Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 11574
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.11574

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Open Access Journal

Higher Education Champions and Reciprocal Community Partnership

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Submitted: 22 October 2025 **Accepted:** 5 January 2026 **Published:** 12 February 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education" edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480

Abstract

Academics globally have been called to investigate and contribute to addressing growing structural inequality, social exclusion, and disconnection. In recent decades, critically engaged research with a social justice orientation has emerged, aiming to bridge scholarly inquiry with community accountability. Within this context, two interconnected areas have gained prominence in academia: diversifying curricula and forming meaningful partnerships with disadvantaged communities to co-create knowledge and transform unequal structures in universities and society. We argue that such partnerships require a critique of and commitment to a "multidirectional flow of knowledge," one that recognizes the complex, multifaceted nature of knowledge that moves in different directions. Using Meraka Village as an example of a university-community partnership in Bloemfontein, South Africa, we demonstrate the value of co-creative partnerships. This partnership prioritizes mutual learning, equal collaboration, and equitable sharing of benefits. We highlight how co-learning—based on integrating indigenous and academic knowledges—has enabled the innovation and transformation necessary for reimagining community structures. Through this, we argue for amplifying the role of higher education champions as agents of change and for applying a power-sensitive lens when engaging with disadvantaged communities in transformative work.

Keywords

co-learning; decolonial methodologies; higher education engagement; indigenous knowledge; reciprocal partnerships; social justice

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions are increasingly encouraged to contribute to reducing socioeconomic inequalities and promoting inclusive participation (Bui et al., 2024; Verma et al., 2025). While universities are often described as agents of social mobility, they may also perpetuate exclusion through resource scarcity, digital divides, and epistemic marginalization (Regmi, 2023; Wang & Huang, 2025). Despite digital technologies' potential to expand access, disparities in connectivity and digital literacy, particularly in low-income contexts, continue to limit participation (Czerniewicz, 2018). Globally, inclusiveness is viewed as not only a moral imperative but a developmental necessity, and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals recognize equitable higher education as both a human right and a pathway to social development (UNESCO, 2020; Vallet & Montjouridès, 2015).

De Haan (2000) argues that exclusions extend beyond material deprivations such as lack of resources and are deeply linked to race, gender, language, and mobility. International research demonstrates persistent inequities: In the US, women remain underrepresented in STEM fields (Talikadze, 2020), and in Europe, international students face challenges integrating into host institutions (Aksay Aksezer et al., 2023). Universities are also increasingly pressured to address local and community-based inequalities while enabling epistemic plurality through curriculum decolonization (Regmi, 2023). These discussions underscore the need to move beyond narrow meritocratic models toward context-sensitive, justice-oriented approaches. This means intertwining decolonization with curriculum change as a necessity for attaining epistemic justice.

In South Africa, global pressures intersect with a legacy of apartheid and colonialism that has entrenched race-, gender-, and class-based inequalities. Reforms such as affirmative action and expanded funding have improved access (Cele & Adewumi, 2024), yet exclusion persists at symbolic, structural, and cultural levels. Current challenges include gender disparities in science and technology (J. Joseph, 2021), barriers for students with disabilities (Ntombela, 2022), and limited access for rural students (Matsepe et al., 2020). Efforts to combat epistemic exclusion—through mentoring, creative pedagogy, and digital inclusion—have been unevenly applied (Batisai et al., 2022).

Community engagement has increasingly been positioned as a mechanism for equity and reciprocity. International literature highlights both its transformative potential and the risk of extractive approaches (Castañeda & Krupczynski, 2021; Taylor, 2024). In South Africa, engagement is viewed as central to human development and the cultivation of professionals committed to the common good (Mtawa, 2019). Scholars further argue that meaningful partnerships should recognize communities as repositories of knowledge (Bam-Hutchison, 2024; Chandramohan & Bhagwan, 2022).

Against this backdrop, this article draws on a qualitative case study conducted at Meraka Village in Bloemfontein, South Africa, a site that functions as both a community and a learning space. Meraka Village is a cultural village where community members live and participate in building the village organically. The founders are Anita Venter and Mme Sebabatso Mofama. Anita, a lecturer at the University of the Free State (UFS) who has become a community member, brings in students, researchers, and volunteers to help build the village and to produce scientific knowledge; hence, she was also a participant in the study. Mme Sebabatso, owner of a small property, lives in the village and is joined by family, friends, neighbors, university students, and researchers who come to learn about indigenous building methodologies as part of either their research or their service-learning modules or as an extension of communal learning and cultural

preservation. The academics who promote community engagement are often called "champions" due to their role in ensuring that communities become partners in knowledge production and in finding alternative ways of conducting research, making it more engaged and participatory (Ntsele, 2024).

Building at Meraka often involves higher education champions, students, and community members, who are often coordinating the building workshops and teaching both students and researchers the skills. Thus, participants come to know the value of co-creation through practicing building in a manner that values epistemic plurality and reciprocal partnerships, as they all learn from each other during the building process. Through the Meraka Village partnership, this article examines how collaborative exercises contribute to mutual learning, integrating indigenous and academic knowledge, and building inclusive futures.

2. Higher Education and Social Justice Engagement

Recent decades have seen a growing demand for higher education to address its role in advancing social justice and developing mutual relationships with communities. Critically engaged research has emerged in answer to this call. In contrast to instrumental or one-directional conceptions of engagement, critically engaged approaches emphasize inclusivity, reflexivity, and co-production of knowledge with communities (Touboulic et al., 2020; Van de Ven, 2007). They move past merely solving problems to questioning power, confronting systems of unequal treatment, and theorizing about what is possible (Kajner, 2010; Strumińska-Kutra, 2016). Research, for example, has shown how reflexive practices allow universities to work through socio-technical complexity without losing partnerships based on dialogue and accountability (Hult et al., 2021). In addition, there is a wider trend globally to address engagement from a justice-oriented angle. One manifestation of this is the call for curriculum diversification, away from the current Eurocentric dominance. Scholars insist that introducing equity in the curriculum must be done with a keen sense of redistribution, recognition, and representation (Ajani, 2024; Mapuya, 2023). Within such framing, curriculum emerges as the disputed domain in which choices regarding what is considered knowledge are directly related to justice possibilities. As Freire (1970, p. 18) notes:

> Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man [sic] is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man [sic] nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world.

In this respect, education transcends being places of learning to being places where students are positioned to be agents of justice and not passive knowledge recipients. University-community partnerships make these commitments operational, but they are usually fraught with tensions. Such partnerships have been criticized for their risk of tokenism, extractivism, and disproportionate power relations (Sathorar & Geduld, 2021; Strier, 2014). Often, these alliances put university interests ahead of community voices: Himmelman (2001, p. 38) argues that "collaborative betterment coalitions are not aimed at redistributing the power relations and delivering community ownership, nor at making a community more of the decisions and actors."

These critiques highlight the importance of reflexivity and attention to power imbalances when considering such partnerships. Both are necessary components for intentional reciprocity, mutual respect, and epistemic plurality when partnerships are meant to contest, but not reproduce, structural hierarchies. These debates

have a specific urgency in South Africa because of the long-term consequences of apartheid and colonial dispossession. Scholars emphasize that higher education is a problematic place, where real change is possible only through decolonizing curricula, increasing access, and enshrining justice in institutional activities (Celis, 2021; Zulu, 2021). By promoting inclusive leadership, transformative pedagogy, and community-based research, higher education institutions reinforce mutual collaboration while fulfilling their claim to being major agents of social justice and communal liberation.

3. Rethinking Knowledge Flows

Historically, the movement of knowledge between communities and universities has been starkly asymmetrical. Universities have tended to position themselves as the major creators of knowledge, while communities have been relegated to being passive consumers. This model tends to prioritize academic agendas rather than the needs and priorities set by the communities themselves, as examples from South Africa and Canada show (Ibáñez-Carrasco & Riaño-Alcalá, 2011; Motala & Vally, 2022; Ntsele, 2024; Strier & Shechter, 2016). This approach is often referred to as extractive and results in disadvantaged communities' mistrust (L. T. Smith, 2021). Even in vocational training and international partnerships, universities often fulfill the role of knowledge dispensers, pushing knowledge out without appreciating or internalizing the knowledge that communities possess (Hatos & Szombathelyi, 2024; R. Smith & Hairstans, 2017). As Motala and Vally (2022, p. 5) observe:

> The imperatives of academic validation militate against the objectives and practices of knowledge co-construction due to the financial and reputational imperatives associated with accredited publication useful for ranking, career advancement, ratings, academic prestige and other purposes. These imperatives have a limiting influence on the intellectual work of universities and the possibilities for knowledge co-construction and engagement more generally.

Postcolonial and decolonial scholars provide critical commentaries on these fixed hierarchies. Postcolonial studies challenge the way Western epistemologies have been made dominant by colonial histories and discourses and address the continuing impact of these historic power relations on their modern academic and social institutions (Bhambra, 2014; D. Joseph & Jose, 2025). Decolonial thought goes even further, highlighting the coloniality of power, which points to the continued hierarchies of Eurocentric knowledge and calls on epistemic pluralism and the recuperation of non-Western ways of knowing (De Sousa Santos, 2021; Zembylas, 2025). In that regard, Anzi (2021, p. 221) claims that, instead, "decoloniality is a constant attempt to delink from modernity, while indigenous epistemologies and those of other cultures pave the path to surpass its presuppositions."

Indigenous scholar L. T. Smith (2021, p. 8) claims there is a need for " 'researching back,' in the same tradition of 'writing back' or 'talking back.' " This means asking about who owns, benefits from, and designed the research, and what its frame is. Together, these criticisms illustrate that knowledge hierarchies are not only intellectual abstractions but highly racialized and political forms of power that keep the Western authority in place at the cost of plural epistemologies (Kessé, 2023).

These critical bodies of literature have resulted in an increase of multidirectional and reciprocal models of knowledge exchange that encourage collaboration, co-learning, and joint responsibility. The use of strategies

such as rural regeneration projects (Åberg et al., 2024) and community-based participatory research illustrates the role that trust, co-design, and relational accountability play in creating real reciprocity (Collins et al., 2018; Oetzel et al., 2022). Similarly, systemic models such as Collective Impact (Ennis & Tofa, 2020; Parkinson et al., 2022), which presupposes equity, shared goals, and structured collaboration to avoid repeating extractive patterns, place universities as conveners and facilitators and insist that equity and co-design are central to preventing the use of extractive patterns (Kramer & Pfitzer, 2016; Ntsele, 2024).

All these criticisms and frameworks assist in increasing awareness of the risks of extractive streams of knowledge and in understanding the transformative potential of mutual interaction. To reimagine knowledge flows is to embrace the practices of co-creation, give precedence to marginalized epistemologies, and enter partnerships that are truly reciprocal and mutually transformative.

4. Community–Academia Partnerships in Context

Community–Academia mapping of community-based partnerships in Bloemfontein must be contextualized within the historical and social context of South Africa. In apartheid, universities were places of privilege and exclusion: They were mostly unrelated to local communities and supported structural inequalities (Hornby & Maistry, 2022). The surrounding communities were framed as passive consumers of knowledge, as opposed to creators, and universities focused more on academic prestige than on social responsibility. This engendered the perception of the ivory tower, where knowledge moved from the university to the community with minimal acknowledgement of local knowledge or agency.

Policies after 1994, the year marking South Africa's transition to democracy and the formal end of apartheid, aimed at disputing this legacy. Engagement with communities became a third mission for universities, alongside teaching and research, and universities were required to foster inclusion and nation-building through socially responsive scholarship (Hornby & Maistry, 2022; Preece, 2017, pp. 1–24). The White Paper on Higher Education of 1997 specifically stimulated universities to capitalize on local knowledge as a development initiative (Department of Education, 1997). Engaged scholarship was formally institutionalized at the UFS in 2017, specifically encouraging the co-creative generation of knowledge that recognizes various knowledge sites, such as community, academic, and hybrid spaces (Ntsele, 2024). Similar programs were adopted in other South African universities: Rhodes University started focusing on reciprocity and ethical collaboration in 2003 (Hornby & Maistry, 2022), and the University of KwaZulu-Natal introduced the Tiba project in 2018 to help build trust and local knowledge in health initiatives (Mutero & Chimbari, 2021).

Higher education champions are vital to these programs. Champions are academic leaders who play an active role in facilitating engagement, early inclusion, and mutual learning between university and community participants. They are brokers of relations, enhancers of reciprocity, and they establish the grounds for co-creative flows of knowledge that honor the community's agency and expertise (Guillen & Zeichner, 2018; Karasik, 2020). Without champions, partnerships may be perpetually instrumental: When engagement is presented as a pedagogical instrument to students, communities may become passive consumers of knowledge instead of co-creators (Ansari & Phillips, 2001; Silbert, 2019). Instrumental engagement in this context describes those activities that primarily aim to fulfill institutional or academic goals rather than benefiting or empowering communities in a real way.

Despite these policy frameworks, inequalities continue to exist. Hierarchical forms of governance, irregular institutional commitment, and funding constraints usually impede authentic collaboration. There are cases of communities being left out when no formal agreements are made or they are ambiguous, and such examples show how partnerships can break down when consultation is given superficially or at a later stage (Silbert, 2019). However, UFS and other universities have demonstrated that transformative learning takes place when students, academics, and community members practice in a sustained and reflective way. Service-learning students at UFS, for example, tend to join partnerships with a knowledge-giving role in mind only to realize that learning is a two-way process: Community members often have ample knowledge that informs the project results and contributes to students' knowledge. Similarly, the University of the Western Cape's projects reinvent social responsibility through joint health and education projects focusing on local knowledge (Bidandi et al., 2022).

In practice, successful collaboration entails partnerships with local organizations such as schools, churches, and civic groups, with universities providing technical skills while local actors are sources of legitimacy, cultural awareness, and moral authority (Nanthambwe, 2024). Such partnerships are illustrative examples of the ethical frameworks in which community perspectives and agency are acknowledged and partnerships are co-creative as opposed to hierarchical efforts. Such practices recognize the history of inequality and develop capacity and trust.

These principles are reflected in the Meraka Village partnership. At Meraka, native knowledge and scholarly knowledge are intentionally merged to make a co-learning space, illustrating how reciprocity can be realized in both process and product. Indigenous building workshops, collaborative reflections, and multidisciplinary participation are some of the activities that illustrate the possibilities of engaged scholarship to shift hierarchical assumptions, prioritize community agency, and foster mutual change. These processes are mediated by champions on both sides, community and university, with the knowledge flowing in all directions and the partnership being equitable, participatory, and responsive to local realities (Croese & Duminy, 2023; Mutero & Govender, 2020; Preece, 2017, pp. 1–24).

To conclude, community–academia partnerships in Bloemfontein are an example of the post-apartheid desire for reciprocity and co-creation. They are influenced by a legacy of inequalities yet enhanced by innovative methods and leadership that encourage trust, reciprocal respect, and local wisdom. As a case study, Meraka Village shows how these principles can be implemented on the ground, identifying both the challenges and the transformative opportunities of engaged scholarship in South Africa.

5. Methodology

We employed a qualitative case study design to investigate community–academia partnerships in Meraka Village, Bloemfontein, South Africa, between 2019 and 2025 as part of the first author's PhD research. This enabled a thorough investigation into the nature of complex social processes, such as co-learning, knowledge exchange, and power dynamics, within a real-life setting (Yin, 2018). We had to constantly reflect on our own positionality as engaged researchers affiliated with universities in South Africa and the Netherlands, considering both universities' great interest in transforming structures in higher education through co-creative research.

Meraka Village is a community and a learning and cultural venue. What began as a project between two friends grew to include individual community members, students, and researchers who joined in to help build a cultural village that is now a venue for workshops, eco-building projects, and cultural activities. It currently functions by combining indigenous knowledge and academic scholarship to provide a platform for mutual learning and transformative interaction.

The 10 participants were (a) community members who were volunteers at the time of the study and were actively engaged in village activities, (b) founders, family members, or friends of the founders, (c) researchers interested in learning more about indigenous building methodologies and students who were attending and participating in the building workshops, and (d) higher education champions—university staff. Participants provided insight into the partnership's processes, results, and problems.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Using participant observation helped the first author to not only observe but participate in community-building practices where building, learning, or facilitating was organized in a fluid and organic manner. In this process, community members would come and go, learn and exchange skills, and were treated as co-producers of knowledge; they were therefore treated as partners rather than passive recipients. Additionally, discussions, interactions, and collaborative practices were captured through observation. All interviews were tape-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by extensive field notes.

The study was approved by the UFS Ethics Committee. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and that participation was voluntary. Some participants chose to use a pseudonym, while others wanted to see themselves in the study. Ubuntu-inspired principles, therefore, guided the research, focusing on relational accountability, mutual respect, and shared benefit. We believe that multistakeholder engagement should allow voices from all partners. This promotes both humility and relationship-building because, when all voices are heard, knowledge hierarchy is broken.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was used to analyze data, and reflexivity was central to the analysis. Member-checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing enhanced trustworthiness. We held sessions to discuss the study's preliminary results with the participants, which gave them the space to engage and discuss their perspectives with us. This approach enabled the subtle interpretation of how higher education champions and community members mutually construct knowledge, negotiate power, and build transformative alliances.

6. Case Study: Meraka Village

Meraka Village, a cultural village situated in Roodewal, adjacent to Bloemfontein, South Africa, was founded to promote and maintain various indigenous knowledges and practices. Mme Sebabatso (a founder) lives there with her family, while other community members come and go. This makes Meraka a multipurpose community: People come to volunteer, to gain academic credits, or to do research, learn, and advocate for indigenous building techniques; academics come as part of service learning, while others come to learn skills, rebuild confidence and trust, or feel the belonging of being part of an inspiring community.

It is a community in which university students, academics, and residents can engage, learn, and get to know each other. Workshops, cultural activities, and sustainable building projects take place in the village, focusing

on co-creation, reciprocity, and integration of indigenous and academic knowledge systems. It was Mme Sebabatso's dream to establish a place that defied the segregation she continued to perceive in the post-1994 environment. When asked why Meraka, she described consistent patterns of separation and longing toward reconciliation and shared belonging: "Meraka means coming together of the long-awaited rainbow nation." The dream became reality when she met Anita, who had posed the question: "Can we begin with relationships and not outputs?" As Anita described: "The emphasis is to create a community first, and the community will create the shelter." Like in the Laweyan Batik Village in Indonesia, where universities played the role of in-between actors between community leaders, NGOs, and the local government (Harsanto & Permana, 2021), collaboration in Meraka was supported by university relationships (in this case with the UFS), which were later formalized in a memorandum of understanding.

7. Co-Learning and Indigenous Knowledge

Co-learning in Meraka is a dynamic and reciprocal process that links indigenous and academic knowledge through shared participation, creativity, and Ubuntu ethics—a philosophy emphasizing relationality, interdependence, and the moral responsibility to care for and support others in a community (Chuwa, 2014, pp. 33–88). As Anita explained: "Practicing Ubuntu at Meraka entails harnessing the cultural, ecological, economic, ethical, political, social, spiritual, scientific, and technological knowledge through engaged scholarship." This holistic perspective disrupts hegemonic hierarchies of knowledge and extends to pluriversality, which acknowledges that there are multiple directions of knowledge flow and that knowledge is also created through lived experience (Van Karnenbeek et al., 2022).

The pedagogy of Meraka is based on learning and shared responsibility. One champion described it this way: "There are no bystanders at Meraka. Everyone has an offering and the beauty of it is knowing that you have people that have your back" (Participant 6). This feeling reflects the Ubuntu principle of interdependence, which considers learning as a social and moral practice (Letseka, 2012). Participants and students, through eco-building activities, learn and labor together using natural materials—mud, straw, and bottles—in constructing homes and symbolically rebuilding the feeling of collective humanity. Indeed, as the same champion went on to say: "Meraka is not simply a construction site, but a place of teamwork where people come together to heal wounds of the past."

These interactive experiences dissolve teacher–learner boundaries, as Freire (1970) envisioned in his view of education as a praxis in which reflection and action become the stimuli of change. This change in agency was described by a community member: "We didn't see the point of living in a shack anymore when we could use our own hands to build our own home" (Participant 5). Similarly, one champion noted: "I am not actually going into the community to teach like I am the teacher in my classroom" (Participant 10). Through such reciprocal learning, Meraka can reformulate knowledge-making as a form of co-creation based on respect, equality, and indigenous wisdom.

7.1. Transformation and Innovation

At Meraka, transformation and innovation were born out of the intentional merging of indigenous knowledge, scholarly partnership, and experimentation. The eco-building project was more than just a construction project—it also served as a social, personal, and environmental change agent (Collins et al.,

2018; Sandmann, 2008). Participant 3 viewed their newfound agency as follows: "I built my first mud-brick wall on my own; it felt like I could create something meaningful for my family." This shows how learning and hands-on experience helped empower community members, turning them into active participants rather than passive ones. Using locally available materials and novel building methods, Meraka participants reinvented traditional building methods, tackling the problems of sustainability and resource shortages. Participant 4 described it by saying they "experimented with mixing cow dung, ash, and local clay to make bricks that would last through the seasons," making it clear that indigenous practices were combined with experimentation.

Innovation at Meraka also occurred at psychological and cultural levels. Community members said they felt more confident and encouraged in their creativity and had a resurgence of cultural pride. Participant 5 mentioned they "never thought I could present my ideas in front of others, but now I lead the workshops with confidence," showing personal change through co-learning. Participant 6 reflected on generational effects: "This work shows our children that building with our hands and knowledge is powerful; it teaches respect for our traditions and new ways to live sustainably." Thus, change was not limited to physical buildings but also covered moral and societal renewal.

Notably, innovation at Meraka was team-based and cyclical and was maintained by collective experimentation and relational responsibility. As Anita remarked: "Everyone brought something unique—skills, ideas, and stories—and together we created something none of us could have imagined alone." Meraka Village is one example of how co-learning can bring about concrete innovations and social, cultural, and personal change through the convergence of indigenous knowledge, creativity, and academic insight.

7.2. Power Dynamics

Power dynamics at Meraka were under constant negotiation, at both relational and structural levels, which explains why knowledge co-creation cannot be discussed outside of social and economic realities. On a relational level, participants stressed that successful cooperation relied on mutual respect and equal responsibility. As Participant 3 noted: "Decisions work better when everyone is listened to; no one should feel they are the sole authority." Trust in relationships was created daily, and the emotional connections created could promote long-lasting interactions, demonstrating the need for using patience, dialogue, and alert leadership to resolve conflicts. This agrees with the literature, indicating that partnerships based on equity ought to have relational accountability and acknowledgment of community agency (Ntsele, 2024; Oetzel et al., 2022).

Both structural and resource-based inequalities also influenced power negotiations. Participants reported inequality in access to resources and funds, with some community members being more disadvantaged despite possessing equal knowledge and requirements. Participant 5 noted: "We often have the knowledge and the will, but getting the materials is another challenge; this creates tension if not addressed openly." The university's role added additional power dimensions, especially regarding budget transparency and administration, highlighting the necessity of making financial and operational decisions together. When institutional authority is not scrutinized, partnerships are prone to recreating hierarchical frameworks instead of bringing about fair co-learning (Motala & Vally, 2022; Strier, 2014).

The main mechanisms of power balance were cultural recognition and epistemic plurality. Leadership alternated, and both indigenous and academic knowledge were considered equally valuable in collaborative activities. As Mme Sebabatso explained: "I had to acknowledge the expertise of community members; without their guidance, the project could not move forward." These examples show that power may be shared by applying purposeful communication, collective decision-making, and respect, as well as by supporting the multidirectional streams of knowledge that transformative community-academic partnerships require (Baquet, 2012; Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009).

7.3. Successes and Challenges

The Meraka partnership is a great example of how co-learning may create both tangible results and radical societal change. Among the achievements was the creation of practical eco-building projects, which made participants feel more confident and gave them a sense of agency. As Participant 3 explained: "When we completed the stove, I felt proud to show it to my neighbors; I realized I could do more than I thought." These successes boosted community pride and Ubuntu-based cooperation, proving the ability of co-learning to make social unity and responsibility more powerful (Freire, 1970; Letseka, 2012). Along with gaining technical expertise, participants described new, transformative personal growth: "Working here has taught me patience and persistence. I now teach others, and I see myself differently" (Participant 6). This reflects the pedagogical and empowering aspects of the partnership.

Meraka was also a place of social and emotional healing. One community member explained: "I was struggling, but being part of the activities gave me energy and purpose" (Participant 7). Such experiences are indicative of the process of merging indigenous activity with academic support, which forms the environments in which knowledge and well-being are fostered in parallel (Ntsele, 2024; Preece, 2017, pp. 1–24). Moreover, multidisciplinary collaboration enabled the identification of different competencies, thereby strengthening the multidirectional nature of knowledge transfer observed in reciprocal partnerships (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2016).

Nevertheless, issues arose, especially regarding sustainability, resource constraints, and socioeconomic stressors. As Participant 5 said: "Some projects are exciting at first, but we don't have a long-term plan, so the momentum fades." Engagement was also complicated by financial limits and inadequate institutional support, as Participant 8 explained: "Sometimes I volunteer time or transport, but it's risky when the university doesn't officially support weekend work." Regular attendance was also limited due to poverty and incompatible livelihoods, demonstrating some of the structural obstacles that inform community-academic partnerships (Bhattacharyya & Murji, 2015; Motala & Vally, 2022).

Despite such problems, the partnership was maintained by the ethos of resilience and reflective learning at Meraka. As a staff member noted: "Here, mistakes are part of learning; failure is not shameful but a step toward innovation" (Participant 9). This experimental and adaptive culture highlights the transformative possibilities of co-learning conditions in which agency, knowledge, and community well-being are mutually reinforced despite structural and logistical constraints (Collins et al., 2018; Oetzel et al., 2022).

8. The Role of Higher Education Champions

The partnerships we saw in Bloemfontein and Meraka Village were held together not only by structures but by individuals. These "higher education champions," as we call them, were the academics who chose to do more than what their formal employment demanded. Three related themes emerged in their narratives: preserving trust and commitment, closing the gap between knowledge and reciprocity, and promoting change and visibility.

8.1. Maintaining Trust and Commitment

The key to maintaining trust and dedication within the Meraka partnership was the regular involvement and relational leadership of community and higher education champions like co-founders Mme Sebabatso and Anita Venter, and other academic staff. The development of trust was supported by their regular presence, attentiveness to participants' needs, and readiness to address any practical and relational gap, which is consistent with research findings highlighting the significance of establishing meaningful and long-lasting relationships during community-university partnerships (Collins et al., 2018; Oetzel et al., 2022). One champion said they "often went to teach where the children stayed because their parents said my place was far...I always made sure they learned how to build," demonstrating how champions were an active agent of accessible co-learning (Participant 2).

Champions made reflection and dialogue a part of everyday activities, establishing a space of mutual respect and responsibility. Discussions at the end of the day and joint problem-solving fostered openness, and over time, historical and epistemic differences were overcome. Mme Sebabatso mentioned that "it took time to trust Anita…using the very building practices I had learned to think of as backwards." This quote shows the importance of persistence and culturally sensitive engagement in bringing about trust and confirming indigenous knowledge systems (De Sousa Santos, 2021; L. T. Smith, 2021).

Commitment was further strengthened through providing tangible support and necessary facilities and resources, including food and transport, and through rotational leadership. Participant 3 recalled a champion saying that "today she will give Velile (a change agent who volunteers at Meraka), tomorrow it's me…she would say, 'I'm empowering you girls, so that when you get to the township, you are able to start your own training.'" Participant 5 said: "The way Mme, Anita, and Heidi treated us was really good….They cared for us, made sure we had food and transport." These actions demonstrate how the higher education champions established a robust trust and active relationship over the years so that the co-learning process at Meraka was not exclusive, solely participatory, or top-down.

8.2. Bridging Knowledge and Reciprocity

Higher education champions also played a significant role in establishing a system of mutual knowledge-sharing in which academic knowledge, local knowledge, and community experience were equally accepted. By maintaining a sustained engagement, champions created a space in which learning became multidirectional and co-creative and helped both students and community members be active knowledge producers. As Participant 4 explained: "They always encouraged us to try things ourselves, and even when we made mistakes, they guided us patiently. It was learning together, not just them teaching us." This style

cultivated curiosity, experimentation, and learning between generations, which form the basis of co-creation (Collins et al., 2018).

Meraka's daily practices also incorporated reciprocity in physical activities. Training sessions were designed in a way that enabled community members to impart practical skills to the students and to learn academic concepts in exchange. Participant 3 noted: "I could show the students how we do certain things, and then they would share ideas from university. It became a real exchange." These interactions were mediated through champions who aligned university resources with local requirements to foster participants in expressing their views on project planning and design. This is an example of how to meet the moral call for relational accountability, where knowledge-sharing is sensitive to contextual realities, including resource limitations and cultural activities (Motala & Vally, 2022; Oetzel et al., 2022).

Reciprocity was also strengthened by incorporating Ubuntu principles. Champions developed mutual respect and trust by creating solidarity, compassion, and shared responsibility (Mtawa, 2019). As Anita explained: "Being part of this partnership meant learning from the community, not just teaching; it was about walking together and building together." These are some of the practices that demonstrate how higher education champions can transcend knowledge boundaries and enhance co-learning, ethical activity, and shared ownership of transformative knowledge production.

8.3. Promoting Transformation and Visibility

Meraka's higher education champions were key catalysts of transformation because they amplified the co-created knowledge's visibility and undermined the traditional hierarchies that consider academic knowledge as superior to local and indigenous knowledges (Ntsele, 2024; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2016). Through deliberate identification of indigenous building methods in conjunction with scholarly advice, champions enabled a redefinition of the local practices, which led to pride and legitimacy for local members. Participant 7 remarked: "When we see the houses built from local materials, I realize our ways are not backward—they are teaching tools for everyone." This intentional incorporation of indigenous knowledge and university-led knowledge strengthened epistemic plurality, legitimizing various types of knowledge and demonstrating that both academic and local knowledge have equal power and can play a useful role in resolving problems and being innovative (De Sousa Santos, 2021; Zembylas, 2025).

Champions also associated local initiatives with concrete societal outcomes and thus reflected the potential transformative power of community knowledge. They described how they also focused on other needed projects like building the community clinical play area so the neighborhood children and kids from the orphanage where Mme Sebabato occasionally volunteers could enjoy play therapy. This shows how cooperation might boost dignity, well-being, and operational service availability. As Participant 8, who became involved in the medical project, said: "The new clinical play area is more than bricks and tires—it shows that we can build spaces that care for people and reflect our culture." By enhancing infrastructure, champions promoted advocacy and institutional participation, providing participants with the ability to use local expertise to impact policy: "By documenting and showcasing our eco-building work, we can influence local councils and universities to support indigenous knowledge projects" (Participant 9).

Another significant result was personal growth and leadership development. Community participants became confident, especially in intergenerational teaching and mentorship: "I never thought I could teach younger people to build, but now I see myself guiding them" (Participant 10). By connecting community experience with scholarship and larger institutional spaces, champions ensured sustainability, amplified marginalized voices, and connected local innovativeness to institutional change, making higher education actors good exemplars of visible, equitable, and transformative knowledge production (Croese & Duminy, 2023; Preece, 2017, pp. 1–24).

9. Toward Equitable and Transformative Partnerships

A major paradox that became visible in this research was that of partnerships seeking to be reciprocal yet being situated within academic settings with policy, funding, and institutional logics that do not question the privilege of universities. Without reflection on this privileged position, people's good intentions will not result in change. This problem is not exclusive to South Africa. Global discussions remind us that the idea of reciprocity is not merely about being kind or showing goodwill but about structural investment and reflection and the promise to co-create knowledge and produce results that benefit communities no less than students or scholars (Mayo, 2020). In this article, we argue that reciprocity needs craftsmanship at individual and local levels, but mainly at institutional levels. It requires co-designing, continuous negotiation, and reflection on power relations. This is then about a distinction between incidental mutual benefit, or thin reciprocity, and what academics refer to as constructive or strong reciprocity: a long-term, intentional practice in which risks and returns are distributed and outcomes are jointly constructed (Cooper & Orrell, 2016; Mohebali, 2017). In thin reciprocity, alliances move toward extractive research or student-centered productions, whereas in strong reciprocity, communities frame the questions and co-produce the answers.

The literature warns that reciprocity should be linked to communities' self-determination and democratic voices; otherwise, academia will merely reassert its hierarchy by a new name (Murtadha, 2016; Opel & Sackey, 2019). In Meraka, reciprocity was most effective when participants slowed down, identified power disparities clearly, and determined the direction according to local priorities. That necessitated humility on the academic side and a willingness to learn, sometimes literally, the languages and logics of the community (Shiller, 2017). Meraka showed the value of equitable partnerships but also the importance of enabling conditions for such partnerships. These conditions include resources, leadership, and structures that do not view communities as a mere placement site but as co-governors of the partnership (de los Reyes et al., 2023; Reardon, 2006). This requires boards, research, shared spaces, and multimodal learning courses that develop long-term interdependence (Grant, 2022). Most importantly, it requires clear roles and expectations and frequent communication to ensure the necessary accountability exists (Cooper & Orrell, 2016).

In sum, partnerships need to be more than superficial forms of collaboration, or thin reciprocity, to be transformative. Transformative partnerships require a necessary capacity, infrastructure, and trust in communities and a thick reciprocity acknowledging community needs, conditions, and knowledges (Quan, 2023). For academics, the test of justice is straightforward: Do communities become stronger, more self-determined, and better resourced by partnering with academia? If yes, then academia is headed toward equity. If not, then it risks recreating the injustices we are trying to eliminate.

10. Conclusion

Although a growing body of literature focuses on critically engaged scholarship, not much has been done on the importance of disadvantaged communities' epistemic knowledge in community-engaged partnerships with universities. We argue for the conditions necessary to enable such partnerships and for the importance of decolonial methodologies in questioning academia's normalized hierarchical approach toward communities. The case of Meraka Village reflects the processes of creating equitable, reciprocal, and transformative partnerships with communities as championed by higher education. These partnerships disrupt hierarchical knowledge systems, encouraging multifaceted learning and respect for the knowledge of locals, and are founded on recognizing indigenous and scholarly knowledge and embracing a multidirectional approach to learning and teaching. Successful collaborations entail sustained, deliberate reciprocity, ethical leadership, and structural support to get beyond superficial interactions and ensure that communities co-decide priorities and share the actual benefits of collaboration.

Epistemic plurality is thus a key mechanism for generating transformative outcomes, and various modes of knowing—indigenous, academic, and hybrid—enhance innovation, social cohesion, and justice. Trust, mutual respect, active involvement, and acknowledging the epistemic value of community knowledges are maintained through Ubuntu-inspired practices as necessary conditions for reflective collaboration and relational accountability. As inequities exist in structures and resources, Meraka shows that higher education can play a role in promoting social justice by forming alliances that amplify marginalized knowledges, redistribute power, and promote an inclusive, sustainable, and context-sensitive co-creation of knowledge.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The qualitative data used in this study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations. The data are securely stored and accessible through encrypted backups and cloud-based services managed by the first author.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used solely for language editing and clarity by the first author. All conceptualization, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are the authors' own, and the authors take full responsibility for the content.

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