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Unlearning Racism in Geoscience

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URGE Policies for Working with Communities of Color for University/Organization

This is what was found by Woods Hole Diversity at Woodwell Climate Research Center on Policies for Working with Communities of Color as well as plans for improved processes and/or needed resources.

Pods may have members from a range of career stages and involvement in the development and execution of research projects, and pod members may have different experiences or different perspectives when responding to these questions. Consider this in the summary document and focus on capturing responses that are representative of the range in your pod.

Three full time employees at Woodwell Climate Research Center were interviewed about their interactions with Communities of Color. Their responses are summarized below.

- **Audit of previous interactions with communities of color at our organization:**

A full audit of interactions between Woodwell staff and Communities of Color is impossible on this timeline. Additionally, what qualifies as a Community of Color, and what qualifies as 'interaction' are both debatable and would require further specification before an audit could even begin. So, instead the interviewees were encouraged to speak about particular 'case studies' that typified what they viewed as the most common interactions.

Much of Woodwells work focuses on rural, often especially Indigenous communities in tropical regions, especially in Brazil and central Africa. Some interviewees also mentioned work in Mexico and in the Arctic, especially Siberia, the Russian Far East, and Alaska. One respondent specified '20+' projects alone, which each could involve dozens of separate interactions with local communities. It is fair to say at a minimum that Woodwell Climate Research Center has participated in hundreds of projects involving Communities of Color.

As far as a 'case-study' can be specified further, oftentimes this involved the usual scientific research process with funding negotiations, research, fieldwork and later publication and any post-publication follow-up work (not a guarantee).

- **What worked well in these interactions?**

One respondent highlighted "listening more, talking less" and "giving more, taking less". All respondents emphasized that it is important to understand local needs and that involving the community in the process with their own agency benefits both long-term relationships and the quality of the work.

Both this respondent and another commented that training in the local environment and broader ethical training (called by one 'ethical screening') on good social science practices ensure that communities are treated fairly, equitably, and do not feel left out, or even abused, by the project happening in their area.

All three respondents said that workshops were appreciated. Going a step further and mentoring people in the field to devolve knowledge and power from the foreign scientists to the locals also helped to build trust, thus developing robust longterm relationships while also helping local communities to address their *own* needs *themselves* as well.

One respondent said that while securing national or subnational governmental support is obviously required, that because there can be many overlapping authorities in the specific area the study is happening in, that ensuring local leaders are contacted *prior* to the study beginning minimizes the chance for accidental offense or violations of local rights. Again, helping to build trust which only can help the overall project.

Another respondent said that "ask[ing], rather than assum[ing]" and working to understand local customs helped to improve relationships. This was echoed in another interview, where they said that tailoring communication to fit the community helped with local participation and ensuring approval. Especially through working either with interpreters, or staff who spoke a locally used language. They added that it helped to design reports that could be easily understood by either an illiterate audience, or one not as well-versed in the specific academic language of the study being carried out.

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

All three respondents highlighted different issues. One talked about difficulties in communication due to technological issues ex. Poor Internet service. While virtual communication through services like Zoom can help connect physically distant groups, that communication relies on infrastructure that often is not reliable.

Another mentioned the opposite of what had worked well - instead of talking less, talking more, and insteading of giving more, taking more. All too frequently, the historically extractive and colonial structure of western science is repeated even by scientists who outwardly profess to want to avoid that. One respondent said that in many institutions there are few opportunities for scientists pursuing flawed and exploitative projects to be informed about the nature of their work, and pushed to correct them.

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One interviewee shared a story about a western researcher who did fieldwork in the country they [the interviewee] studied in, only having acquired national governmental approval but without consulting *any* local leaders, got the results, left (obviously then doing no followup work with the community in the area) and the resulting uproar was so extreme that when entering the country themselves to do their own study - with prior consent of the community in *that* area, they were nearly arrested. This was purely based on the suspicion they were doing something similar, and the situation only resolved itself because this scientist had deep local connections and people in the area could vouch for them to the authorities. This interviewee called the entire episode a "disgusting show of colonial arrogance".

This idea of 'parachuting out' as another interviewee put it came up repeatedly. Once a study ends the work should not end. Otherwise all the work involving the community, is fundamentally a farce. It is important to maintain relationships, keep people informed of what is being done with the data gathered in their area, or even from the people themselves, and if possible to establish relationships with organizations on the ground as well, such as locally run-NGOs.

However, as one respondent put it - this is all trying to pursue an ideal. Follow-up work especially is expensive. Many sources of funding do not consider it important enough to supply sufficient, if any, resources. The 'paper-first' model of grants directly disincentivizes proper scientific behavior. Scientists who wish to maintain good local relationships often open themselves up to more risk, both in their career and finances, than scientists who prioritize publication above all else.

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

In the same way that projects should not end upon publication, past projects can be improved even if deadlines have passed. One respondent highlighted the success of long-term mentoring programs and building local organizations - specifically IPAM in Brazil. Another added on this by discussing bringing scholars to within the center itself and building up those relationships outside the local area itself. This of course has to be reinforced with ensuring a respectful and sustainable environment for these researchers at the center itself.

One researcher pushed back on the comments of the others by saying it is difficult to improve the outcomes of projects once completed, but that if one is able to maintain productive relationships over time, "there will be opportunities to improve upon the interactions the next time around".

These relationships can be aided by, as has been mentioned before, ensuring the results of studies are shared with the community. This obviously includes accessible design and possibly translation but can also include shows of support and understanding like Land Acknowledgements. Now, one researcher mentioned that the specific form this takes can vary based on the historical context of the area. For example, they were unsure if Land Acknowledgements were appropriate in central Africa. While European colonialism no doubt affects, and affected Africa, the form of *settler* colonialism that dominates the conversation of land sovereignty and Indigenous rights in much of the Americas is not a factor in the region the interviewee worked in.

The Indigenous (non-European settler colonial) population not only forms an overwhelming majority, but also controls the land and organs of political power. Colonial and more broadly power relationships take different forms in different areas, and researchers should seek to understand the specific situation in the area being studied to determine the most appropriate course of action. When in doubt, ask and listen.

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

Every respondent said additional funding and support for planning studies along a longer timeline would improve relationship-building. This includes after publication. One emphasized that these resources "ensure projects are not just one-off activities, but rather enduring/lasting investments in these communities."

One respondent mentioned that creating specific points of contact where requests can be organized would help ensure communities are not overwhelmed by a haphazard flood of additional work. This would play into what was said above about working not only with local leaders but local organizations.

Lastly, training came up as a vital part of preparation for fieldwork itself. A major cause of the destructive ignorance of many research projects in one interviewees eyes, was that researchers coming from many technical fields lack social, ethical, and cultural training. They emphasized that ignorance is not a crime, but it is not an excuse. Not only should researchers strive to educate themselves, but there need to be systems in place to detect issues before they affect a community down the line.