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**Turning outwards or inwards? The experience of a Mexican Indigenous model of community-driven and intercultural education in a globalized world - La Universidad de los Pueblos del Sur**

<b>Alfredo Méndez-Bahena</b>	Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero Chilpancingo, México	amendezbahena@gmail.com
<b>Anna Rosa Domínguez-Corona</b>	Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia Ciudad de México, México	annadominguezcorona@gmail.com
<b>Norma Elena Méndez-Bahena</b>	Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero Chilpancingo, México	norelen3@gmail.com
<b>Marlene Brito-Millán</b>	Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero Chilpancingo, México	mbritomillan@gmail.com
	UC MEXUS, University of California, Riverside, USA	

### Abstract

The neocolonial undercurrent of internationalization that drives educational policies and standards, imposes a EEUUrocentric worldview and perspective of human development upon the global South. Beyond the discourse of international cooperation, this vision sustains what Quijano describes as the 'coloniality of power' that deepens inequalities between universities of the global North and South. In Latin America, there are various alternative educational projects, including indigenous universities that turn inwards toward rich pluriversal contexts, histories of resistance, and diverse tapestries of knowledge to address local problems and train youth to generate new horizons for ongoing indigenous and afro-mestizo social movements. This article is a reflective analytical account of our seven-year experience as volunteer educators at the Universidad Intercultural de los Pueblos del Sur (UNISUR) from an intercultural and decolonial feminist perspective. Founded in 2007 in southern Mexico, UNISUR was formed as a grassroots indigenous university of and for the original peoples of Guerrero state. Our account disrupts the hegemonic vision of an internationalized education that sustains racialized 'colonialities of power' and instead proclaims the right to self-determination, to the empowerment of women, and to an education based on principles of decolonial epistemic equity.

### Resumen

El trasfondo neocolonial de la internacionalización que impulsa las políticas y estándares educativos imponen un EEUUrocéntrismo del mundo y del desarrollo humano sobre el sur global. Más allá del discurso de cooperación internacional, esta visión sostiene lo que Quijano describe como 'la colonialidad del poder' que profundiza desigualdades entre universidades del Norte y del Sur global. En América Latina existen diversos proyectos educativos alternos incluyendo las universidades indígenas que voltean hacia adentro a ricos contextos pluriversales, a historias de resistencia, y a diversos tapices de conocimiento para atender problemas locales y entrenar a jóvenes a generar nuevos horizontes para los movimientos sociales indígenas y afro-mestizos. Este artículo acontece nuestra reflexión analítica colectiva de siete años como docentes voluntarios de la Universidad Intercultural de los Pueblos del Sur desde una mirada intercultural y feminista decolonial. Fundada en 2007 en el sur de México, la UNISUR fue una institución indígena comunitaria, propia de los pueblos originarios del estado de Guerrero. Nuestro relato interrumpe la visión hegemónica de una educación internacionalizada que mantiene 'colonialidades de poder' racializadas y en cambio reivindican el derecho a la autodeterminación, al empoderamiento de mujeres, y a una educación basada en principios de equidad epistémica decolonial.

## Introduction

Globalization, or internationalization, which has come to be profoundly influenced by the orthodoxy of capital, subjects cultures around the world to the gradual imposition of a hegemonic ‘way of being’ that is dictated by the most powerful countries and their policies and programs. The vast reach of internationalization today is, in part, possible because of what Quijano (2000) describes as the ‘coloniality of power’ – the enduring racialized colonial structures that permeate economic, political, familial and onto-epistemological aspects of contemporary societies. Within Quijano’s colonial matrix of power, the knowledge and cultural production that is intrinsically linked to the formation of subjects continues to revolve around EEUUrocentric<sup>1</sup> values, structures, processes, and legacies of domination – a reality reinforced by internationalization.

In the case of education, Quijano’s ‘coloniality of power’ is evidenced by both international and national policies that continue to center EEUUrocentric rationality and logic, and that also amplify inequality and decrease access to education through privatization. Additionally, internationalized education systems enact evaluation standards based on increasingly complicated quantitative criteria that are assumed to be prime indicators of quality, but that have the effect of privileging the learning structures of the global North (Sahlberg, 2016). According to Miranda and Miranda’s (2012: 45) critique of corporate education:

(...) a vision of educational quality originating from the new corporate culture is being introduced practically worldwide; it proposes to transform educational systems towards a perspective of totalizing quality characterized by an approach centered on the client and a politic of zero errors.

The global North’s internationally exported criteria are sometimes impossible to meet for resource-limited institutions operating in vastly different contexts in countries of the global South, often becoming constituting factors that deepen inequality gaps regionally. By continuing to impose EEUUrocentric forms of knowledge and a homogenizing corporate vision of development and education upon ‘underdeveloped’ countries, this type of internationalization fails not only to respond to the necessities of local contexts but plays a role in the ongoing contraction of the pluriverse, that is, in the ongoing erasure of diverse human cosmovisions, worldviews, languages, and lifeways (Kothari, Salleh, Escobar, Demaria, & Acosta, 2019).

Within this context of ‘development’ and internationalization, the subjects, or people, of the global South are valiantly leading various localized educational efforts that turn inwards to their communities to address local problems by drawing upon their culture, histories of resistance, and diverse tapestries of knowledge. Here, we provide a reflective analytical account of one of these efforts, la Universidad Intercultural de los Pueblos del Sur – UNISUR, or the Intercultural University of the People of the South. UNISUR was founded in 2007 in southern México as an intercultural community-based institution of, and for, the original peoples of the Indigenous and afro-mestizo regions of the ‘Costa Chica’ and ‘Montaña’ in the state of Guerrero. Although not formally a registered intercultural university, Indigenous universities, like UNISUR, are principally grassroots-driven universities that, at least for

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<sup>1</sup> EEUUrocentric is used to signify both European and EEUU centricism, where EEUU is a common Latin American Spanish-language abbreviation used for the United States.

UNISUR from 2007 to 2014, turn their vision inward towards their rich pluriversal context of struggle and resistance in the face of the dominant neo-colonial project of schooling and internationalization (also referred to as 'development'). Such universities are an important embodiment of decolonization in Latin American higher education through their decolonial praxis situated within local contexts and their centering of students committed to generating dignified autonomous horizons for their communities (Batz, 2018; Zapata Webb, 2019).

We write this reflective analytical narrative drawing from our collective memory and personal written, video, and photographic records and positioned as participants in the development and operation of UNISUR until 2014. We are Mexican activist scholars of which, two of us were involved in the organizing and designing of UNISUR from 1998 (years before its official opening), and of which most of us were involved in the construction of an adaptive pedagogical-model built to respond to the evolving needs and feedback of the students and communities. Most of us also served as members of the academic body that was regularly guided by the wisdom of local regional leaders, and as classroom facilitators - the title assigned to faculty committed to horizontality within classrooms. This article uses an intercultural, decolonial and decolonial feminist perspective to reveal the complexity of advancing a collective dream of community-based higher education that tried to put front and center the communities themselves, their needs, their languages and cosmovisions, within a context dominated by neoliberal educational policies designed to advance authoritarian structures that ultimately inhibit the autonomous organization of subjects.

### **México within an international context and a concise history of its educational system**

With the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, the United States and México in 1992, a series of very profound transformations began in México – from an overflow of commodities made in the United States that modified day-to-day habits and consumption behaviors, to the great waves of NAFTA-impooverished peasants who became the 'human capital' that migrated towards 'the North' (Mize & Swords, 2010). In the educational realm, the effects of NAFTA brought a new wave of internationalization in the form of an English language requirement at practically all levels of education.

Despite the fact that the Mexican revolution cemented the right to education into the constitution, over time the imported standards of a modern western education system actually diminished access to education. Two examples are: the creation of custom entrance and exit exams across various educational levels and the start of an accreditation system for programs and institutions - both backed by external private institutions that often charged exorbitant prices which fell upon public institutions and their students (Aboites, 2012).

The incorporation of imported standards into Mexican educational policy was justified by the argument that "competition between Mexican universities and those from other countries entailed developing our higher education institutions according to international indicators" (Malo, 2000: 9). The notion of standardized competencies (e.g. in curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluations) that drove projects like Tuning Latin America "implicitly brought a profile of the professional that...simply, assumes [professionals] are identical for all of Latin America" (Aboites, 2010: 136). Without any

consultation processes nor contextual reflections, the arrival of this standardization to México not only demonstrates Quijano's 'coloniality of power', but shows a complete disregard for the many public institutions and social movements that had been advancing processes that reclaimed diversity, interculturality and epistemic equity, as transformative dimensions of public education (Freidberg, 2005).

For Mexican professors, the arrival of educational 'standards' meant that they were suddenly faced with a series of stringent requirements, some of which included: having a postgraduate degree (typically at the doctoral level) to retain positions they had been in for decades, new requirements of regular international research stays and publishing in peer-reviewed/indexed journals with an associated impact factor, and the pressure of being evaluated and vetted into a new National System of Researchers (SNI). This internationalized form of education shifted the focus of the Mexican professoriate towards publishing rather than investigating and contributing towards solving the vast multi-dimensional and historically-driven problems affecting the people of México (Aboites, 2012).

To refer to the structural and functional remnants of knowledge production that are rooted in the often invisibilized history of colonial rape, dehumanization, theft and exploitation of the diverse cultures and peoples of the Americas, Lander (2000) uses the term 'coloniality of knowledge'. This concept traces the origin of the inequalities that have persisted throughout five centuries of dispossession due to enduring colonial structures and processes. For example, Walsh (2008:137) affirms that the consequence of EEUUrocentrism as the defining scientific-academic-intellectual framework against which all other knowledge must be measured, is that it discards the existence and viability of other epistemic rationalities that are not those of EEUUropean or EEUUropeanized white men. In essence, EEUUrocentric thinking has continued its hegemonic colonial project since the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the conquest of the Americas marked the beginning of the first 'world-system' (Dussel, 2000). This 'coloniality of knowledge' is evident within México's education system, from primary to higher education, where a single EEUUrocentric patriarchal logic and way of knowing is imposed despite a diverse mosaic of realities across the Americas (Quijano, 1997, 2000; Lander, 2000; Grosfoguel, 2013; Wood, 2020).

It is from these critical positions of historiography and the 'coloniality of power and knowledge', that we critique the neocolonial arm of internationalization and its exclusionary impositions upon the Mexican educational system.

### **Sociocultural, economic, and political aspects in Guerrero and their relation to education**

The vast diversity of contexts and cultures in México make it difficult to justify the establishment of a uniform standard of teaching – as intended by neocolonial internationalization initiatives in education. Many students in the southern states of México, including Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas, come from regions with the highest concentrations of Indigenous people – people who continue to practice their millennial traditions and communicate in their native languages (Méndez, Urbán, Díaz, & Maradiaga, 2009). However, according to international rubrics, they also have the worst indicators of well-being in the country. Ongoing structural racism that manifests in the form of neglect and resource dispossession by the Mexican nation-state undoubtedly contributes to the disproportionate

manifestations of extreme poverty and marginalization of the Mexican South (Méndez and Bueno, 2019).

In Guerrero, the state in which UNISUR was created, lived realities are marked by deficiencies in basic services; for example, in access to drinking water, electricity, housing, and the worst conditions in sanitation, education and communication infrastructure. University enrollment is predominantly of youth from impoverished campesino (peasant) and Indigenous communities where formal educational attainment is lower than the national average (Méndez and Bueno, 2019). It is common for many students in this region to attend their classes without having eaten, to have traveled several hours to get to their schools, and to simultaneously work to pay their expenses (Ferguson & Morales, 2019). In the same vein, many university professors do not have postgraduate studies since opportunities in the region are scarce. Given the socioeconomic reality, educators in the region are more focused on transformative, yet low-cost pedagogy due to the overload of students, the scarcity of resources, and low state-wide salaries, rather than on the scientific research that internationalization demands (Méndez & Bueno, 2019).

The challenges for women in education, especially for campesinas, are even more tenuous. Firstly, women have a 'triple work shift': they study, work, and are responsible for taking care of family and housework, especially within rural contexts (Rodríguez Flores, 2015; Reynoso Sánchez & Castro Andriano, 2020). Second, women are more likely to be sexually harassed in the education system, as is seen in other patriarchal societies (Wadman, 2017). Third, within academia, women's voices are undervalued, which makes it more difficult for them to be recognized as knowledge holders and producers, which can stymie professional development for some. All of this makes it more challenging for women to publish articles and gain access to research positions and attain the 'standards' demanded by internationalization.

A subset of Indigenous people who have lived for millennia in the region now called the state of Guerrero, are the Nahua, Me'phaá (Tlapanecos), Ñuu Savi (Mixtecos) and Na'mncue No'mndaa (Amuzgos) peoples and they have done so, more recently, alongside afro-mestizo and mestizo communities (Good, 2009). These communities are fairly religious, especially within the Catholic tradition. However, they maintain syncretism with their ancestral knowledge and belief systems, including that of traditional medicine and petition rituals, while sustaining a worldview in which elements of nature, such as rain, earth, and maize, are represented by deities and guardians (Martínez, 2009).

The region's economy is primarily based on subsistence agriculture with small-scale commercialization of some crops, including Jamaica (Hibiscus flowers), coffee, maize, mango, and beans (Martínez, 2009). It is also important to note that in the region there are occurrences of clandestine crops, including amapola and cannabis, but the commercial dynamics of these are elusive and complex (Domínguez, 2017). Lastly, a portion of working-age family members, especially men, seasonally migrate to work in the large seasonal agricultural plantations in the northern states of México.

In terms of political organization, most communities maintain a rotational system of 'cargos' (community service roles) where they directly elect representative authorities through popular

assemblies in which most men participate – but not most women (Domínguez, 2017). In line with a decolonial feminist lens, Díaz, Espinosa, Nemecio, & Ochoa (2009:132) state:

...women not only share ethnic and class inequality with men, but they also suffer exclusion mechanisms that operate specifically against them because they are women. Both in the private sphere of home and family life, as well as in the public sphere, where the community debates and decides on matters of common interest and where social organizations work around various projects and demands – it is possible to perceive the inequality, discrimination, subordination and/or violence against women.

In these communities (whether Indigenous or mestizo) it is uncommon for women to take on positions of authority, although they do participate in assemblies and meetings to discuss local issues. Although different from the various forms of sociopolitical organization in precolonial times, women now have little incidence in political decisions in the region despite the essential nature of their work as caretakers of family and community and as bearers of a growing transformative force - as pointed out by Díaz *et al* (2009: 132):

... where there is domination there is resistance, so that in the beginning of the this 21<sup>st</sup> century the atomized, discreet and ancestral feminine resistance starts to be collectively assumed and expressed in organized actions, in projects that tend to positively modify the relations between men and women, and to redefine the position, functions and decision-making capacity of women in various spaces of social life.

Women in these communities have participated in and promoted diverse collectives that offer mutual support for *compañeras* to take on leadership roles to fight for their rights within community organizational structures in the tradition of community-based feminism – emblematic of the cultures in this region (Espinosa, 2010; Gargalo 2014; Paredes & Guzmán, 2014; Ochoa, 2019).

It is in this multifaceted context that we will narrate the history and scope of UNISUR during its first seven years of operation (from 2007 to 2014), as a community-based university for rural youth, whether Indigenous, Afro-mestizo or mestizo, who sought educational training that was linked to their communities. UNISUR provided community-based education through bachelors-level degree options each based in a different campus community. These options varied slightly through time, but the three principal options were: Community Environmental Management (region of the Me'phaá people in Malinaltepec), Language and Culture (region of the Ñamncué Ñomdaa people in Xochistlahuaca), and Governance of territories and municipalities (region of afro-mestizo people in Cuajinicuilapa) (see Figure 1).

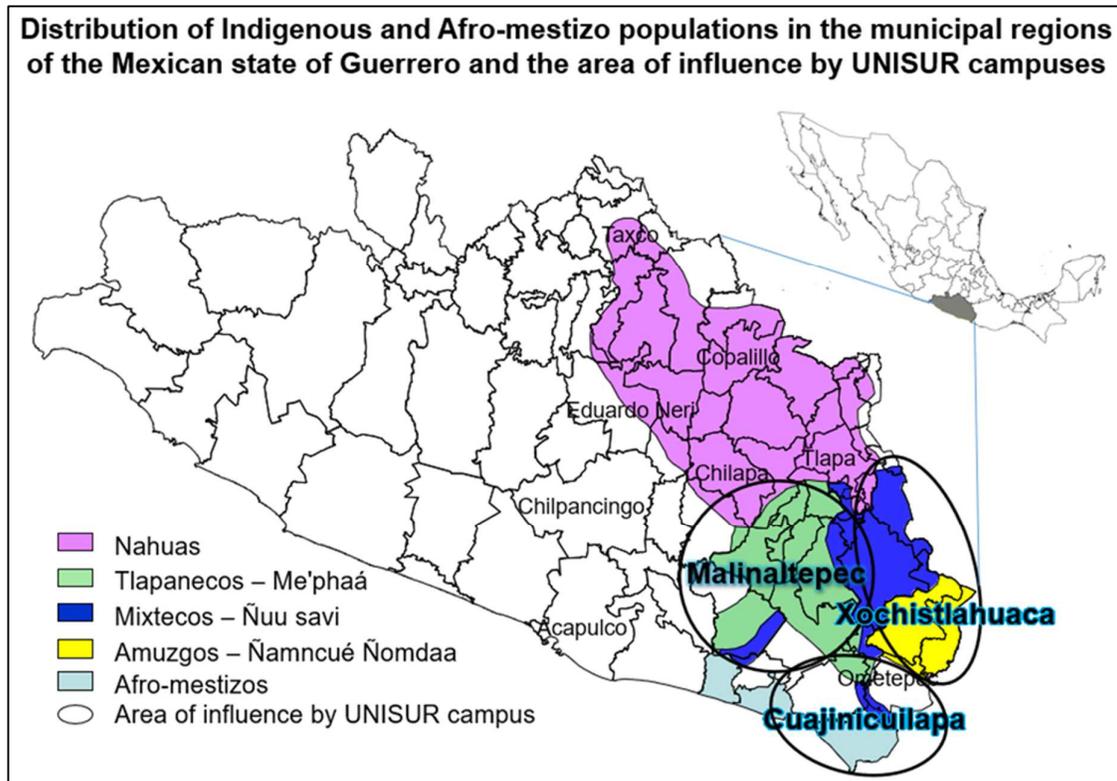


Figure 1: Municipal Map of the state of Guerrero (southern México) indicating the approximate territorial distribution of Indigenous and afro-mestizo peoples and the location of the three principal UNISUR campuses (Source: The Authors).

### The UNISUR proposal – higher education ‘for what’ and ‘for whom’?

Towards the end of the millennium, the continental campaign ‘500 Years of Indian, Black and Popular Resistance’, and the uprising of the ‘Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN)’, illuminated the collective imagination and provided enormous momentum and vitality to Indigenous peoples’ organizational processes within projects that were propelling demands in health, education, justice, and self-determination among others. In the opinion of Walsh (2008: 134), these Indigenous struggles over the span of two decades:

... are a reflection and manifestation of their political insurgency which is, at the same time, an epistemic insurgency; epistemic not only by questioning, challenging and confronting the dominant structures of the State – those that sustain capitalism and the interests of the oligarchy and the market – but also by putting on the scene different logics, rationalities and knowledge that make the State and society think in a radically different way.

In Guerrero state, the consolidation was underway of the ‘Regional Council of Community Authorities - Community Police’ (CRAC-PC), which defined its own model of security and justice as it brought ever-expanding territorial control from narcocartels under communitarian logic (Domínguez, 2017). Historically abandoned by the state, Indigenous people were convinced that they had not only the

right, but the ability to create their own institutions designed to autonomously procure the benefits that the government had denied them.

Indigenous leaders and organizations in the region proclaimed the need to train the next generation of leaders in their communities to carry on processes of regional development rooted in the various inter-community agreements including those reached by the CRAC-PC. Thus, for eight years before the official opening of UNISUR in 2007 there was a wide range of organizing events, participatory workshops, forums, assemblies, and conferences stemming from partnerships between Indigenous educators in the region, leaders of social organizations, including '500 years of Indian, Black and Popular Resistance' and the CRAC-PC, and local activist scholars, who together articulated the lived educational experiences and needs of the Indigenous communities of Guerrero (Flores & Méndez, 2008).

The general sentiment was that universities were not an option for Indigenous peoples, not only because it was very difficult for young people to enter and remain within them, but because when they did, the training received transformed them in such a way that they ended up denying the knowledge and culture of their people (an effect of the 'colonial matrix of power') to instead take on a different lifestyle that corrupted their spirit to the point that they did not want to return to their communities. This is how the idea of having a community-based Indigenous university gained strength and moved the various communities towards the decolonial praxis of co-designing their own model, not to compete with 'traditional' universities, but to stay relevant to the local context and to train young professionals who would generate new horizons for the Indigenous and afro-mestizo social movements.

Conscious of the fact that, since colonial times, western-based education has always tried to undermine Indigenous cultures (Smith, 1999; Reyhner & Eder, 2004), the fundamental goal in the construction of an Indigenous university was to create an educational institution of and for the people that was oriented towards revitalizing and vindicating cosmologies, knowledge and traditional practices. That is to say, a school in which one does not have to hide ones' particular way of being and knowing in the world. It was necessary to create a university rooted in decolonial pluriversal logics that would promote values such as collectivism and self-determination. Propelled by this collective dream, more than 40 volunteer community leaders and activist scholars with long-time links to the social processes of the region jointly helped construct and, in time, run the nascent UNISUR institution.

From the beginning, UNISUR's mission (Santos, Méndez, Flores, Muñiz, & Pimienta, 2006: 27) was:

to train Indigenous, afro-mestizo and mestizo professionals and intellectuals, who are deeply committed to their communities and, who, start from the perspective of their own culture and cosmology, to contribute to the integral and sustainable development of their communities.

It was precisely this ethical and political positioning of this nascent institution that generated rejection among Mexican government officials which had been initially consulted for access to federal and state resources given the impoverished reality of the region. At the time, UNISUR had hoped that presenting a well-defined, collectively constructed, and locally supported Indigenous university project would

qualify UNISUR as one of the ten new intercultural universities that the Mexican government had committed to opening (Gobierno del Estado de Guerrero, 2016). Instead, UNISUR was confronted with the imposition of a rigid intercultural model set on advancing the logic of neocolonial schooling, if consideration for State funding was to materialize. UNISUR refused to comply and, ultimately, neither federal nor the state-level governments were willing to select UNISUR to receive institutional designation and financial support as an intercultural university. At the municipal level, UNISUR was seen as an unaccredited volunteer-based grassroots university that happened to exist within the boundaries of particular municipalities, but there was almost never any type of support on behalf of the municipalities for the construction or day-to-day operations of UNISUR. The only exception was the municipal government of Cuajinicuilapa, which donated materials for UNISUR community volunteers to build basic classroom infrastructure.

Coincidentally, the UNISUR Malinaltepec campus was situated within a territory slated for transnational mining, which the communities had already been organizing against – a reality that likely also detracted governmental support since it would not have been convenient to empower the resistance of the communities with a fully-vetted university. In line with the collective experience and intergenerational memory of the Indigenous and afro-mestizo people of Guerrero, the communities of the region deduced that the government's refusal to support UNISUR was based on neocolonial logic that sought to extinguish alternative pedagogical and political processes that could invigorate the autonomous 'buen vivir'<sup>2</sup> and long tradition of organizing and resistance in the region.

Throughout UNISUR's history, various local actors linked to different organizational processes intervened in the process of creating and operating UNISUR. As a result, and due to the lack of government support, intense debates were generated within UNISUR to define the university's stance regarding the State. On the one hand, those closest to the National Pluri-Indigenous Assembly for Autonomy (ANIPA), who strived for representation in governmental political spaces, pushed towards seeking institutional recognition and public financing for UNISUR. On the other hand, those who sympathized with a position closer to the CRAC-PC and the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) argued that the government's repeated violations of Indigenous peoples' rights, including of the right to an education, called for a more powerful legitimacy that could only arise from the communities themselves by remaining totally independent of the State (for more information please see: Sarmiento, 2004; Flores, 2005; and Méndez & Bueno, 2019). Up until 2014, which is the time period we focus on in this article, the more decolonial stance (aligned with the latter position) guided UNISUR and marked a period rooted in the fervent commitment on the part of Indigenous communities, organizations, and educators to advance their own collective dream of an Indigenous community-based university of, and for, the people of the South.

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<sup>2</sup> Buen vivir, or 'Good Living', is a life philosophy of Latin American Indigenous Andean societies that encompasses harmony with nature, pluriculturalism, coexistence, and inseparability of material, social, and spiritual elements of life. It exists in a number of variants across the Americas, including Sumak Kaway of the Kichwa, Sumak Qamaña of the Aymara, and Sumak Kawsay of the Quechua. More recently, the concept has been ratified into the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador (Kothari *et al*, 2019).

### UNISUR's multi-campus, territorially-rooted, reciprocity-driven institutional structure

UNISUR started operating in August 2007, in three campus locations: Malinaltepec (region of the Me'phaá people), Xochistlahuaca (Ñamncué Ñomdaa people) and Cuajinicuilapa (Afro-mestizo people) (Figure 2). These small regional campuses were chosen because UNISUR sought to respect community agreements strategizing locations considering municipal boundaries, mobility in an extremely mountainous orography with low internet connectivity and cultural factors given the confluence of five Indigenous territories (Figure 1). In the end, the chosen sites were economically accessible and centrally located micro-regional centers where students from the ethnically diverse communities could gather (Santos *et al*, 2006).



Figure 2: Inauguration of the campus in Me'phaá territory in Santa Cruz del Rincón, Malinaltepec, Guerrero, August 9, 2007 (left). Inauguration of the campus in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, August 10, 2007 (right). (Photos by Norma Elena Méndez-Bahena).

From the beginning, UNISUR has consistently had high enrollment of women (e.g. in 2007, 70% of the student body were women). This improved educational access in the region was significant in starting to shift cultural barriers for women, from improving family resource investment in women's education, to circumscribing the need to move away to pursue studies. In contrast to UNISUR, internationalized university models function as hegemonic institutions that concentrate students in distant locations far from students' communities, often encouraging mobility to other countries – trends that consciously or unconsciously drive the de-territorialization of students from their communities. The dominant narrative is that universities are forming “universal citizens” capable of exercising their profession anywhere in the world, reducing people to abstractions without complex and deep connections to territories.

The territorially-rooted model of UNISUR proposed to train professionals who did not have to migrate to receive an education, but who instead remained in their communities to promote local development processes. In this way, UNISUR strengthened commitments and bonds between students, communities, and local environments – in a model that conceived community as the primary territorial and cultural space for training and applying expertise. Far from extracting youth from their homes, the idea was to strengthen their sense of rootedness in their home territories and empower

them as co-producers of situated knowledge relevant to local and regional contexts of self-determining sustainable development (UNISUR, 2008).

The relationship between the university and the communities occupied a fundamental place in the final pedagogical model. Community work developed by students and teachers (e.g. fire and water management, and agroecological initiatives), contributed to training in axiological aspects that consistently reaffirmed a horizontal commitment between the communities and UNISUR. This approach also represented an epistemic-methodological stance put in practice through an action-theoretical reflection-action cycle that gave way to transformative praxis (Arbesú, 2006).

UNISUR did not propose to 'educate' in the traditional sense, but instead to nurture critical subjects. For this reason, UNISUR adopted and adapted the model of modules implemented by the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (Arbesú, 2006), in which strictly defined subjects were avoided and replaced with thematic axes that guided students to develop processes of knowledge construction based on dimensions of lived realities. For example, interculturality repeatedly emerged in teaching-learning processes and in reflections intersecting the themes of territory, culture, and language.

In UNISUR's version of the modular model, in-person classes occurred every two weeks for four intensive workdays (Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday). The rest of the time, students spent in their communities where they independently advanced in their academic work, while staying connected to family, community and the production that sustained their families. This would be impossible in the traditional centralized university model that requires students to spend long periods in schools outside their communities.

Because each degree was based in a different campus, degrees highlighted the unique essence of each of the regional cultures and practices. Naturally, many students decided to study the degree that was offered nearest their community, because choosing another would have required that they moved every 15 days and deal with the challenge of seeking lodging in the community where their degree was offered. This was especially difficult for women because of stringent gender norms and insecurity, but, in general, for most students it was nearly impossible to afford the costs of transportation, accommodation, meals and learning materials.

In the face of such challenges, our university community depended on donations and volunteers to coordinate and make in-person access to UNISUR possible. For example, we minimized student transportation costs by arranging student pick up locations that coincided with routes of educators. Lodging was also resolved collectively with instances of community-designated shared sleeping areas, or coordinated rentals of unfurnished rooms, which provided a shared floor area for sleeping. The situation for educators was no different, often having to sleep in the same conditions in areas graciously offered by communities. Food was always resolved collectively, either by hiring local women to prepare food or by cooking together, although the task almost always fell upon women, whether they were students or educators. The communities supported as they could by donating bushels of basic grains such as maize and beans.

UNISUR educators regularly contributed beyond the academic to sustain UNISUR. Physically maintaining campus classrooms and creating the appropriate conditions for students and educators

required carrying out various tasks, including building construction, participation in assemblies, health campaigns, fieldwork in agroecology projects, food preparation, etc. Educators also heavily contributed to the costs of operation through donating monies from private consultation contracts – undoubtedly increasing their workload. Nevertheless, this versatile and indispensable labor, often done alongside students, fostered very close interactions and commitments between diverse worldviews and positions.

### **UNISUR's unifying core: interdisciplinary student research projects**

UNISUR, as a community-focused institution, established as a central objective the production of knowledge relevant to local and regional realities. This meant focusing student investigations on multi-faceted contextual problems in an integrative way, which called for transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches. UNISUR was not concerned with national standards, much less international ones, because as Mato (2014: 261) affirms "... the ideas of mainstream educational 'quality' frequently respond to trans-nationalized representations of a kind of de-territorialized imagined 'academic excellence'". Instead, UNISUR was focused on its role of understanding and addressing local problems, such as food sovereignty, defense of territory and resources, and the preservation of culture.

The UNISUR model of on-site training went beyond confining educational processes to just the physical classroom by giving agency to the students themselves as subjects with the capacity to transform their own environment. With this idea in mind, UNISUR's core pedagogical approach was made up of three central axes: subject - context - project. These categories provided the methodological guide for student research projects, which constituted the unifying core of their training. Thus, admitted UNISUR students entered with a community-backed preliminary research project aimed at solving an existing dilemma or need, which became a key element of their training. In the end, because research advances were presented in sessions open to the public, interested community members were involved in not only reviewing student progress and experiences, but in witnessing altruisms, lessons, and the contributions of the students to their communities. It came to be known that no one came to UNISUR to gain a personal degree, but instead as representatives of their communities ready to address an aspect of community life that required attention.

Community endorsement of students was generally vetted by their community's municipal commissioner, one of the most important authority officials in communities of the Montaña and Costa Chica region (Good, 2009). Many students had a community connection prior to the formation of UNISUR, for example, through service as community defense/police dealing with insecurity in the region (e.g. defense against narcocartels, trafficking rings). In this way, students' relationships between chosen research topics and community problems were direct. For others joining UNISUR, the student research projects helped them start connecting with the problems of their communities by promoting continuous dialogue with relevant social actors. In all cases, the need for students to interact with community officials through their research projects drove students to understand, and more actively participate in, the organizational processes of their communities.

The complexity of local problems revealed the need to generate synergies that pushed individual student research proposals (articulated around community issues) beyond the traditional logic of disciplines, resulting in the formation of student research teams across degrees. The entire process, from investigation to the presentation of results and conclusions, was collective, which resulted in series of complementary projects that strengthened community relationships. The phases of the research projects themselves were: (1) the identification of a community problem or need of interest to students, (2) recognizing and naming the community actors associated with their research problem, (3) exposing the local, regional and state contexts, (4) the collective construction of proposals aimed at advancing options towards solving the problem at hand, and (5) the public presentation of final projects for evaluation not just by an academic committee, but by educators, authorities, and actors in charge of caring for community and territory. For example, one such research project focused on the human right to water and sanitation, which included the collective identification and protection of water sources, a review of the water management and distribution system, renewed community agreements for equitable water access, resurgence of rituals related to water, installation of low-cost domestic and community sanitation systems, and the construction of wood-saving stoves to promote the conservation of the forests to which water was linked (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Students and educators in the participatory territorial planning process to identify water sources, infiltration zones and key areas for protection (e.g. sacred water springs). (Photo by Norma Elena Méndez-Bahena).

Putting into practice the aims of UNISUR was not without significant challenges which were solved along the way: from accessibility, to indispensable bibliographic materials, to the formation of reading and study habits; from teaching/managing research techniques, to the students' enormous difficulty in writing in Spanish – which was not their native language. It was our frameworks of interculturality, decoloniality, co-learning and liberatory pedagogy (Freire 1976), grounded in creativity and a

profound sense of humanity that articulated the learning process and the empowerment of UNISUR students in their pursuit of solving problems and meeting local needs.

### The vision of pluriversal interculturality

Embedded in the journey of collectively constructing UNISUR was the operationalization of interculturality within epistemic, pedagogical, and didactic spheres. In the epistemological domain, several definitions of interculturality contributed to our collective reflection as UNISUR. Bruno Baronnet's (2012) description of the close connection between school education, and 'inter-ethnic relations' as dependent on logics of power and social domination in the case of Zapatista education in Chiapas, captures part of our own reflection. "Empowering students and the community through the classroom to fight against racism and sociocultural discrimination" (Baronnet, 2012: 279) was quite complex for us because interculturality operates in two directions. One is to empower, in the context of a dominating culture, but something that always escapes the focus of attention is internal community discrimination. Our experience with UNISUR helped us to understand parallels amongst inter-ethnic relationships 'on the surface', where superficial knowledge of the 'other' leads to the predominance of the pejorative stereotype, under the assumption that 'one's own' is always better.

Pedagogically, our aim, from the beginning, was for the various communities collaborating with UNISUR to participate in determining curriculum that centered and integrated their traditional knowledge within the academic content that would be taught to the students. According to Baronnet (2012: 280), "to interculturalize plans and programs, implies transforming the power to decide on educational activities in relation to the cultural group concerned."

But, for the communities to intervene in the design of content was more than complicated because the formality of a university structure invoked a sense of knowledge hierarchies in which local knowledge was rendered irrelevant. Despite these challenges, UNISUR's commitment to move towards pluriversal logics that dismantled hegemonic knowledge hierarchies manifested in the active practice of centering the voices of wisdom holders in the communities, such as elders and healers like midwives, medicine people, etc. who regularly accepted invitations to orally share stories, methods, and lessons with our students and educators.

Across campuses, the intercultural aspect of UNISUR promoted respectful and collaborative interactions between students from different regions and Indigenous backgrounds. In the classroom, key words and concepts were regularly interpreted in the various native languages of students which allowed for enriching discussions on the local, yet diverse 'ways of knowing' and 'ways of being'. Students also shared culturally-rooted experiences about important processes in their communities such as customs of selection of community leaders, tequio (rotational collaborative work on the land), petition rituals and ceremonies, etc. Collectively, this expanded intercultural understanding, amplified how students situated themselves within an emergent pluriversal knowledge system that rejected the 'coloniality of power and of knowledge', and nurtured more genuine ties between them (Figure 4).



Figure 4: A group exercise highlighting in an experiential way the value of teamwork and the strength of an interdependent social community fabric. (Photo by Norma Elena Méndez-Bahena).

#### **Embodiment and challenges of the global South: UNISUR in its Indigenous pluriversal reality**

The UNISUR school year consisted of three terms and at the end of each year all students and educators came together at a select campus venue for four days. In addition to finalizing classes, on these occasions there were student assemblies to elect representatives and discuss matters of interest to the student body. Simultaneously, educators also ran assemblies to organize the next academic cycle. At the end of academic-related activities, there were traditional dance and music presentations, as well as other artistic activities, all prepared by the students. We typically concluded with a community dance where all UNISUR community partners were invited. In essence, UNISUR came to embody the practices, values, traditions, and organizational processes of the communities it served and co-constructed with, in a manner that cemented its identity as a grassroots university of the Indigenous global South.

The story of UNISUR in southern México incites a reflection of the conditions that community-focused universities face in countries of the global South where the first priority is to ensure student access to educational institutions; secondly, that students have enough food to be able to function and learn; thirdly, that they have the school materials they need to learn; and lastly that their academic training has local relevance. As educators who faced the challenges of extreme poverty, violence and insecurity, and the lack of basic necessities, we were forced to reflect on what it was that we had to prioritize when we spoke of academic training or educational standards. It was clear that aiming for international standards that required accreditation and extensive publishing was irrational, since it was useless in the lived reality of the communities which UNISUR served. Instead, all of our efforts, experiences, lessons, and transformations as UNISUR, revolved around collectively building an institution of higher education that was authentically committed to the people of the South – a journey imprinted upon the valiant and compassionate hearts of those involved.

## Conclusion

Our intention has been to capture, through the concrete example of UNISUR, the vicissitudes that exist in some regions of the global South. We described the conditions that make it difficult or nearly impossible for most universities in southern México to reach the standards demanded by the neocolonial arm of internationalization. This holds true more so for institutions located outside the country's large urban centers where the disadvantages and structural inequities at a personal, institutional, and regional level are strongly evident.

Our attempt to reconcile internationalization within the context of UNISUR exposes how corporatized educational standards exclude the complex realities and onto-epistemologies of the people of South, which only widen the inequality gap between the global North and South. In essence, the relationship between an EEUrocentric internationalization (particularly its neocolonial aspects) and Indigenous universities, like UNISUR, is fraught with contentions stemming from opposing visions. On the one hand, Indigenous grassroots universities turn inward towards their rich pluriversal contexts of struggle and resistance (and at times, strategically turn outwards to fund their decolonial alternatives). On the other hand, the dominant neo-colonial project of modernity and that of internationalization sustain a EEUrocentric 'coloniality of power' (Quijano, 2000) dominated by neoliberal economic and educational policies that maintain authoritarian structures and ultimately inhibit the autonomous organization of subjects.

Initially, UNISUR sought to be legitimized as a state-sanctioned intercultural university recognized by the Mexican government, but this was ultimately avoided because UNISUR rejected the government's imposition of a model of interculturality which was limited to the simple recognition and acceptance of difference, without dismantling systemic inequities and the epistemological 'coloniality of power' (Llanes Ortiz, 2010). Eventually, UNISUR sought to generate recognition through international synergies with other Indigenous institutions in Nicaragua, Bolivia and Ecuador, eventually founding the Network of Indigenous and Intercultural Universities of Ab'ya Yala (RUIICAY) – a conglomerate of institutions creatively and defiantly challenging traditional colonial education models and their increasingly internationalized systems (Zapata Webb, 2019).

Beyond analyzing theories within the academy, when we reflect on the degree of independence achieved by UNISUR, we think it is essential to respond from the perspective of the communities themselves who consider receiving support from the government to be an act of justice that does not in itself imply a renunciation to being 'independent'. This reflection captures the political orientation of the communities of Guerrero towards the State – communities who persist in the face of the State's evolving racist power structures and incursions. Nevertheless, UNISUR, first and foremost, tended to turn inward towards the communities, towards building from the local pluriverse and towards generating an educational model that represented and served the people of the South; without ceasing to turn outwards towards the nation state in the demand for institutional recognition that would validate the studies of their graduates so that they may access local employment. Thus, state-recognition of UNISUR was one of the ways that the people of the South sought to vindicate their rights as original peoples to an institution that educates based on principles of decolonial epistemic equity, including interculturality, and a non-EEUrocentric core.

UNISUR was constituted upon a horizon of hope for the communities. They saw the project of UNISUR as a possibility for professional training that built from the tapestry of their diverse cosmologies and addressed their concerns and needs. In the Indigenous and afro-mestizo communities which UNISUR served, this was especially true for young women, who challenged limitations stemming from paternalistic traditions and regional insecurity to suddenly gain access to higher education without leaving their communities. Using a decolonial feminist lens allowed us to recognize that the involvement of women in UNISUR not only enriched the spectrum of human experience in the classroom, but fomented growth in women's self-confidence while increasing participation in community political spaces (e.g. speaking in assemblies and participating in community organizations that advanced decolonial aims). Although, we also recognize that these important advances were not enough to transform the dominant patriarchal community structure, since most women still conduct themselves mainly within the private sphere. In spite of this, the nature of UNISUR's academic training empowered students overall to participate more fully in community institutions and assemblies, while simultaneously revalorizing local knowledge – placing it on par with western knowledge in a way that disrupted knowledge hierarchies, enriched the classroom, and instilled a sense of pride in students. Additionally, UNISUR also interrupted the 'colonial matrix of power' by (1) nourishing local economies that provided food and accommodation for UNISUR affiliates and (2) accompanying local actors (e.g. CRAC-PC and the Regional Council of Agrarian Authorities in Defense of the Territory - CRAADT) who were actively organizing to prevent the intrusion of mining companies.

As a valuable alternative to the dominant model of the 'colonial matrix of power' (i.e., the homogenizing, internationalized system of EEUrocentric higher education), UNISUR offered an authentic two-way partnership with local communities through accompaniment of community organizational processes rooted in pluriversal logics, collectivity and local relevance that generated new horizons for the intergenerational Indigenous and afro-mestizo social movements in the region.

Despite the conclusion of the original UNISUR project in 2014, there remains in the region the early generations of alums of UNISUR, that were formed with a different mentality and who continue to drive organizational processes that strengthen both the long tradition of Indigenous and afro-mestizo resistance movements and the ethnically rich social fabric of the region. In this sense, the community-driven university project, UNISUR, sowed seeds that have endured.

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