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PRACTICE-BASED ARTICLE

## When the guns stopped roaring: Acholi ngec ma gwoko lobo

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### Abstract

This article calls attention to the responsibility of universities to transform, through partnership, the community in which they are embedded. The authors suggest that, to find solutions to the various community challenges and achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), universities need to engage in partnerships of knowledge co-creation with the community in ways that value local knowledge and experience. The article elaborates on the efforts of Gulu University Centre for Community Based Participatory Research and Lifelong Learning, located in Northern Uganda, to show the potential of co-constructing knowledge for community transformation. The centre is part of the Knowledge for Change (K4C) global consortium, which is a growing network for community-based research. The authors share three research stories of community-based research that reflect distinct challenges faced in Northern Uganda and effective community-engaged solutions. Through an exploration of the Acholi ontology and epistemology of interconnection, the authors demonstrate that local communities have the knowledge and experience to define and address local problems.

### Keywords:

**Community-based research, African universities, Sustainable Development Goals, knowledge democracy, community transformation**

When the guns fell silent – oh!  
 The tears were fresh and flowing  
 then the people ask  
 what shall we do to make our lives better?  
 What shall we do to make our lives better?  
 This is what we are going to do

Let's build ourselves together, no one will do it for us  
 rich cultures and natural resources we have  
 they can take us far.  
 The sky is our limit

For the pain in the past is gone and the future is bright.

## Introduction

Gulu University is located in Gulu district, a rural community of Acholi in Northern Uganda. Uganda gained independence from British colonialism in 1962 and has endured a somewhat rocky political and social period since that time. As the country negotiated Cold War influences and colonial induced tribalism, there has been a series of military coups to install different leaders. Most recently, from 1986 to 2007, there was the civil war between government and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) across Acholi lands. Gulu University was founded during the war and it now plays a large role in rebuilding the community. This article represents the commitment of Gulu University to be a local and regional leader and partner in community transformation and sustainable development.

We, the authors of this article, are five (male) members of the Centre for Community Based Participatory Research and Lifelong Learning, recently established at Gulu University as part of the UNESCO Knowledge for Change (K4C) global consortium. K4C is a global research network that aims to respond to what Ndlovu-Gadsheni calls the 'visible crisis of northern epistemology' (Omanga 2020 n.p.). Through community-based research (CBR), K4C hubs are attempting to bridge the gap between traditional university knowledge making and community knowledge making processes, which are often undervalued. One of the authors is the founder of the Centre and the Vice Chancellor of Gulu University. Four of us are lecturers at the university and one is a director of a community-based organisation. Four of us are Acholi and one is white, born and raised in Canada but now living and working in Gulu. We are all certified teachers of CBR under the K4C program and co-facilitate workshops, with emphasis on arts-based inquiry, as part of our work at the Centre.

The introductory poem, written by members of the Centre, affirms that we need to shade ourselves from the hegemony of what Wangoola Wangoola Ndawula (2017) terms Ameripean epistemology (referring to American and European cultural hegemony and reclaiming 'Western' spaces in Africa) and water our own local endogenous seeds of change. We affirm, as with the title of this poem, *Acholi ngec ma gwoko lobo* (Acholi knowledge for protecting the world), that local (Acholi) ontological and epistemological perspectives are essential, not only for local solutions, but as contributions to a diversity of approaches to cultivating a bright future in Africa and in the world. Chilisa, Major & Khudu-Petersen (2017, p. 328), suggest that scientific research needs an African epistemology based in connectedness and spirituality that '*promotes harmony and balance as well as critical inquiry and fearless aspirations for new paradigms ... Deriving its assumptions from the 'weness' and 'usness'*

*and the I/we relationship*'. Our (the authors) ontological and epistemological foundations are based in an interconnected world view. The trees and plants are important representations of us and our research goals. We are seeds, we are water, we *are* together the soul of the world. We believe that learning requires diversity, and research therefore needs to be democratic. Traditionally, in Acholi, as elsewhere, we learned through rigorous testing and observation of the world around us. We listened carefully and respected the world around us, upon which we were (and are) so dependent. Over centuries we learned how to live well in this world. We analysed our research around the campfire, with input from everyone, including youth. We disseminated our knowledge across generations through stories and riddles and we celebrated life through ceremony. These processes resonate today with the processes of community-based research – a care-full, egalitarian, social justice oriented approach to research based in knowledge democracy.

In this article we seek to demonstrate how Ameripean science and endogenous community-based epistemologies and practices can work ethically together to produce knowledge and actions that serve community needs that cannot be produced by either in isolation. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how community-based research can harness community and university-based knowledge to help us understand and respond to community-driven questions. It is emphatically a partnership that seeks transformative on-the-ground change. Importantly, this partnership has the goal of community involvement and improvement. This article lies in the intersecting space of university and community academic traditions.

We begin by briefly introducing community-based participatory research. We present here three brief research stories of community-engaged research practices, in which the Centre has been involved and which we use (among others) as local case studies in our courses at the Centre. The stories are written, one each, by three of the authors. The stories shed light on some of the particular challenges faced by the fragile and postconflict Acholi sub-region of Northern Uganda: high levels of out-of-school and unemployed youth; major deforestation, land grabbing and livelihood loss; vulnerability to climate change and water shortages. We use the term *postconflict*, without a hyphen, because new and emerging conflicts that are directly related to the war between the LRA and the Ugandan government are present and continue to impact the lives of everyone in the region – here, and elsewhere in Africa, postconflict represents another state of conflict characterised by multiple forms of violence, injustice, disenfranchisement and alienation from land and community. The challenges are thus significant and intersectional. They are grounded in a history of colonialism and war that has been imposed on Acholi people and land for a century. We then weave the stories together in an analysis of the participative and empowering nature of the research, and we conclude by reflecting on the potential of community-engaged research practices to create new knowledge to address current and future (unpredictable) challenges. We assert that building knowledge collaboratively can help us to view the world as having potential to make good things come to pass and imagine possibilities that we don't yet know exist.

## Community-Based Participatory Research

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) emerged from the field of radical adult education. Adult educators like Paulo Freire in Brazil and Julius Nyerere in Tanzania inspired in the 1960s–1980s a movement of liberatory and empowering education for social change, which valued local knowledge and experience and asked students to reflect and act on their positionality. Out of this movement emerged similar radical, empowering and engaged ways of studying the world, through approaches variously termed, such as community-engaged

participatory action research. Budd Hall, Marja Liisa Swantz and Orlando Fals Borda are other radical adult educators who were important early advocates for community-based participatory research and inspired many others in the global movement towards community-engaged research for social justice. Of course, community-based research practices have existed for millennia in various cultures and regions of the world, including Acholiland; however, they were silenced and delegitimated through colonialism and what Santos (2014) defined as epistemicide. Ndlovu-Gadsheni (2018) details how the white male western Europeans positioned themselves as the makers of knowledge and culture, presenting a historicity that ignored and demoted all other cultures and ways of knowing. Community-based research (CBR) is a movement that challenges ‘what constitutes knowledge production and who is allowed to take part in this process’ (Tandon et al. 2016, n.p.). Hall (1985) explains that community-based research is a collaborative process of knowledge creation which recognises that solutions to community problems must come from the community itself. CBR is social justice oriented, whereby the process of doing the research contributes to the output, which is a tangible solution to the issue raised. Importantly, CBR is not a prescription, but an approach that calls into question hierarchies of power, centres healthy relationships and begins from an understanding that everyone is an expert in their own lives and in their own ways.

The following CBR principles are very important for us in our research practice:

1. Community members and researchers work together in all stages of the research process.
2. All participants (researchers, community and partners) are involved in decisions about the research process from the beginning until the end.
3. The research process strives for consensus and enables participation from all members.
4. The relationship between researcher and community members is built on respect and trust.
5. The research process lays the groundwork for the exchange of knowledge, skills, resources and ownership between the researcher and the community.
6. There is continuous discussion/verification of data between all partners in order to generate meaningful, useful and accessible results that can inform actions.
7. The research addresses the interest and needs of the community/organisation.
8. Research builds on and contributes to the strength and resources of the community.

Research is a fundamental component of learning, adapting and acting in the world. Community-based research, as an egalitarian process of studying the world, is an important break from and radical confrontation to hegemonic power reinforced and rationalised by oppressors’ claims to universal knowledge. Shifting processes of research to value all knowledge shifts power and comes to create a new social charter from the bottom up. As such, it is a revolutionary practice of social change and social justice. We hope that our three stories, through their difference and diversity, will demonstrate the radical and care-full contribution of CBPR to building the world we want now.

## Research Story 1: Youth Connection and Art-based Pedagogy

I (David) am a straight white male Canadian. I lecture at Gulu University and Chair the Centre for Community Based Participatory Research and Lifelong Learning. I am interested in learning systems, including Indigenous ones, that are based in world views that emphasise interconnectedness and interdependence across species and time, and encourage learners to take responsibility for their learning and that of their community. It is perhaps not surprising,

then, given my pedagogical outlook, that I found myself in early 2018 sitting around a campfire with a grassroots community youth group, Starface CAMP, sharing stories, riddles, theatre and dance depicting the aspirations, oppressions and challenges at the centre of this youth world.

Starface CAMP's mission is to 'empower marginalised youth and embrace humanity through arts and culture' (personal correspondence with Starface CAMP director). The learning and talent that emerges through traditional Acholi learning in art, mentorship, stories and campfire circles at Starface CAMP is empowering and inspirational. Most of the youth are early primary school leavers for a variety of reasons. Many were born in internal displacement camps during the war and, as with almost everyone in the region, they lost parents or other close relatives during the war. I have engaged with Starface CAMP for approximately two years as a community member and as a university lecturer, including through *Theatre of the Oppressed* type productions and presenting at conferences with the youth. My interest in their teaching and learning practices is what drew me to Starface initially. I wanted to engage with the youth about what and how they were learning, but the youth wanted to emphasise that art is integral to life, so we decided to examine the question. They wanted to promote the arts to their teachers, parents and the community.

I initially proposed the research idea to a group of about 60 youth in my fumbling Acholi language at one of their campfires. I think they let me join them because they appreciated my effort to speak Acholi, and perhaps because of my unbridled appreciation of their capabilities. Speaking broken Acholi lowered the barriers between white university lecturer and teenage school drop-out because it immediately showed them that they had a lot to teach me. On splitting into groups according to their art preference, a number of options emerged: one (larger) group wanted to create a dance, another wanted to write a play, a third group wished to create a beatbox-spoken word-rap performance, a fourth wanted to make a short film of the whole process, and the final group wanted to use painting. In the end, the play and the movie did not materialise, but the dance, beatbox-spoken word-rap and painting interventions did. These were shared with the wider community, involving a short introduction, a performance, and then a discussion. The story presented here focuses on the painting project, which I was involved with, along with a group of 10 artists, three of whom were girls and six were boys between 14 and 18 years old.

The research utilised a collaborative, community-based art inquiry method taught to me by my close colleague, Dr Bruno de Jayme Oliveira (see Sanford, Jayme & Monk 2018). This technique involves handing out pre-cut squares of canvas and asking participants to paint a picture that represents an answer to the research question (in this case, why are the arts important to you?). Participants then collate their pictures onto a larger canvas, which prompts a conversation about the paintings. The arts are valuable tools of inquiry because they facilitate a deep and emotional understanding of self in the world (Clover 2011; Darder 2011). This is fundamental to understanding and exposing power dynamics and structures that are at the centre of struggles for social justice, a key goal of community-based research and the Starface program.

The research was conducted in three stages. First, I trained some of the youth in the process; second, the youth facilitated a community intervention; and third, we coded and analysed the data together. We had to modify the data collection process to suit the materials that were available (we used a bed sheet instead of canvas, for example), but generally we were able to follow the process outlined above. The intervention was attended by about 150 community members. Figure 1 shows the process of painting.





Figure 1 Process of painting by the participating youth during the university-community engagement on youth connection and art-based pedagogy

After the intervention, the youth facilitators and I reflected on participant responses, the images and the general inquiry process. We also coded and analysed the themes that emerged. I took written notes of this animated discussion, which left us using our cell phones as flashlights as it ended well after the mosquitoes had stopped biting at our legs. I compiled them and we shared them with the broader youth group.

Some of the key themes identified by the youth were: freedom; self-expression; hope and possibility; knowing yourself and appreciating difference; diversity and collaboration; culture and connection to the village; and vulnerability.

Cultural identity was seen as an important connection to art, which participants felt was absent from school and the city. The participants identified art with learning around the campfire, storytelling, traditional dancing and the 'songs of birds'.

Hope and possibility were another common theme that emerged. One participant described art as 'possibility in the palm of my hand'. Another explained that 'art means doing it all, art is freedom, art itself is everything'. One participant recounted that art helped her find her way: 'I never did well in school, but I started dancing and I got inspired'. Likewise, another explained, 'I wasn't anyone, I lost hope. From nowhere, I started bringing hope back through painting'.

Linked to this sense of hope was an understanding that art is important in helping you know yourself. Participants suggested that art was essential to being free to express yourself; they felt that they needed to 'break the corporate monoculture'. Participants agreed that 'everyone has a different perspective' and that embracing art was important because it encourages and embraces difference and diversity. A break dancer explained, 'those moves when breaking - individual moves may be not much, but when they come together they make something nice - like this art.' Love and embracing humanity were generally seen in the context of building a strong world. They were associated with mothers, who participants felt supported them in their dreams 'without judgment'.

Overall, it was established that art brings out important aspects of life and living together that are essential for individual identity building, empowerment and community development. Youth felt that art is missing from education and social life in the modern city world. They felt that their message was well received by participants in the intervention and that more interventions such as this one could be successful in building an art movement. They expressed that, as a result of this research process, they felt more capable of expressing why and how the arts are important. The canvas is displayed at the K4C Consortium's Centre for Community Based Participatory Research, based at Gulu University.



Figure 2 Photograph of the final canvas

Several ongoing and unanticipated outcomes emerged from this research. The first was the attendance of the mayor and district youth representative, who sat down after the initial performance to discuss how they could improve the art scene in Gulu. They pledged to host a national break dance competition in Gulu and gave money for a follow-up community arts day (two more of these events have since taken place). Second, the youth really embraced the painting method of engagement and we have used it in subsequent community interventions. We have also been invited to a neighbouring town, Kitgum, to facilitate an art-based workshop. A local primary school teacher also reached out to us and we helped facilitate a session in one of her classes. We have now connected with a university student group to build the arts scene on campus, and we continue to work together on various community initiatives.

## Research Story 2: Environmental Justice

As an environmental activist working with a grassroots, community-based organisation, Partners for Community Development, I (Simon) am accustomed to using CBPR to promote social, environmental, political and human rights' aspirations. One of the areas that we, as an organisation, are actively involved in is tackling the problem of deforestation in the Amuru district of Northern Uganda.

Unsustainable exploitation of forest resources for fuel wood remains a hard-hitting challenge to most communities in Uganda. Consequently, the country has lost more than 75 per cent of the initial 8.2 million hectares of forest cover in under 100 years. There has been

a vast increase since 2005, particularly in Northern Uganda (Branch & Martiniello 2018). In the charcoal producing district of Amuru, there is rapid loss of vegetation despite substantial efforts by the Local Government and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) to sustain forest cover. The phenomenon has accelerated in the last decade due to a relatively lucrative charcoal-for-energy business and international timber exportation. Branch and Martiniello (2018) explain that the problem is complex and connected to the demand for large-scale agriculture, illegal land grabbing and forceful evictions. In totality, these developments are largely exploitative of the local rural population who have limited alternative means of income and are often tricked or harassed into selling their land.

Partners for Community Development, the grassroots, community-based organisation where I work, decided to use CBPR to assess the impact of deforestation on the community and try and find a solution to the problem. A big part of our goal was to bring community together to reflect on what was happening and how it impacted them. We convened four Community Reflection Action groups with the purpose of mobilising community knowledge through discussion and action on deforestation in Amuru district. The process included field data collection, stakeholder and situational analysis, data dissemination to the Local Government district officials and direct community action. Each Community Reflection Action group consisted of 80 people, both men and women. We used community mapping, photo/video inquiry, storytelling and discussions to co-collect and co-analyse the data with a focus on enabling action to improve the community.

The community mapping process was done by groups drawing maps in the dirt to identify the hotspots for tree cutting within their villages. The processes required power sharing and a lot of adjustments to the maps until consensus was established. Thereafter, video and photography were used to document the deforestation camps, the process of charcoal being burnt and transportation trucks being overloaded. Collectively, the numbers of charcoal loaded trucks and trees being taken each day from the district was established. For storytelling, the participants listened to the stories of elders who explained the extent of degradation and shared the cultural, medicinal and spiritual value of some of the trees being lost. Throughout the process, problems associated with tree cutting emerged and stakeholders were identified. Thus, formal space was provided for each group to discuss the problems, identify who the key stakeholders were and develop a plan of action.

Depletion of forest land resources due to charcoal production was identified as one of the most serious environmental issues in the district. Participants pointed out that there was a need to prevent the indiscriminate cutting of trees in order to ensure that the current forest is better conserved. The threat of the problem is best highlighted in the village of Amora, which produces about 70 per cent of all the charcoal from the Amuru district. In this village, about 50 truckloads of charcoal are harvested each week.

Also, it was reported that community members were being exploited by charcoal traders from outside the district. The community members reported that they thought that they were signing contracts for a certain number of trees, but unknowingly ended up signing away their land titles. Further, the charcoal producing households earn on average 200 000 Uganda shillings per month from the sale of about 20 bags of charcoal. In contrast, the charcoal traders earn approximately 1 600 000 Uganda shillings at the current market rate for the same number of bags. The community members also pointed out that, at the current rate of forest depletion, approximately 146 000 acres will be deforested within 10 years. The mathematical basis for their projections is provided in more detail in Appendix 1.



Elders in the groups shared that some people in the community believe that, when they die, their spirits go into the trees, and thus if trees are cut without the appropriate rituals, the ancestors are being murdered. In addition, Shea trees, which are among the most important species for medicine and human healthy wellbeing, are targeted by tree cutters due to the high quality of their charcoal. It was pointed out that, traditionally, community by-laws forbid the cutting of Shea trees. This is because the Shea nut tree is crucial for the sustenance of natural vegetation, medicine, livelihoods and culture. Unfortunately, the charcoal burners have a strong preference for Shea trees due to the desirable quality of charcoal that the wood produces. The participants also expressed concern that, due to their observation, the majority of tree cutting in the district was currently being done by power saws, which in their opinion is wasteful compared with hand cutting the trees. They also reported that the charcoal burners do not replant trees in the areas deforested. The only potentially sustainable measure adopted in the district is agroforestry, whereby pine trees are grown for timber by mainly multinational companies. The community members also mentioned that the areas where trees are cut and burnt usually damage the surface of the topsoil and nearby shrubs. As a result of the digging and burning, the areas do not revegetate for several decades even when the rainfalls are enough to support regeneration of the vegetation.

They also observed that, because a lot of the trees were being cut, natural wells and rivers were drying up more frequently. Thus, community members have to walk long distances for access to water, which usually means boreholes with access fees involved. Also, they are now forced to walk long distances to find firewood for cooking. Both of these issues mainly impact the women and girls because these are traditionally their tasks.

The community also believes that the prolonged dry seasons are a result of massive tree cutting, making it difficult to grow crops, which directly impacts their livelihoods. This is because most people rely on subsistence farming in the regions. However, when it does rain, it pours, and this causes landslides and flooding probably because the roots of trees are no longer keeping the soil together. This is believed to cause not only desertification but also loss of soil fertility. These close observations of the community mirror findings found elsewhere (for example, for Brazil, see Pedlowski et al. 1997; for Sierra Leone, see Morie & Zang 2018). Also, the large transportation trucks carrying the trees and charcoal are usually overloaded and cause destruction of the village access roads.

In the absence of sufficient livelihoods from agriculture, incomes from charcoal production enable community members to acquire items such as bicycles, motor bikes, roofing materials and clothing, and pay for water and children's school fees. However, still more than 80 per cent of the community members participating were strongly opposed to tree cutting.

The extensive cutting of trees has resulted in adverse social, economic and ecological consequences. Reduced access to resources that are necessary for survival is seen as the cause of increasing conflict and tension in the community. Often it is the local communities who are blamed for cutting down the trees; however, this research demonstrates that in fact the communities are aware of the damage inflicted by deforestation and are generally opposed to it. The community compiled a report of the findings, documenting the negative environmental and social impacts of charcoal production and deforestation on the Amuru district. We presented this to local district officials in a subsequent dissemination meeting, along with a list of 14 recommendations for the local district government, to mitigate the current challenge of deforestation.

Thus far there have been two key direct consequences of this collective mobilisation. First, in the face of indisputable community demands, local district councillors took the recommendations seriously and instituted a ban on all commercial tree cutting, effective January 2020. They also started community tree nurseries. Second, when the implementation of the ban was not carried out effectively, the community mobilised in direct action on the camps they had mapped out, destroying them and forcing out the workers. While there remains much to be done to curb the deforestation in the area, the research has been an effective tool for real solutions.

### Research Story 3: Integrating Water Program in University Training

Over recent years, as a water resources engineer engaged in training and research at Gulu University, I (Denis) have appreciated that providing high-quality education requires collaborative efforts between the university and the community. With the concept of CBPR gaining ground as the best practice in conducting research to find engineering solutions to community problems, the Department of Biosystems Engineering at Gulu University has effectively applied this concept to the development of new training programs that are responsive to community needs.

In 2018, a group of communities in Northern Uganda petitioned the Vice Chancellor of Gulu University to establish a faculty of engineering to offer degree programs that could address water challenges, among other things. Sustainable access to water of suitable quality and quantity remains a critical development challenge in Northern Uganda and the country at large. A Ministry of Water and Environment report (2019) indicates that more than 34 per cent of the rural population in Uganda lacks access to potable (safe) water. Also, access to water for agricultural production is reasonably constrained and only the few Ugandans living close to surface water bodies are able to practise irrigation. In addition, the increase in population and economic activity and the impact of climate change due to anthropogenic activities, such as burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, mining and industrialisation, have exacerbated the current water challenges. And finally, there has been increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, such as drought, floods, landslides and heat waves, in Uganda.

To respond to the community demand to address these water challenges, the Department of Biosystems Engineering at Gulu University initiated development of a degree program in Water Resources and Climate Resilience Engineering (WRCRE) to train graduates who would be capable of providing solutions to the community water problems. There is a saying that 'water is life', which in the local language of the community in Northern Uganda (the Acholi) is interpreted as 'pii aye kwo', meaning without water they cannot grow crops, they cannot raise animals and their bodies will not survive.

A study was therefore launched, involving the university and the community, to identify the skills/competencies required to support the development of a program that would produce graduates who were responsive to contemporary water challenges in the era of climate change. The skills that would be required of graduates were categorised into technical, soft/transferable, business, entrepreneurial and writing/reporting. The study also covered gender mainstreaming and explored ways in which the university could collaborate with the community to enhance skilling of the graduates.

The community members were drawn from (1) Local Government technocrats – District Engineers, Water Officers, Agricultural Engineers and Environmental Officers; (2) Ministry of Water and Environment (MWE) – regional staff of the Directorate of Water Development (DWD), Directorate of Water Resources Management (DWRM) and Department of Climate Change; (3) Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industries and Fisheries (MAAIF) – regional staff from the Department of Water for Production; (4) Private sector – National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC), water consulting companies and well drilling companies; (5) Non-government organisations running water development projects; and (6) Alumni from the Department of Biosystems Engineering. The community members were also drawn from organisations to which graduates from the proposed program were expected to be attached for field training and in which they may eventually get employment. The views of the community members on the required skills/competencies of the graduates were crucial to the development of the proposed program. The Department of Biosystems Engineering at Gulu University worked in partnership with colleagues from the Department of Civil Engineering, University of New South Wales (UNSW) and the Department of Biosystems and Agricultural Engineering, Makerere University.

The conduct of this study was guided by the principles of community-based research. Hall (1985) explains that CBR is a collaborative process of knowledge creation which recognises that solutions to community problems must come from the community itself. He further observed that CBR is social justice oriented, whereby the process of doing the research contributes to the output, which is the tangible solution to the issue raised.

The research took a qualitative approach. Data collection was conducted through two phases. In the first phase, 60 selected community members were interviewed about the skills that would be needed by the graduates. Purposive sampling was used to identify the community members from the organisations. Key questions to the community members covered the technical, soft/transferable, business, entrepreneurial and writing/reporting skills they desired of the graduates of the proposed program. Responses from the community members were compiled and discussed in a second phase of data collection, the stakeholders' workshop. Again, a purposive sampling method was used to identify 20 participants for the stakeholders' workshop who would review the responses from the interviews. Focus groups were used in the workshop to identify gaps in the skills proposed during the interviews in the first phase and also to discuss community-university collaboration and gender mainstreaming in the program. See Appendix 2 for a summary of the community-compiled list of skills needed by graduates to address the water crisis. These lists were used to guide the next steps in the curriculum development, which included formulation of learning outcomes and identification of relevant courses. The university again worked with the community to translate these skills into a curriculum for training the graduates.

One of the surprising outcomes of the research was that, through the process of conducting the research, the proposed program gained stature in the eyes of the community. They felt that the university was addressing their needs, and because they were involved, the university was also serving them. In the long run, this will probably improve relationships with the community so that when the university wants to send students for internships or conduct other research they will be responsive. Furthermore, it demonstrated the relevance of the university to the community. Thus, the university is more likely to attract students to the program, and the students are more likely to find employment.

## Weaving the Stories, Connecting CBR and Community Transformation

This article is our campfire. We present to you these three stories that have made important contributions to the development of our community, with our community. Our stories are bound together in a cooperative approach to research that values and requires the diversity of expertise and experience of an entire community. The research stories shared here have important lessons for community-engaged research and building equitable relationships with community. They demonstrate the potential for universities to authentically participate in community development. They are based in an ontological perspective of interdependence that reduces patriarchal power hierarchies and recognises that the university is a part of the community, not above it. This perspective recognises that university researchers and community members alike have particular skills and resources that are needed to mobilise community transformation. The process of community building is especially evident in Northern Uganda as we seek to rebuild our lives and cultural institutions after living in the middle of a particularly brutal civil war. A process of research that accompanies the rebuilding of relationships, businesses and livelihoods and helps us to understand our collective capability and imagine a prosperous future together is essential for this region. The university has important resources and expertise that can accompany this process. Here we elaborate a few of the ways we observe this happening.

The research contributes to creating and sharing new knowledge. In all of the stories new knowledge was created. Story one presented rich data about art-based learning; in the second story the extent and consequences of deforestation came out; in the third story, a program to address water scarcity in the region was produced.

The research was empowering. Hall (1985) articulated that community-based research is a social action process that combines research, education and action to challenge unequal power structures and empower exploited peoples. In the process of recognising and validating the knowledge, community actors were empowered to believe in their potential. Following the long colonial history, communities in Northern Uganda have repeatedly been told that they don't know, and that they should listen to experts who do know. The participative process is therefore an act of empowerment. The researchers in these stories also became empowered by embedding themselves in the community. In the first story, the empowerment of the youth was especially prominent. The participants in Starface CAMP are mostly marginalised youth. Many of them have left school, and many are orphans without very much support outside of this program – a result of the recent 30-year war they were born into. Starface CAMP is a place where they are encouraged to pursue their dreams. As they developed the question of why the arts were important, the youth were speaking from their hearts. They were also answering the underlying question of 'why am I important to society?'. Their integral ownership of the research process and collective reflection was fundamental to learning for self-empowerment and self-realisation.

In all three stories, the research was collaborative and democratic. Deliberating and coming to consensus was an important part of the research – this is particularly evident in the second and third stories. In the second story, participants had to deliberate at length to decide together on the number of trees being cut and on developing a list of demands and actions to be taken. In the third story, participants decided on key components of a water program, including a list of skills needed by graduates. The collaborative process included collaborative interpretation and analysis in all cases.



The research was facilitated in recursive phases of engagement in action and reflection, as in the case of the second story, where participants mapped out the research on the ground, compared maps, and then went and took videos and photos of the spaces. They came back and deliberated again to form a list of demands for their political representatives. In the third case, the participants participated in discussions and interviews about the needs of the program, and then came together to co-analyse the data and formulate a list of skills needed by graduates.

In the first and second cases, traditional learning practices were used. Participants were engaged in circles, in case one around the campfire, in case two under a tree. Elders were consulted and traditional cultural values and knowledge emerged as key insights. In case two, the medicinal value of the trees came out in this process, and the traditional Acholi connection to the trees as ancestors built the importance of keeping the trees. The elders had knowledge of the ecosystem that the trees supported.

The research conducted here engaged the community to address the challenges they face and to begin to take action for their collective future. Tandon (1988, p. 6) asserts that participative research has ‘enormous potential as a major contributor in transforming the struggles of poor and deprived peoples’. This transformative agenda is clear in these research stories. In the second story, for example, the community was able to collectively shift policy and political action, and mobilise to physically dismantle the camps and chase away the tree cutters.

Banks, Herrington and Carter (2017) explain that in participatory research the impacts are considered to be non-linear and ongoing as opposed to traditional notions of impact occurring after research is complete. We would like to emphasise and elaborate on this point in two ways. First, the individual research stories presented briefly here demonstrate that social justice action was ongoing throughout the individual processes. This was happening through empowerment, engagement with a broader community and mobilisation of collective action across the cases. Second, the broader impact of this type of research is felt in the longer term. Building relationships of trust and value are integral to this type of research. The research is not simply a one-off, issue-driven project. While the individual issues are important, what we have tried to demonstrate here by presenting three very different cases is that, as with any healthy ecosystem, there is a trust and interdependence that emerges over time. This builds sustainable communities that are capable of identifying and solving current issues and preventing future issues. Individually, these stories represent important social justice action; combined, they show the longer term impact of community-engaged research practices for community development.

The participative nature and value of endogenous knowledge is important for building healthy communities because it challenges power structures that hide behind claims of ‘knowing better’ to control and oppress and maintain inequalities. Building knowledge democracy into community breaks down these barriers and opens the opportunity for diverse and creative solutions to the many problems facing the world today.

## Concluding Thoughts: A University-Community Hub for Transformative Change

The 24–27 February 2020 session of the African Regional Forum on Sustainable Development proclaimed that it would only be possible for Africa to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) if ‘universities in Africa collaborate in research, teaching and community or societal engagement’ (Ligami 2020, n.p.). The Regional Forum is an intergovernmental

platform convened by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in collaboration with the African Union Commission, the African Development Bank and the United Nations system. The outcomes represent African contributions to high-level discussions on the SDGs. The forum called for local partnerships to address the distinct challenges faced by particular regions and for pan-African networks to share solutions to common problems.

The K4C consortium emphasises that, as knowledge organisations, universities have a responsibility to generate knowledge for community change, with the community (Hall & Lucio-Villegas 2011; Mukherjee & Tandon 2011). The Gulu Centre for Community Based Research and Lifelong Learning reflects the goals of the university to be socially responsible and relevant to the community. With the goal of imagining possibilities that don't exist yet for our community, we are committed to developing reciprocal and equal relations with diverse partners. Ndawula (2017) suggests that *Ameripean* science and culture continues to dominate the development discourse. He asks: Why should we trust a science and culture that has been so destructive to the entire planet and is based in hierarchy, exploitation and military might? We, the authors, don't think we should.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the colonial–capitalist–patriarchal means of arranging society does not work and is not sustainable. We believe that a different, caring and socially just world is possible if we look for it, experiment and collaborate together. It is time to join and empower a rising tide of committed social justice activists doing research collaboratively and bring back an interconnected and interdependent paradigm of being. There is plenty of deep wisdom in the world, and if universities are really committed to community transformation, it is essential that they seek it out. Communities too.

With the whole world reeling from the COVID-19 crisis, the call to universities from the African Regional Forum for Sustainable Development to address local challenges is especially relevant. Considering the positive results of the global movement for engaged research (Hall, Bhatt & Lepore 2017), we believe that this kind of community–university configuration based on mutuality, responsibility, recognition and acceptance will contribute to the production of socially, economically and democratically relevant knowledge that will likewise contribute to human development and peaceful societies.

For the guns have stopped roaring,  
and we are finding our way together,  
to a better world.

Join us!

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