2. Ways of Working

The Ecominga project focuses on two main areas: environmental health education and support for local food security and local environmental sanitation. Practical internships link leadership training to community development participation. The basis for
this collaborative project is a global vision of the strong link between health, food security, sound water management, environmental quality and the development of a grassroots economy. It comprises the implementation — with a view to the integration — of the following activities:

- Structuring and professional development of university teams in community ecodevelopment, with a focus on environmental health, the priorities being the water supply and food security;
- Design and setup of a training program for leaders of grassroots territorial organizations within each of the three Bolivian universities. In relation to the training for leaders, support for the development of community projects focusing on the issues of water and food security;
- Various activities aimed at the acquisition, sharing and dissemination of new knowledge in the area of ecodevelopment: an environmental education resource centre, a research program, an interuniversity and multidisciplinary network for community ecodevelopment, and communication activities, including conferences and symposiums.

It was important to fully understand the partners’ concerns and priorities to ensure that the project met their expectations adequately. The latter therefore took the time to build trust and establish collaborative working methods.

The training of the university teams and the development of the university program contents were achieved through inter-and intra-university workshops for the 16 academic team members (nine women and seven men) from the four partner universities. At these multidisciplinary training sessions, the partners discussed and, as applicable, shared their perspectives and experiences through their common efforts to clarify the issues of this new field of knowledge and social practice known as community ecodevelopment. These joint training sessions took place regularly between members of each of the four university teams and twice per year between the Canadian and Bolivian teams.

Each of the three Bolivian university teams formed a local network of contributors, comprising representatives from NGOs, educational institutions and municipal administrations. These contributors have a hand in both training the leaders and carrying out related community ecodevelopment projects. Some municipalities have already incorporated such projects into their operating plans and will provide logistical support.
The training of leaders was directly related to their community engagement. The environmental leaders who took part in this training were chosen by their peers. Alongside local residents, they carry out community projects that help stimulate and support public involvement so as to improve the management of local socio-environmental issues. These projects benefit from the support afforded by the special ties between the university and the community that Ecominga aims to strengthen. They highlight the different cultures of the groups involved, as well as the initiative and participation of women, aboriginal groups and young street workers, while maintaining a special focus on social equity and multiculturalism.

3. Results

The partners in the Ecominga project worked together to create and introduce training programs in a new discipline. In each of the three Bolivian universities, the academic teams designed and implemented a training program for leaders of grassroots territorial organizations, more specifically for aboriginal leaders, women, and young street workers. To date, some 150 participants have completed this environmental leadership training program based on 10 modules related to environmental health, local governance, social and environmental equity, social economy, multiculturalism, public education and project management.

Moreover, 19 professors and teachers from the Bolivian universities involved in the Ecominga project completed various training programs offered at UQAM, including graduate diplomas (9), Master's degrees (8), and Doctoral degrees (2). In relation to this training, community development projects focusing on the issues of water and food security were carried out, focusing on such areas as drinking water supply, school gardens, seed banks and tree planting.

Each of the participating universities established an ecodevelopment and environmental health resource centre, as well as a research program to study these issues. In addition, an interuniversity and multidisciplinary network for community ecodevelopment and environmental health in the Bolivian Amazon was created.

Finally, the experience and knowledge of the project partners were shared with other researchers and stakeholders from both Bolivia and Canada through conferences, symposiums and workshops, as well as the publication of articles, educational materials, conference papers and proceedings, and a video.


Several innovative practices helped to enhance the quality and promote the sustainability of the results achieved by the partners. The first of these consisted in adopting an approach that reflected the partners’ main values: active listening, cultural openness, open-mindedness, the creation of a multidisciplinary environment for knowledge-sharing where everyone feels comfortable and can learn from each other. This learning dynamic was based on a reflective practice where each participant was asked to take a critical look at his/her perceptions, ideas and actions. The professors from the four participating universities chose to train each other rather than using external trainers, hence the reference to joint training. Knowledge generation is a cross-sectional aspect of the project and is a result of this joint training between partners, either as part of their joint workshops or their collaborative research studies.

Within the framework of this initiative, the effect of the close ties between the three components of the university mission is their influence on each other: research, in
combination with practice, increases the relevance of course content, which, in turn, results in training that is more deeply rooted in the needs of learners and their communities.

By contributing to learning that is inextricably linked to the realities facing the partners and their communities, such practices promote the appropriation of the project by all stakeholders and thereby help to ensure the sustainability of the results of the Ecominga project.

The partners had to overcome the challenge posed by the large amount of time needed to apply the collaborative work methods, mainly by focusing on the priorities of their work program. Moreover, through discussion and sharing, they managed to counter the impacts of the hierarchical model of international cooperation under which the partners had acquired their experience. They first had to “deconstruct” the traditional ways of working and foster mutual trust in order to promote the development of new, more equitable relationships with each other.

5. Looking Forward

The partners are currently looking for ways to ensure the long-term institutionalization of the new environmental leadership training programs and instill a community ecoddevelopment culture within the participating universities. Based on the promising results of the Ecominga project, the partners would also like to lobby the national and municipal governments to support the training of new cohorts of environmental leaders. This would entail promoting the legacy of the Ecominga amazonica project in the participating universities and relevant communities.

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