Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji: "United We Are Stronger": Reflections on Over a Decade of Transformative Community-Engaged Learning and Research With Indigenous Shuar Communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon

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Abstract

In this reflective essay, we (community and university partners) recount a course-based ongoing cross-cultural 10-year+ Global South–Global North partnership (before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic) between four Indigenous Shuar communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon and a U.S.-based institution of higher education. We report on developing, maintaining, adapting, sustaining, and enriching that relationship. The experience is founded on a changing decolonizing conceptual framework that integrates participatory action research with Indigenous epistemologies and methods. As we collectively reflect on a decade of collaboration, we explore the transformative potential of *Minga* (collective action and cooperation) and *Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji* (strength in unity) as Indigenous Shuar models for shaping community-driven learning and research. This ongoing partnership underscores the significance of trust, accountability, reciprocity, equity, and humility, cultivated through over a decade of solidarity with shared goals and outcomes, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable form of international community-engaged learning.

Keywords: Indigenous models of engaged learning and research, COVID-19 impact on global community engagement, cross-cultural challenges, equitable community-driven research

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In this reflective essay, we (community and university partners) recount an ongoing cross-cultural 12-year+ (2012–2024) Global South–Global North partnership (before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic) between four Indigenous Shuar communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon and a U.S.-based institution of higher education. We describe developing, maintaining, adapting, sustaining, and enriching community-based engagement models for learning and research.

This experience encapsulates transitioning from in-person engagement to virtual engagement and back, fortified by the Shuar principle of *Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji* (strength in unity). We use a dual, Two-Eyed Seeing, interactive lens of community and academic perspectives (Broadhead & Howard, 2021; Hill & Coleman, 2019; Reid et al., 2021) on interpreting course-based learning experiences in an attempt to shed light on how integrating modified models of engagement during these transitions not only preserved but energized the partnership. A key theme is how these events fostered a shared preparation for in-person engagement amid global uncertainties and cross-cultural challenges.

The community-engaged learning and research experiences discussed are founded on a changing conceptual framework that

integrates participatory action research with Indigenous epistemologies and methods. This approach is focused on a collaborative decolonizing process through *Minga*, a form of Shuar collective action and cooperation. In this essay we as Indigenous community members and course facilitators jointly reflect on over a decade of collaboration and explore the transformative potential of *Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji* and *Minga* as Indigenous models in shaping community-engaged learning and research for Global South–Global North collaborations. We also challenge the reader to critically assess the current theory and practice of outreach and engagement between higher education institutions and Indigenous communities from the Global South.

Our ongoing partnership underscores the significance of trust, accountability, reciprocity, equity, and humility, cultivated through over a decade of solidarity with shared goals and outcomes. Our reflections integrate insights that emphasize the importance of sustained engagement models that resonate with the core values of each community, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable narrative of transnational international community-engaged learning (ICEL) overall (see Fukuzawa et al., 2020; Hartman et al., 2018; Larkin et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2024).

Two fundamental and linked research questions have shaped our assessment of the ICEL Ecuador experience, especially for the purpose of this reflection: (1) How can an existing collaborative Indigenous community partnership be maintained, sustained, and strengthened through virtual community-engaged experiences, developed during the pandemic, and prepare students for in-person engagement? (2) How did those opportunities change student community-engaged learning, engagement, and research experiences when in Ecuador?

To begin, we will review the context of the students who take part in this immersive experience. We feel it is important to provide information to the reader on the ways in which the students are prepared for the trip and a broader view of how it is designed for specific global learning outcomes. We have tied our descriptions to the themes of this JHEOE special issue by emphasizing that ICEL can be achieved only by promoting equality and reciprocity in transnational ICEL partnerships through the Indigenous strategies utilized in navigating cross-cultural challenges across a 4-year social justice–oriented program.

Ozanam Scholars Program

The university-based focus of this international community-engaged learning and research experience is embedded in the Ozanam Scholars Program (OSP) at St. John's University (SJU) in New York City (NYC), one of the largest Catholic universities in the United States. The OSP is an academic and service social justice initiative supported through the SJU Office of University Mission, dedicated to the example of St. Vincent de Paul, who based his ministry on helping the poor. It is a key initiative of the Vincentian Institute for Social Action. The program's namesake, Frédéric Ozanam, was a 19th-century French historian, lawyer, and scholar who helped establish the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to bring about a more just and compassionate society through service. Therefore, for the OSP, social justice is defined and realized through actions that support the mission of working to create just societies where everyone, everywhere receives equal rights, opportunities, and access, regardless of identity. The OSP is a 4-year scholarship-supported program that students apply to before entering the university as first-year students. The OSP selects students who have a strong academic record and a passion for service from across all colleges and academic programs at the university. Through their development as scholars, they elevate their contribution to society through service and research. During their junior year, the Scholars travel to Ecuador for 2 weeks, taking part in a course-based ICEL experience that integrates community-engaged learning, service, and research.

Key social justice pillars of the OSP program include (1) Vincentian leadership—promote and deepen the understanding of the Vincentian mission and its focus on facing the challenges of the underserved and marginalized through volunteering, reflection, and research at local, national, and international locations; (2) global citizenship—learn about the rights of all human beings and factors that hinder their rights and dignity through local, national, and international experiences; and (3) academic scholarship—develop skills to analyze social justice issues and propose workable solutions, through academic study and research. Students in the program graduate from SJU with the interdisciplinary minor Social Justice: Theory and Practice in the Vincentian Tradition.

Student Development as Ozanam Scholars (Pre–COVID 19)

To provide further context for the OSP student's preparation for this international community–engaged learning and research experience in Ecuador, we list the 4-year sequence in the program that they follow:

Year 1 (First-years)—Introduction to social justice concepts, research techniques, and the Vincentian tradition of service, through ongoing volunteer experiences in NYC and a volunteer trip to Puerto Rico.

Year 2 (Sophomores)—One semester volunteering and study abroad at the SJU campus in Rome, introducing the analysis and articulation of global poverty concerns, and one semester of continued ongoing volunteer experiences in NYC.

Year 3 (Juniors)—Begin a social justice community-based action research capstone project linked to hunger, homelessness, health care, and/or education, under the guidance of a SJU faculty mentor. All OSP participants have historically been required to complete a course-based community-engaged learning and research trip to Ecuador, and for a smaller select group (based on their performance in Ecuador), a subsequent community-engaged learning volunteer trip to the Oglala Lakota Nation in South Dakota.

Year 4 (Seniors)—Complete and defend a capstone research project that creates an implementable solution to a social-justice-based research question. After graduation (before the COVID-19 pandemic), a select group (based on the merit of their capstone project and performance in the OSP) took part in a global volunteer learning and service trip. Locations have included Vietnam, India, and Ghana.

It is important to note that except for the semester study abroad experience in Rome, all travel-related expenses described above are paid by the OSP. Therefore, except for their time, students bear no cost for their experience in Ecuador (i.e., transportation, lodging, food, and course tuition are all covered). Covering expenses in this way is one of the factors that has been considered when the pandemic and postpandemic return led to a rethinking and restructuring of both preparing students for Ecuador and initiating a selection process for establishing greater commitment by the students to the overall experience, discussed in more detail below.

Context of Learning, Research, and Engagement

Over the past 12+ years (2012–2024) it has been through a credit-bearing 2-week international experiential learning course in Ecuador, Anthropological Field Methods in Global Sustainable Development, that cohorts of juniors in SJU's OSP program are concurrently involved in ICEL, community engagement, and community-based participatory research projects with four Indigenous Shuar communities. Specific ICEL learning outcomes are discussed below. To date, over 200 students, faculty, and support staff have participated in this annual 2-week experience. On average 15 students take part in the trip each year.

The authors of this reflection have been involved in various ways with the program since its inception in 2012. Two are Indigenous Shuar educators from two of the partnering communities; one is a White U.S. settler of Northern European descent, faculty and professor of anthropology, and one is a Mestizo, first-generation bilingual Salvadoran American and health data analyst who was first an OSP student, then support staff, and then a faculty member.

The course is designed to support the growth of the Ozanam Scholars as social justice practitioners through experience with applied anthropological research embedded in ethical community partnerships. Course objectives and learning outcomes for the students are achievement of the following goals: gain experience in applied, community-based research; contribute to sustainable strategies for community-led development; understand Indigenous knowledge and practices within research and development work through a decolonizing and Indigenizing process; and practice ethical engagement within community partnerships that are centered on relational accountability, mindful reciprocity, and cultural humility. It is through this approach that strategic allyship with

partnering communities is reinforced (see, for example, Gadhoke et al., 2019; Heidebrecht & Balzer, 2020; Judge et al., 2021; Louie et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2018; Snelgrove et al., 2014). A primary focus of this course-based partnership has been centering the community-engaged research and learning experience around the core areas of cultural heritage, education, health, empowerment, and community collaboration as avenues for supporting sustainable development.

Although not a focus of our essay, a key component of this and any ICEL experience is the central role of reflections tied to the course learning outcomes (noted above). During the 2 weeks each evening after returning from the communities and having a quick meal, students, faculty, and staff meet for 1–2 hours to openly reflect on the day's events. The reflections rotate from a focus on the research process one day to an emphasis on the service experience and broader implications of our partnership the next day. Students' grades are primarily determined by their participation in the overall experience, detailed written daily reflections tying the experience to course learning outcomes, and research team project reports. All writing is submitted after returning to the United States.

All research conducted has been approved by the SJU Institutional Review Board (IRB). Research questions are founded on a changing conceptual framework that integrates community-driven participatory action research with Indigenous epistemologies and methods (see, for example, Brown & Strega, 2005; Datta, 2018; Denzin et al., 2008; Gone, 2019; Hayward et al., 2021; Kimmerer & Artelle, 2024; Kovach, 2009; D. McGregor, 2018; L. McGregor, 2018; Morton Ninomiya & Pollock, 2017; Padmanabha, 2018; Pidgeon, 2019; Ray, 2012; Smith, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Whitt, 2009; Whyte, 2021; S. Wilson, 2003, 2008).

Through this community-engaged and community-driven process a decolonizing and Indigenizing approach to this work has developed over time. We have thus collectively sought to transform and redefine our use of Western research methods, such as participatory action research, to contribute to creating meaningful and lasting partnerships between academic institutions and Indigenous communities (for various other models see, for example, Ambo & Gavazzi, 2024; Bartleet et al., 2014; Drouin-Gagné, 2021; Dushane et al., 2016;

Fraser & Voyageur, 2016; Goforth et al., 2022; Kennedy et al., 2020; McDermott et al., 2021; C. McGregor et al., 2016; McNally, 2004; Padmanabha, 2018; Thibeault, 2019; Tobias et al., 2013). It should be noted that community-engaged research, teaching, and learning examples in the literature on the use of Indigenous models in the Global South by U.S.-based universities are uncommon, with the majority of existing North American literature on the topic coming out of Canadian institutions (see, for example, Bartleet et al., 2019; Bolea, 2012; De Souza & Watson, 2020; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001; Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2017; K. Wilson, 2018). This balance of source locations is perhaps not so surprising given the support for a systemic change occurring across postsecondary Canadian institutions through Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation as a guiding principle from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2008–2015). Creating such a national model for the United States does not seem likely in any foreseeable future.

Our approach is specifically focused on a collaborative, decolonizing process through *Minga* (Gadhoke et al., 2019), a form of Shuar collective action and cooperation, and more recently also embracing the Shuar term *Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji* (united we are stronger). Both concepts are discussed further below. The four Shuar communities that are part of this mutually engaged experience are located in the high Amazonian jungle (Selva Alta) region on the eastern slopes of the Andes, in the Ecuadorian state of Morana Santiago, Limón Indanza Canton, parish of Yunganza. Three of the communities are recognized by the government of Ecuador as Indigenous Shuar Centers (this recognition includes providing support for teaching Shuar language and culture in primary school). One community is a blend of Shuar and Mestizo households. For additional information on the historical establishment of Shuar communities in the 20th century see Rubenstein (2001).

Minga as Metaphor and Action

Shuar view the concept of *Minga* as a deeply ancestral term that literally means "to work in a group" or "mutual help" (think of a traditional barn-raising or husking bees in a historical U.S. context). It is a term borrowed from the Indigenous Andean Quechua/Quichua word *Minccacuni* (*Mink'a*, *Minka*, or *Minga*; Sanz Ferramola et al., 2020). It refers to forming a communal

effort in which members participate in group work to achieve an outcome that is equally distributed (Faas, 2017; Partridge, 2024; Townsend, 2012). *Mingas* are now at the heart of our work as a practice of de-colonizing and Indigenizing social justice research and experiential learning (Gadhoke et al., 2019; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). *Minga* is practiced through our shared investments, shared accountability, reciprocity, humility, and social bonds with university students, faculty, staff, and Shuar community members, all working together in a collaborative and respectful way. What has been key to this process is the understanding that the relationship between the community members and students is about the mutual benefits received and building collaborations, and less about labor and resources.

Beyond its literal meaning of "working in a group," *Minga* in our partnership also represents a broader communal ethos that facilitates both cultural continuity and social cohesion. Drawing on the holistic approach described by Brown and Strega (2005), *Minga* as noted is not simply about physical labor or resource sharing; rather, it involves collective responsibility and interdependence that surpass Western notions of volunteerism. By creating a foreground of Shuar perspectives on relational accountability and mutual support, *Minga* serves as a living framework through which community and university partners cocreate both knowledge and reciprocal trust.

Meaningfully, *Minga* provides a decolonizing lens that actively challenges top-down and extractive research paradigms. As Tuck and Yang (2012) emphasized, decolonizing practices require engagement with Indigenous ways of knowing without recentering dominant Western frameworks. In our experience, *Minga* operationalizes these ideals by structuring how research questions are formulated, how decisions are made, and how outcomes are shared. This process resonates with S. Wilson's (2008) emphasis on recognizing Indigenous protocols of reciprocity, accountability, and collective benefit in building equitable research relationships. Thus, *Minga* not only shapes how we work together but also acts as a mechanism for assessing whether our cross-cultural interactions uphold the values of shared responsibility and shared power.

By situating *Minga* in conversations with academic literature on communal labor and collective action (e.g., Gadhoke et al., 2019), we underscore how it transcends a mere volunteer "service" model for ICEL. Instead, *Minga* enables community-driven priorities to guide the research process and course-based activities, thereby supporting the Shuar principles of cooperation, solidarity, and the pursuit of a just and sustainable future. Together with the Shuar principle of *Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji*, where we work collectively and united to become stronger, *Minga* binds students, faculty, and local community members to a shared purpose, ensuring that no participant engages as a passive recipient or an external "helper"; rather, all are fully invested partners in collective transformation that strengthens the community and the partnership.

A Shuar community leader, when discussing the lack of experience student-volunteers have in relation to performing manual labor during service activities, stated, "Students do as much as they are able to, within their capabilities . . . what matters is their enthusiasm and collaboration." Another Shuar man noted, "You are coming and supporting us, and we also unite and support all of you. And, together, we complete the given work, a work that helps all of us to develop more." As will be discussed further in reflections below, it is important to note that the Shuar are keenly aware that students are getting a university education in a program that supports social justice, and as one part of that experience they see themselves supporting student development and look forward to sharing their worldviews through cultural exchange with each cohort.

Tied to both trip and course logistics, *Minga* involves teams of students taking part alongside community members in 2 weeks of service activities that are linked to community-driven projects that had been informed by research completed by the previous year's cohort. The projects are funded in part by a small grant that the OSP provides to each community in recognition of our reciprocal partnership and related outcomes. All communication during this time is in Spanish. Therefore, depending on a student's Spanish-language proficiency, each team has the support of both a translator and a research facilitator (often that role is performed by the same person). Indigenizing the research process and methodologies has involved the integration of *Minga* in establishing collaborative modes of data collection through interviews, community conversations,

and informal participant observation over the same 2-week period. Based on that research, student teams are then responsible for presenting to the community (in Spanish) a potential community-informed and community-driven project that the next year's cohort will implement. This cyclical iterative process has shaped the experience for both students and community members over the past 12 years.

To date, action-research project themes that have been implemented through *Mingas* include access to health care; water and sanitation; Indigenous knowledge of food and medicinal plants; school-based gardens for healthy eating; cultural heritage, traditional arts, and performance; youth engagement and gender empowerment; community-based income-generating programs; and trilingual education (Shuar–Spanish–English). These themes continue to emerge each year, and some projects have driven the general focus of the *Mingas* and related outcomes for over a decade. However, it must be noted that the research not only informs the next student cohort's potential service projects with the communities through *Mingas*; it also shapes and organizes ongoing community conversations about community projects beyond the 2 weeks we are there. The four communities with whom we work are not only highly diverse in their history of maintaining Indigenous Shuar language, culture, and traditions, they also have distinct approaches to setting community development priorities, including their viability and interest in leveraging our engaged work for additional funding support from their local municipalities to continue those projects in our absence.

Changing Modes of Engagement Before, During, and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

The following insights are drawn from methods and modes of inquiry that have informed our reflections in and around the COVID-19 pandemic and include a number of assessments for gaining outcomes-related measures. Our sources include assessments of community and student engagement during virtual dialogues in preparation for in-person engagement and assessments of the overall experience by partners during in-person engagement in the communities.

The pre-COVID in-person structure of the course (2012–2020) included pretrip workshops (10–12 weeks) on the U.S. campus to prepare students for the experience. While in Ecuador for 2 weeks the students took part in the following activities: *Mingas* in Action (a communal work and community service activity); community-based participatory research; language workshops; and community presentations on proposed *Mingas* for the next cohort.

Pandemic Adjustments and Transformations

A cohort did travel in January 2020, shortly before the pandemic put the world on pause. Since it was not possible to travel in 2021 due to pandemic restrictions, the communities became concerned regarding if and when the program would return. To maintain our partnership and mutual commitment, trip facilitators and community members organized and implemented a virtual structure for the experience in May 2021. Despite navigating such cross-cultural challenges, this adaptation presented an opportunity to rethink our approach and maintain the core elements of the partnership. Similar to workshops prepandemic, 10–12 weeks of Zoom workshops were organized to prepare students for a culminating virtual event in which representatives from the Shuar communities participated in discussions sharing their experiences and addressing changes due to the pandemic.

Throughout the preparatory workshops, experts and community leaders conducted virtual sessions on Shuar education, traditional knowledge, and local history. Google Classroom was also utilized to facilitate ongoing dialogue and knowledge exchange, with university students presenting research and engaging with high school students from the communities. A culminating 3-Day Global Learning Event allowed Ozanam Scholars and community partners to share lessons learned and recommendations for future iterations of the course, considering the uncertainty presented by the pandemic as well as new avenues for connectivity tested through the use of online platforms.

The virtual adaptation set a new precedent for year-round communication with the Shuar communities and continuous engagement. Tools like Zoom and Google Classroom facilitated direct and immediate lines of communication, making it easier to coordinate activities, share knowledge, and collaborate on projects related to the core partnership. These platforms enabled

continuous and wider reaching engagement despite the physical separation imposed by the pandemic and ensured that dialogue between the Ozanam Scholars Program and the Shuar communities remained active and productive.

Community partners played a pivotal role in this virtual engagement model, taking on clearly defined roles in planning and facilitation workshops, discussions, and course sessions. Their contributions were not only recognized, but also fairly compensated (receiving the same standard rate as a guest speaker from the U.S.), emphasizing the partnership's commitment to equity and reciprocity. By involving community educators and leaders in the virtual classroom setting, we were able to deliver lessons on Shuar education, traditional knowledge, and local history from the perspective of Shuar educators. This form of sharing was a critical enriching experience for students that highlighted the cultural and intellectual wealth of Shuar people.

This virtual adaptation not only maintained, but meaningfully enhanced, the partnership's foundational principles of mutual respect, shared knowledge, and cultural exchange. It set a new precedent for continuous communication, establishing a robust framework for future ethical engagement that is not dependent on in–person interactions. This approach has ensured that even in the face of global uncertainties or domestic challenges, the collaborative spirit and mutual goals of the partnership continue to thrive, cultivating a resilient and dynamic relationship that benefits both the Shuar communities and the Ozanam Scholars.

New Digital Skills

One of the key advantages of this adapted model was the integration and familiarization with various digital tools and platforms such as Zoom and Google Classroom. Educators and community leaders adapted to these technologies in order to engage with virtual partnership models, and have since utilized these skills for broader educational and community communication purposes. The production of digital resources for education and representation of community interests has enabled educators to share information with greater efficiency among their students as well as other interested parties, including neighboring learning institutions and local governments.

Participating educators' ability to navigate these digital tools not only facilitated learning for Ozanam Scholars, but also brought a sense of immediacy and relevance to the content. The ability to interact in real time, to ask questions and receive instant feedback, created an engaging and participatory educational experience despite the physical distance. The collaborative nature of these online tools also enabled educators to upload their own material, comment on student work, and share deeper perspectives on their lived experience as it related to traditional knowledge, culture, and local history. This ability was especially important for maintaining the sense of community and mutual learning that is central to our partnership. As one Shuar educator noted, "It is indispensable for us to use a learning tool, especially during the pandemic, where we share knowledge with students outside the classroom . . . it's a tool we can use with our own students, as well as share with local community leaders." This sentiment highlights the broader impact of these tools beyond just the immediate educational context.

Digitization of Linguistic and Cultural Resources

Progress in digital proficiency has also presented potential long–term benefits for the Shuar communities. By integrating these digital strategies into their local education efforts, Shuar educators feel better positioned to enhance their teaching methods, broaden their outreach, and stimulate their own continued learning. These new digital skills have also enabled educators to digitize language learning materials and cultural resources, such as Shuar myths and legends. This effort not only preserves their cultural knowledge but also facilitates a self–managed, wider dissemination of Shuar Indigenous knowledge resources.

To support this initiative, we have begun developing a central hub for educational and cultural resources through an online platform where Shuar educators can curate and share representations of Shuar culture with a broader audience, including other Shuar communities. As a Shuar educator explained,

> Our ancestors would teach us Shuar orally, through stories and song. Then, with the Salesian priests, we began writing our language and stories. Then we relied on the radio

to disseminate cultural resources across Shuar communities in the Amazon. And now, we look to digitize, and further extend the reach of awareness and understanding of our culture across Ecuador and beyond.

The ability to manage and distribute their digital resources empowers Shuar educators to contribute to global consciousness and dialogue, asserting their presence within the global community on their own terms.

Return to In-Person Engagement

The return to in-person engagement in January 2022 marked a reinforcement and reaffirmation of our partnership. This phase underscored the trust and willingness to evolve the partnership, as the community and students navigated the transition from virtual to in-person interactions.

A notable programmatic change in the post-COVID course structure was the shift from mandatory participation in the trip to Ecuador (previously a requirement of the Ozanam Scholars Program) to an opt-in model through an application process. This adjustment was prompted by the ongoing health risks associated with international travel and the continued spread of the virus, which necessitated greater flexibility. Whereas prepandemic participation in this experience had been a requirement for maintaining a student's status in the Ozanam Scholars Program, the new opt-in model reframed the trip as a voluntary commitment. Observational data from students and facilitators suggest that this shift has led to more motivated participation and stronger engagement overall—students who choose to participate tend to display a deeper sense of personal investment. Moreover, the actual number of students who elect to participate is still the significant majority (85%–90% of those eligible).

Early feedback suggests that, compared to cohorts who participated under the mandatory framework, students are more open to aspects of the experience that challenge their initial expectations and generally exhibit greater enthusiasm when collaborating with Shuar community members on site. Although further reflection and data collection are needed to quantify these differences, the anecdotal evidence to date points to positive student learning outcomes and richer cross-cultural experiences among students participating in this intensive community-engaged learning and research experience. Additionally, pretrip workshops were streamlined to prioritize essential information, such as partnership history, Shuar culture, and ethical standards for applied research. This optimized preparation period has contributed to a more focused and effective in-person experience.

Reflecting on the lessons learned from the virtual engagement model and the transition back to in-person engagement, it is clear that the integration of digital tools and platforms has created a more resilient and dynamic partnership. Moving forward, we aim to increase capacities further by exploring new avenues for digital and in-person collaboration, including the piloting of a virtual learning partnership between SJU and the community high school. This program would emphasize knowledge and cultural exchange facilitated by online communication while continuing to develop our in-person approaches and efforts in Ecuador.

Closing Reflections

At this point we would like to provide some brief closing reflections through direct first-person narratives shared by the two Indigenous Shuar coauthors on over a decade of transformative community-engaged learning and research.

> The last 10 years of community work, through the *Mingas* carried out with the support of the university, have generated different forms of development in each of the communities. This includes social, economic, cultural and infrastructure dimensions, and has strengthened the unity of families and work in *Mingas* that has been fading in recent years. The projects have been chosen through collective meetings, always seeking a horizon for social, cultural, and economic development. The *Mingas* carried out in each community during collective work is the strength in the development of our communities, and that which characterizes us. Working together, we complete the effort in less time and with better outcomes. The work carried out with the university has contributed to residents of each community embracing the values that characterize us: "United we are

strong" (*Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji*). Promoting that strength emphasizes our ancestral customs and greatness of our people.

—Franklin Antunish, educational leader for the Velasco Ibarra Shuar Bilingual Intercultural Community Educational Center, Metzankim, Ecuador

For us in the community where the university has been supportive, it has been of utmost importance to strengthen certain values that perhaps as a community have not been practiced in recent days. For example, the organization of the *Minga*, of joint work, of joint plans. The participation of the university in developing our infrastructure plans for addressing challenges in education, cultural traditions, and the environment has also motivated our local regional authorities to also support these initiatives. It has been a pleasure during these 10 years to receive the support of the university, not so much in terms of the economic benefit, but the presence of cultural exchange, the exchange of experiences, the friendship, the trust that has been generated between us, allowing us to speak the same language of development and continue working together. In my part as a teacher, as a parent, and as a resident of this area, we hope that we will continue to carry out other activities, other projects that strengthen us as a community, strengthen us as an educational institution, and strengthen us as a family.

—Romero Vega, primary school teacher for the Unidad Educativa de Yunganza, Yunkuankas
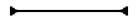
Conclusions and Recommendations

The goal of this reflective essay was to share and highlight how our existing University–Shuar partnership through a course-based international community-engaged learning and research experience was maintained, sustained, and strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic. These outcomes extended to the reestablishment of in-person engagement in the years that have followed. The key lesson from adapting to global un-

certainties in this case is the high degree to which ongoing commitments to community partners can be mutually articulated and sustained through both in-person and virtual dialogue and engagement. However, it should be noted that this persistence was possible only because of the strong existing relationships that had developed before the pandemic that centered Indigenous models of engagement, such as *Minga*, and other Indigenous models of trust, responsibility, and partnership-building that resonate with the core values of each community, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and equitable outcomes during Global South–Global North cross-cultural encounters.

We recommend other institutions adopt similar models that blend digital and in-person engagement, supported by continuous communication with community partners and a commitment to mutual learning for improving the partnerships themselves. By leveraging the strengths of both virtual and in-person interactions, partnerships can thrive even in the face of unforeseen challenges, ensuring adaptive and sustainable partnerships for the future. For example, a current challenge is that Ozanam Scholars Program leadership recently decided to take a different approach to determining the lead personnel involved in the experience in order to exercise more institutional control. We have deep concerns that this will potentially impact over a decade of developing community-centered Indigenous models of trust that have strengthened our relationships, but are confident that our Indigenous partners will respond as always with strength, autonomy, and self-determination.

In closing, integrating the use of different Indigenous models of engagement has been critical to maintaining trust and reciprocity in our relationships with Indigenous Shuar communities. Transitioning from in-person engagement to virtual engagement and back was fortified by the Shuar principle of *Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji* (strength in unity) and supported by the Shuar concept of *Yeimiu* (solidarity). Furthermore, the collaborative decolonizing process of engagement through *Minga* builds on the cooperation, collaboration, solidarity, accountability, and humility that we have developed through over a decade of engagement.

—*Yuminsajme* (Thank you—until we meet again).

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