

CommunALLY

*Cross-Community Solidarity Among First Nations,
Inuit, Métis, Refugee, and Immigrant Peoples.*



REPORT BY

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AS PART OF EFFORTS TO
PROMOTE ALLYSHIP BY

Ally Squared



Our Team



Uswah Ahsan is our Executive Director. She is a Pakistani Muslim Immigrant who strongly believes in active allyship.



Maya Whiteduck Crawford is our Equity Director. She is an Algonquin woman from Snimikobi Nation who leads our digital storytelling projects.



Ilinca Isopescu is our CommunALLY researcher. She is a Romanian woman who works for Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada.



Zuleyma Caparo-Escalante is our CommunALLY researcher. She is a Peruvian woman with a research focus on international migration and migrant rights.

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of CommunALLY thus far.*

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Project Methodology

The methodology for this project was guided by non-Western and Indigenous ways of seeking information. We designed CommunALLY to learn from storysharing and communal gathering in a safe virtual environment.



personal stories about lacking allyship and fighting discrimination were submitted by Indigenous peoples, immigrants, and refugees. We received stories from people of many ages, genders, career backgrounds, perspectives, and lived experiences. Stories could be submitted in any format, language, and length over a period of five months.



sources of literature from academia and non-academic avenues. We researched ethical storytelling, sustainable community-building, migrant and Indigenous relations, and perceptions held by communities. We ensured that the design of our research, the implementation of our phase one, and our interpretation of results were done responsibly.



consultants from all over Turtle Island joined us over Zoom to share their expertise about cross-community allyship. We spoke with parliamentarians, authors, professors, activists, non-profit professionals, and youth leaders. Consultants were offered remuneration for their time and we made sure to create sustainable long-term relationships with them.

Introduction

Affirmation

CommunALLY exists because of the time and emotional labour undertaken by Indigenous peoples and migrants all over Turtle Island. As Ally Squared's work is done on the stolen land of the First Peoples, we commit to centering Indigenous knowledge, compensating Indigenous peoples for their time, and actively participating in reconciliation processes.

Origins of CommunALLY

CommunALLY builds ways for Indigenous and migrant communities to be in solidarity with each other against colonial oppression, societal inequities, and cross-community isolation. It was started by Maya, an Algonquin woman, and Uswah, a Pakistani immigrant woman, who felt shared experiences of alienation despite their different lived experiences.



About Ally Squared

Ally Squared is a youth-led nonprofit that creates responsible allyship by prioritizing lived experiences, amplifying communities that fight oppressive systems, focusing on decolonization, and advocating for intersectional practice. We encourage active allyship, both in the sense of being there for others and yourself.

Our Intent

This report intends to give an overview of CommunALLY thus far. In the summer of 2020, we began this project through a pilot story collection phase and consultation process. This report summarizes our learnings from these discussions and what we intend to do with this knowledge moving forward. This report situates CommunALLY in the context of a colonial Canada and the experiences of Indigenous, immigrant and refugee peoples as individuals, as communities, and in broader society.

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted Indigenous, immigrant and refugee communities more severely due to systemic oppression, withdrawal of resources, and alienation from society. We understand that this is a sensitive time and due to this reality, our timeline for the CommunALLY project has been affected. Our relationship building has taken place through online platforms and has hindered our ability to connect with community members in person.

Case Studies

Indigenous and migrant communities have practiced allyship for decades before CommunALLY. There have been different community initiatives that sought to strengthen the relationships between Indigenous and newcomers communities. In this report, we have highlighted two of these projects.

The Marae Welcome Program

The Marae Welcome Program was based in the region of Wellington in New Zealand, and connected newcomers with Indigenous communities to provide a learning opportunity on Maori culture, language, and history. Activities were led by the Maori people, including educational workshops on the Treaty of Waitangi. Other workshops informed newcomers about practices that have existed for generations among the Maori people, such as their relationship with the land and their roles as the guardians of the environment. This initiative created important connections between local Maori people and municipalities. It helped launch discussions about the impacts of migration and changing demographics.



The Vancouver Dialogues Project

The Dialogues Project Vancouver began as an 18 month initiative involving the participation of First Nations from the area, urban Indigenous peoples from all over Turtle Island, and Immigrant communities in the city of Vancouver to better community understanding and strengthen inter-community relationships. The project was in collaboration with 27 partners and included components such as a youth and elders program, dialogue circles, and community research. Sharing histories and cultural perspectives were the centre pieces of the project, as well as cultural exchanges to Indigenous and migrant communities by Musqueam Nation, Tsleil-Waututh Nation, Chinese, Jewish, and Israeli community members. During the initial timeline of The Dialogues Project, nine groups met three times and shared “personal experiences of racism, stereotypes, and the effects of colonization of Aboriginal communities.”

There are multiple initiatives to build cross-community relationships with Indigenous peoples, immigrants, and refugees through activities, workshops, and discussion tables. We want to continue this work by bridging communities at the national level and building a space where communities can engage on an ongoing basis.

Part One: Is this work needed?

1.1 The Need to Change the Status Quo

CommunALLY began because two young women experienced discrimination through microaggressions and systemic racism, resulting in alienation from society. The current status quo doesn't allow for marginalized communities to support one another and there aren't enough spaces for shared dialogue, mobilization, and decision-making.

Among colonial governments, Indigenous peoples are made unwelcome to tables that decide immigration and refugee policies. Simultaneously, settlement information packages or citizenship tests exclude opportunities for migrants to learn about Indigenous peoples beyond a surface level, especially in a localized manner. Among the nonprofit and charity sector, newcomer integration organizations seldom offer resources for newcomers to learn about Indigenous nations around them. Elders, community leaders, and Indigenous educators are not invited to discussions about newcomer acclimation into society.

On all ends, there are learned stereotypes that form obstacles to cross-community solidarity and allyship. Unfortunately, this often means that conversations regarding Indigenous, immigrant and refugee communities remain parallel to each other. This is why CommunALLY is needed to eradicate stereotypes and bridge better understandings of migrant and Indigenous identities.

We must also acknowledge that the status quo generalizes Indigenous peoples and migrants into uniform experiences. Nikki Fraser, an Indigenous advocate from Secwépemc Nation, pointed out that in cases where Indigenous peoples are welcome to speak about a particular topic, only one representative is invited to the table. This leads to generalized and ambiguous messaging, which results in ineffective action. If we know anything, it is that 'Indigenous' and 'migrant' are two generalizations that cannot illustrate the variety of lived experiences. We need a project that takes an intersectional, anti-colonial, and feminist lens to storytelling, mobilization, and advocacy.

At the same time, these communities, diverse as they may be, face many co-existing struggles. The colonial impacts on Turtle Island have created a divide in which both Indigenous peoples and migrants are left behind. Industrial complexes have seeped from private corporations into nonprofits and charities, causing a battle for resources and public attention. This has much to do with the settler ploy of 'who is superior, who belongs on this land, and who deserves adequate resources to sustain themselves?'

It is nearly impossible to form your sense of identity when you have oppressive narratives being fed to you by settler society. For people to find a sense of security and a sense of self, there must be safe places to practice their culture, share it with others, and eradicate Western colonizer imposition.

1.2 The Need for Education to Fight Stigma

One of the most profound findings that we have learned through our discussions is a lack of resources for education. In the colonial Canadian education system, there are limited—if any—lessons on historic colonialism and violence against Indigenous peoples, much less about colonialism in the modern day. Therefore, it is easy for migrants to believe racist and discriminatory stereotypes as true. Our participants repeatedly stressed a need to explore how an individual can be both a migrant who has and still experiences oppression while also contributing to colonial violence.

To become a Canadian citizen, there is little requirement of learning about Indigenous nations and ongoing colonial violence. Javier Badillo, a Venezuelan cinematographer asserted that there must be pathways to learn not just about Indigenous peoples in general but about the specific nations whose land a migrant is on. Resources for education must be done with the participation of Indigenous educators who are compensated for their work. Gone are the days of land acknowledgements that act as empty symbols. Without actions tied to it, they mean very little.



1.3 The Need to Build Cross-Community Support

Many of our participants spoke about feeling isolated from “Canadian culture.” Whether it be from migrating to a new country and experiencing culture shock, or for Indigenous peoples living in settler cities that did not erase their worldviews, this is something we see as needing to change. Indigenous peoples and migrants saw a lack of role models with similar lived experiences who could support them in navigating their lives.

Participating in settler society led many individuals to feel a divided sense of identity from their own cultural views and the society they feel forced to comply with. As Member of Parliament Leah Gazan stated to us, “If you’re going to invite people and say ‘Oh welcome to Canada,’ then you better support people properly so that they can survive and thrive.” Indigenous participants shared their want to support migrant integration in a way that protects communities from oppression. Likewise, migrants indicated a desire to adopt policies and practices that centred Indigeneity and removed colonialism.

What the CommunALLY team saw was a strong preparedness to practice active allyship amongst individuals but also requesting allies to support them. As Ally Squared has always believed, individuals can need an ally and practice allyship simultaneously. We’re all a result of a colonized system that imposes prejudiced views that we have internalized. Knowing this, we’re all trying to get ourselves out of the sticky sap of the colonizer’s tree. As Pamela Roach said, the only way we can do that is by sticking together.

1.4 The Need to Move Beyond Intention and Towards Action

Eradicating performative allyship was the reason Ally Squared was started. While raising awareness is essential to promoting the wellbeing of communities, if there is no concrete plan to move forward with the exposed issues, then the only thing left are empty promises. As noted by Dr. Evelyn Encalada Grez of Justice for Migrant Workers, the systems in Canada are not built to support marginalized communities. While the government and broader society speak of reconciliation, there is no action being taken to achieve such a goal. We need to move beyond gestures and shift into action-based initiatives. Awareness raising is different from proper education, and proper education does not guarantee proper action. We must move beyond intention, towards action.



Part Two: How can this work be done?

One of Ally Squared's goals for CommunALLY is to understand how bridges can be built and maintained between and within Indigenous, immigrant and refugee communities holistically. To answer this question, our participants have suggested different ways in which cross-community allyship can be strengthened.

2.1 Through Multi-Faceted Education

A multifaceted educational approach is necessary to explore non-traditional, participatory methods of education that account for the different ways in which communities can engage, learn from one another, and practice allyship. The basis of this approach involves creating decolonized spaces for dialogue and exchange between communities, which are integral to fostering environments with mutual respect. To open this dialogue, it is important for individuals to acknowledge the ignorance that they have about other communities. For non-Indigenous peoples, part of this process includes exploring what it means to be a newcomer on Indigenous lands.

Consultants also suggested developing Indigenous-newcomer toolkits with partner organizations, which will inform immigrant and refugee communities about Indigenous histories and cultures, and help eliminate the misconceptions, biases, and stereotypes newcomers may hold about Indigenous peoples. Awareness building can also be communicated through art.

For instance, sharing poetry, paintings, performances, or other artistic and political forms of expression across newcomer and Indigenous communities can create a better understanding and appreciation of one another. Furthermore, Mandela Kuet of The Hood Fams Inc suggested that team sports are another form of inter-community engagement among youth and adults that can foster allyship and create positive perceptions between communities. These resources must be created with direct and compensated participation of Indigenous and migrant educators. They must be open-access, available in multiple languages, and in various mediums.

2.2 Through Community Building

Allyship is also about community building, which means working together and building community strength. This work must be approached with care and respect as it involves building trust among Indigenous, refugee and immigrant communities in order to dismantle existing tensions resulting from the lack of inter-community engagement and perceived competition for government resources.



Community building cannot be done without talking about and working towards reconciliation and land repatriation. As noted by Bonnie Van Hatten from KAIROS, these have different meanings for Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks, which is why it's important for newcomers to take the time and discuss what these mean for Indigenous peoples and how they can work together to achieve these goals. Many newcomers have seen similar struggles in their countries of origin, including talks of reconciliation that have reaped no results. Community building involves understanding shared struggles that Indigenous peoples, immigrants, and refugees face or have experienced.

2.3 Through Land and Water Based Reconciliation

Reconciliation is at the heart of building allyship. It's an ongoing process that has different layers, but first and foremost, must acknowledge that the treaties signed with Indigenous nations continue to be violated by the Canadian state. One of these layers is understanding the spiritual connection to nature and the land, because reconciliation cannot be done without returning ancestral lands to Indigenous peoples.

Conversations about land and water-based reconciliation must occur with the goal of creating understanding and suggesting action. A powerful message that Professor Tara Williamson shared with us was about how water is a connector of people around the world. It is life, it can heal, but it is also powerful enough to take a life.

Understanding the repercussions of privatizing and exploiting water, just like what is being done to the unceded lands of Indigenous peoples in Turtle Island, will help immigrants and refugees engage with Indigenous nations on a human rights level.

2.4 Through Mobilization, Lobbying, and Advocacy

Allyship is also about communities mobilizing, lobbying, and advocating together. Consultants from Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee backgrounds highlighted that migrants and Indigenous peoples have more in common than they realise. This is certainly true when it comes to interacting with oppressive institutions.

Abdulla Daoud, Executive Director of the Refugee Centre, told us that communities need to be at the forefront of organizing by working together. Member of Parliament Leah Gazan shared that engaging politically is necessary for communities to move forward and advocate for their human rights. Voting is one example of civic engagement in which Indigenous peoples, immigrants, and refugees can make their voices heard and mobilize for injustices to end across all communities.



2.5 Through Safe Spaces

Safe spaces are integral to fostering an environment where communities can honour who they are, feel safe in their own identity, and gather comfortably. These spaces are protective shields to practice and safeguard identity.

A safe space is also a space where multiple voices of a community can be celebrated. Often, we see the same activists speaking at conferences and roundtables, but they are only one person representing a diverse community at these events. Nikki Fraser pointed out the importance of celebrating the voices of those who do work behind the scenes. For instance, discussion tables will invite a known Indigenous activist to have their input in a discussion that pertains to the Indigenous community. However, there are hundreds of Indigenous nations spread across the country with different cultures and perspectives and cannot be represented by a single person. Many others are also doing the same kind of work every day but go unnoticed. Instead of waiting for governments to act for communities, Indigenous peoples, immigrants, and refugees can gather in these safe spaces, celebrate diverse voices, organize, and practice allyship.



Part Three: What Impact Will It Make?

Impact measurement is a key focus of our project and we want to instil it at every phase. We asked our participants how CommunALLY would impact them, their communities, and society at large.

3.1 Healing From Trauma

In our pilot digital story collection phase, Melissa Chung-Mowat shared that she used to hide her Indigenous identity because she was traumatized by the racism she faced in her childhood. Dr. Evelyn Encalada Grez pointed out that marginalized communities fight everyday to remind their oppressors that they are human rather than focusing on being true to themselves and their communities. Ibrahim Musa of Cuts for Kids said that while we continuously see conversations about resiliency, we seldom talk about or start a healing process. What we hope for in CommunALLY is a way for communities to heal together from trauma caused by oppression. Without seeing any change, without proper support, and without an acceptance of fault by oppressors, Indigenous and migrant communities have long been forced to suffer.

As a project that is for-community, by-community, we hope to create tangible change and spaces that are conducive to conversations about healing, with adequate support from Indigenous and migrant mental health professionals. We hold the words of Abdoulla Daoud close to our hearts in this project: “I find that if you're just as aggressive as they are in trying to shame you for who you are, and you're proud of who you are, you get a lot done.”

3.2 Cross-Community Allyship

Through CommunALLY, we want to build cross community ties with other migrant and Indigenous-run organizations and migrant and Indigenous activists. Some of this work is already being done in some shape or form by them, and we want to build a bridge on which everyone can connect, exchange ideas, and ultimately work together to eliminate the barriers that Indigenous peoples and migrants face. Through cross-community allyship, communities can work together and push for individuals to be in leadership and decision-making positions, and work together towards real change by having the community represent itself at the institutional level. Journalist Kamal Al-Solayee told us that “the sooner we work to eliminate barriers amongst Canada’s diverse communities, the better this country’s chances of surviving what looks like a turbulent decade ahead.”

3.3 A New Status Quo

At the beginning of our report, we wrote about a status quo that infringed on the safety and rights of Indigenous peoples and migrants. We hope that our CommunALLY project creates a new status quo, one where Indigenous peoples and migrants build kinship ties (Bonnie Van Hatten), respect each other’s identities (Justine Abigail Yu), and push for change (Abdulla Daoud). At the core of this new status quo is active allyship that is impactful, intersectional, and leads to collective gain.

Moving Forward

The CommunALLY project is still in the early phases of what we hope will become a several year project. The mission has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and because of this, our capacity has been limited. We place great emphasis on establishing and continuing relationships with Indigenous, immigrant and refugee communities, organizations and individuals. At the moment, we are limited to connecting through virtual means, but once restrictions are lifted, we intend to continue our relationships in an in-person context, gathering our growing community. As a youth volunteer run organization, we have a limited network and an even smaller funding capacity. As such, we recognize that this report is not a representation of every Indigenous or migrant perspective. As our work grows, so will the breadth and depth of experiences we include.

Moving forward, we plan to develop community education resources with partner organizations, and build a platform on which communities can engage in the long term. It is essential to our work that CommunALLY be led by Indigenous and migrant community members, and that we put lived experiences at the center of this initiative. The CommunALLY project may be altered depending on funding, a changing environment, new learnings, or shifting needs. For more information about CommunALLY, please visit allysquared.ca or contact Maya at allyneeded@allysquared.ca.



CommunALLY Participants

Some of our participants chose to share their contact information for those who have questions about them or their work. Please be cognizant of the emotional labour incurred by participants when contacting them.



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CommunALLY Participants



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Until next time...