URGE Policies for Working with Local Communities

Below is a summary of previous experiences working with local communities (including indigenous communities, minoritized communities, and/or communities of color) from the Florida State University, Department of Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric Science URGE pod, and a summary of ideas on how to improve meaningful engagement and collaboration in the future.

Audit of previous interactions with indigenous communities at our organization:

Most members of our pod have experience doing fieldwork in areas with local communities (including indigenous communities, minoritized communities, and/or communities of color), and most members of our pod have previously actively sought out local collaborators, liaisons, or guides. However, local collaborators were most often engaged after the initial development of research questions, and sometimes collaborators from local groups were not necessarily members of local indigenous communities. Local research collaborators were usually included as authors on resulting publications, and people paid for field assistance (who were most often actually from local indigenous communities) were generally acknowledged within publications. Local indigenous communities were acknowledged for about half of projects (but some projects were not performed near communities).

About half of projects actively sought to include local students in research (however, again, local students were not necessarily from indigenous communities). Similarly, about half of projects sought to build trust and form long-term connections with local institutions for multi-year or ongoing projects. Previous negative interactions with local communities were usually not addressed in plans for creating long-term connections (but at least one project formed connections with a local institution at the explicit recommendation of a previous research team that had a negative interaction in the same area). Fewer (roughly a quarter) of projects shared results with the local community in an accessible way (but some projects are ongoing and have not yet produced results to share).
Most pod members have educated themselves about local politics, culture, customs, knowledge, and history prior to doing fieldwork in an area. However, this was generally done at the individual level, not as part of a coordinated effort in the research group or project. Most pod members felt that these individual efforts were not adequate. Only about a third of projects explicitly included ‘respecting culture and customs’ as part of a formal code of conduct.

Most projects did not include local communities in broader impacts in a meaningful way. Where local communities were included in broader impacts, pod members felt that community members were neither leveraged nor compensated appropriately. However, broader impacts are ongoing for some projects, and some projects have planned or ongoing prioritization of research questions and research locations based on the needs of local communities.

**What worked well in these interactions?**

Many positive interactions occurred when interactions with communities were facilitated by local institutions. For example, local institutions most often coordinated efforts to include local students in research or effectively communicated results to the nearby communities. In one project, the local park system even provided a code of conduct specific for a marine monument, including information to educate researchers about the local cultural significance of the monument. Another institution created meaningful land acknowledgment statements by working with local indigenous communities, and requiring researchers to use acknowledgment statements approved by those communities.

**What did not work well, and how can this be better addressed in future plans?**

Although most projects included local collaborators on some level, most pod members felt that more could be done to: engage local groups earlier in the research process, communicate results to local communities, and educate project members about local customs and history.

Most successful efforts in our pod were mediated through local institutions who have already built trust with local communities, so working more closely with local institutions could address many of these shortcomings in the future. We discussed that researchers could explicitly communicate with local institutions that they would like to share results with community members early enough in the writing process so that support for outreach efforts (i.e. buying refreshments, town halls) could be included in project financial and time budgets.

For some groups/projects, respecting culture and customs could be addressed by adding it to a code of conduct. Some groups and projects already include this, some include interactions with local communities tangentially as part of a “risk assessment”, and others do not currently have
any code of conduct for conducting field research. Pod members sometimes felt that it was difficult to initiate engagement with communities as a more junior member of a larger research team—codified plans from departments or institutions could help students and postdocs feel more empowered to bring this up with more senior researchers.

**Are there ways to improve the outcome of projects already undertaken?**

Our pod members identified some ways to improve the outcome of ongoing projects.

One suggestion was to have a discussion with collaborators about engagement with and respect for local communities, in order to create a coordinated plan going forward.

Additionally, many projects in our groups include landmarks with both local names and newer names not used by indigenous communities—we discussed that continuity with previous publications (that do not use local names) could be maintained by primarily using local names but included newer names in statements like “(also known as ___)”.

Last, land acknowledgements in ongoing projects could be improved by searching for acknowledgements that have been used in the past or are provided by institutions (for example, for FSU: [https://arthistory.fsu.edu/about/land-acknowledgment/](https://arthistory.fsu.edu/about/land-acknowledgment/) and for University of Lethbridge: [https://www.uleth.ca/first-nations-metis-inuit](https://www.uleth.ca/first-nations-metis-inuit)). Again, these acknowledgements should be made with, and approved by, local groups.

**Are there specific resources or guidelines that are needed to improve the process for planning ahead and working with indigenous communities?**

Research groups and departments could maintain a list (with links and/or contact information) to existing organizations that can help build contact and meaningful relationships with local communities (for example, local watershed councils). Further, departments could develop a collection of resources (like external courses) to help people learn more about working with indigenous groups; departments should also financially support participation of researchers in these efforts.