

International group develops guiding principles for community-engaged sustainability research

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An enhanced visualization for principles guiding international and intercultural research. Credit: illustrated by M. Campos Rivera, based on the design by P. Friedrichsen. *People and Nature* (2023). DOI: 10.1002/pan3.10496

USask researchers Dr. Maureen Reed (Ph.D.) and Dr. Jim Robson (Ph.D.), who share the UNESCO chair, are lead authors of a recent paper published in the journal *People and Nature* that lays out the seven principles developed through a collaborative effort.

Robson and Reed said these principles will be relevant not only to sustainability researchers but also to other researchers—especially those engaged in intercultural, collaborative research—tackling a broad range of topics and working with local people and Indigenous groups in rural, urban, and peri-urban settings.

"The whole idea is that we as university researchers, partner organizations, and collaborators are responding to community needs and supporting them through community-engaged research," said Robson. "It is working with communities rather than working on communities or studying them."

The aim is to engage equitably, respectfully, and responsibly with multidisciplinary, intercultural colleagues, partner organizations, and community collaborators, rejecting the notion of scientists descending on a community to study a topic of academic interest and departing, never to be seen again.

"I don't think that's what we're meant to be doing as university researchers," said Robson. "We're moving toward a place where we are

responding to [community needs](#) and finding ways that we can support communities to help them in whatever way they see fit," said Robson.

The principles were developed through a community of practice built through the UNESCO chair, said Reed. They represent the consensus of a diverse group that includes local and Indigenous people, non-governmental agency members, and early career and established academics from Canada, Argentina, Bolivia, Germany, Mexico, and South Africa.



Dr. James (Jim) Robson (PhD) and Dr. Maureen Reed (PhD) share the UNESCO chair. Credit: University of Saskatchewan

Team members span the natural and social sciences and humanities, including evolutionary, forest and ethno-ecology, agronomy, history, philosophy, water science, and engineering. Most work in areas somewhat removed from their training, and identify as interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary sustainability scientists, practitioners, and knowledge holders.

"The fact that the input has come from such a diversity of backgrounds is why we feel these principles potentially will be useful to people working in many different fields, even though we focused it around our passion for biocultural diversity and sustainability," Reed said.

The [group members](#) began in 2018 to articulate principles by which they would work together, with revisions in 2020 and 2021 making the principles that much stronger, she said. Team members offered diverse examples of how to put the principles into practice. The aim is to make a living document, with ongoing reflection and potentially more revisions to come.

"We hope some of this will resonate beyond sustainable development because it isn't specific to the work we do. It's about respect, relationship building, and friendship—the things that you need to cultivate and look after if you are going to be effective in [collaborative research](#) that engages communities," said Robson.

The seven principles are: honor, self-determination and nationhood; commitment to reciprocal relationships; co-creation of the research agenda; generation of meaningful benefits for communities; approaching research in a good way by embedding relational accountability; ensuring equity, diversity, and inclusion; emphasizing critical reflection and sharing.

Reed and Robson emphasized that the seven principles are not a

blueprint that is prescriptive, but are touchpoints to keep in mind when conducting research.

Robson said the approach has implications for not only how academics do research but also for how ethics boards support such projects in terms of providing oversight, and how universities at large value and encourage academics doing this type of research.

It also speaks to [funding agencies](#) on how they need to help fund the process of relationship building, said Reed, noting that current agency policies pose a barrier for academics. As well, she said, funding is also needed at the back end of a project to produce some outputs that granting agencies want.

"We tend to conduct research to the very end of the funding envelope, but there are usually two or three years following that for a project to wind down. By then there are no funds left," Reed said.

"We hope these principles will encourage researchers, as they work to address institutional challenges, to reflect on their own practice to engage collaborators effectively and equitably."

More information: Maureen G. Reed et al, Guiding principles for transdisciplinary sustainability research and practice, *People and Nature* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/pan3.10496](https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10496)

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