging the risks of digital tracking.

These negotiations were rarely smooth or predictable. Connectivity failures sometimes forced interviews to move to email exchanges, requiring improvisation and flexibility. Participants were also invited to adapt interviews according to their comfort levels, reinforcing a commitment to care that responded to the circumstances of each encounter.

In this way, the project exemplified the labour of care that is central to feminist internet research and resonates with the principles of engaged research. It demonstrated that ethical practice is not a once-off requirement but an iterative, situated process inseparable from the politics of voice, inclusion, and justice. Here, care becomes methodology: a way of conducting research that foregrounds the safety and dignity of participants while holding open the space for meaningful knowledge production.

Together, these two examples from The Left Out Project show how feminist internet research enacts engaged research principles in digital and community contexts but also expands them through feminist reflexivity and ethics of care. Further, these negotiations

highlight that feminist internet research, like engaged research more broadly, demands a relational, ongoing ethics of care that cannot be reduced to procedural checklists of traditional research ethics.

Community-Engaged Feminist Internet Research Is Messy

The practice of feminist internet research makes visible the inherent messiness of research. This messiness is not accidental or indicative of poor scholarship; it is a reflection of the deeply relational, reflexive, and situated nature of the work (Gringeri et al., 2010; Hesse-Biner, 2007). As the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project showed, feminist research, similar to engaged research, often blurs the boundaries between theory, methodology, and literature. Grappling with positionality, researchers found themselves in states of uncertainty, negotiation, and even doubt. Yet rather than being a weakness, these moments became instructive. They demanded openness to emergence, collaboration with peers, and recognition that knowledge is not produced in a linear or neutral fashion but through dialogue and reflexivity.

Messiness also emerged in the labour of balancing care and critique. Researchers and partners frequently spoke of the difficulty of honouring participants' stories while also producing rigorous analysis. The instinct to protect participants sometimes led to hesitancy in applying critique, out of fear of reproducing power imbalances. However, as the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project and The Left Out Project revealed, critique itself can be a form of care: it enables participants' stories to contribute to transformation rather than remain descriptive accounts. Embracing discomfort and contradiction, rather than smoothing them over, became a way to practice an ethic of care that was both rigorous and transformative.

The Left Out Project further highlighted the messy realities of feminist internet research in fieldwork contexts. Unexpected findings – such as intra-community violence in Rwanda and Uganda – challenged what was assumed about the LGBTIAQ+ community. Ethical and safety challenges required constant improvisation, from adopting pseudonyms and encrypted tools to negotiating support systems with NGOs. These processes were unpredictable, relational, and sometimes frustrating, but they revealed care as methodology in action. Taken together, these examples demonstrate that feminist internet research is inevitably messy, and that this mess is its strength: it resists simplification, insists on reflexivity, and honours complexities of lived experience in pursuit of justice.

In recognising community-engaged feminist internet research as inevitably messy, we are reminded that this messiness is not a liability but a resource. It is through reflexive practice that researchers can make sense of uncertainty and positionality; through communities of practice that support and solidarity can emerge in the face of complexity; and through an ethic of care that critique, improvisation and responsibility are held together. By embracing, rather than concealing, the contradictions and challenges of research, we not only produce more rigorous knowledge but also create practices that are

attentive, relational, and committed to justice. Drawing towards a conclusion, this article now presents a set of three recommendations for navigating the messiness of community-engaged feminist internet research.

Recommendations

Community-engaged feminist internet research can benefit greatly from openly engaging with the messiness of doing research. The reflections and examples discussed above demonstrate that research is rarely neat or linear, but instead marked by contradictions, discomfort, and continual negotiation. Rather than concealing these experiences, embracing them offers opportunities for rigour, care, and transformation. Considering the challenges and insights shared, I propose three recommendations for researchers working with engaged and feminist internet research: be reflexive; establish communities of practice; embrace messiness as care.

Be Reflexive

Elden (2012, p. 67) argues that reflexivity requires researchers to acknowledge and accept the messiness inherent in the research process. Reflexivity is not simply a matter of reflecting after the fact but an ongoing practice of engaging critically with how research is shaped by one's own values, assumptions, and positionality (Billo and Hiemstra, 2012; Edwards and Mauthner, 2012). This includes recognising and leaning into discomfort rather than avoiding it. As Chadwick (2021) emphasises, discomfort is central to reflexive and critical research practice; when researchers shy away from it, they risk missing opportunities to contextualise the complexities of knowledge production and to be accountable for their work. Reflexivity, then, means staying with discomfort, interrogating one's own position, and acknowledging that knowledge is always situated and partial (Billo & Hiemstra, 2012).

Establish Communities of Practice

Researchers often encounter messiness and may struggle with how to respond to the challenges it presents. Establishing communities of practice provides space to share these experiences, create dialogue, and collaboratively generate solutions. By speaking openly about the complexities of research, messiness can be reframed as a collective learning process rather than an individual failing. For example, during a FIRN convening, sharing the idea 'research is messy because humans are messy' resonated with research partners, shifting their perspectives on their own struggles with data categorisation and analysis. Such exchanges can be transformative, enabling researchers to recognise that difficulties are not isolated but part of the shared labour of knowledge-making. Building communities of practice thus sustains dialogue, supports problem-solving, and affirms the inevitability of mess in research as an integral aspect of engaged scholarship.

Embrace Messiness as Care

Feminist research ethics emphasises "care and responsibility rather than outcomes" (Edwards & Mauthner, 2012, p. 19). An ethics of care creates space for emotionally engaged research that shows concern for participants, the outcomes of the research, and care for the researcher (Preissle, 2007; Blakely, 2007). Embracing messiness can be understood as part of this ethic: it is a way of acknowledging that difficulties, uncertainties, and contradictions are inevitable and worth making visible. As Chadwick (2021) notes, confronting discomfort is itself an ethical mode of interpretive practice. By articulating the messiness of research, we not only support our own reflexive engagement but also enact care for other researchers, signalling that they are not alone in facing such challenges. Sharing these trouble spots becomes an act of care, cultivating solidarity and contributing to a broader culture of transparency in feminist and engaged research.

For higher education institutions, this means legitimising such messiness as integral to rigorous inquiry through flexible ethics processes, interdisciplinary support, and valuing time spent on relationship-building and reflexive practice. By recognising complexity, uncertainty, and emotional labour as central to ethical engagement, higher education institutions can foster environments that sustain the relational, situated, and transformative character of feminist and community-engaged research

Conclusion

In bringing these reflections to a close, it becomes clear that community-engaged feminist internet research demands that we recognise messiness not as failure but as an inevitable, productive, and ethical dimension of research practice. The examples drawn from the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project and The Left Out Project illustrate how grappling with positionality, navigating intra-community tensions, and negotiating ethical complexities can unsettle our assumptions while deepening our understandings of harm, justice, and care. By inviting in the mess – through reflexivity, communities of practice, and an ethic of care – we create research that is more honest, accountable, and transformative. Such work resists neatness in favour of complexity, embraces discomfort as a form of rigour, and positions care as a central methodology. In doing so, community-engaged feminist internet research not only enriches engaged research but also expands its reach into digital and socio-technical contexts, ensuring that knowledge-making remains relational, inclusive, and responsive to the realities of those most often left out.

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