I Participate, Therefore We Benefit: Ubuntu as a Relational Compass for Ethical Compensation in HCI

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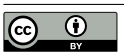
Abstract

Compensation in HCI research is often the primary ethical interface between HCI researchers and low-income communities. Yet, prevailing models of compensation can perpetuate neocolonial extraction and frame participation as transactional labor. This practice risks creating dependency and obscuring power imbalances, ultimately compromising both research integrity and participant dignity. Drawing on the experiences of researchers working in Africa and the southern African philosophy of Ubuntu, this paper employs a decolonial lens to critique the research economy of participation and compensation. We propose a framework for relational compensation, which re-imagines compensation not as payment for data but as a form of restorative justice and relational accountability. Through analytic vignettes, we examine tensions around community-researcher interdependency, gendered care burdens, and community solidarity. We conclude with principles for relational research economies that prioritize communal benefit, long-term data sovereignty, and co-designed terms of engagement, offering HCI a path toward reciprocal praxis.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Social recommendation**; *HCI theory, concepts and models*; **Field studies**.



CHI '26, Barcelona, Spain

ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-2278-3/26/04
https://doi.org/10.1145/3772318.3791981

Keywords

compensation, ubuntu, ethics, incentive, low-income, hci4d, decolonial, african

ACM Reference Format:
Jaydon Farao, Sierra van Riel, Sarina Till, Folasade M Adedeji, Rachel Oluwatuyi, Ndinelao Iitumba Ms, Sabiha Mosamat Shaikh, Sampson Adotey, and Melissa Densmore. 2026. I Participate, Therefore We Benefit: Ubuntu as a Relational Compass for Ethical Compensation in HCI. In *Proceedings of the 2026 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '26), April 13–17, 2026, Barcelona, Spain.* ACM, New York, NY, USA, 18 pages. https://doi.org/10.1145/3772318.3791981

1 Introduction

Compensation practices in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research, particularly when involving low-income communities, face critical ethical concerns deeply rooted in legacies of knowledge extraction and exploitation [5, 108]. Traditional frameworks often align with transactional, neoliberal paradigms that treat participant engagement as a mere exchange, devoid of consideration for community sovereignty and relational accountability [4, 87]. Such dynamics can perpetuate a cycle where benefits disproportionately favor academic institutions and researchers rather than the communities whose insights and labor are solicited [59]. While compensation practices have been critiqued extensively in bioethics [93, 99–101, 150], their effect in HCI and community-based research, contexts with unique considerations, remains under-explored. We are especially grateful to work that has highlighted the importance of ethical research practice and reflection throughout community engagements [25, 67, 77, 84, 107], but also the importance of transparent and meaningful compensatory frameworks for HCI research [77, 113].

Ethical engagement in HCI must transcend mere compliance with established practices by integrating community voices in the governance of research processes and outcomes. Engaging with communities in a meaningful way not only enhances the relevance of the research but also contributes to the collective empowerment and restoration of trust between researchers and communities [68, 81]. This shift can help mitigate harms resulting from practices that reinforce systemic injustices and ensure that communities are not merely subjects of research but active participants in shaping agendas that directly affect their lives [29]. Community involvement can take such forms as civic participation, where community panels review research proposals to assess their social impacts, thus fostering a participatory design ethos that is equitable and just [39, 59].

To better understand these issues, we critique existing compensation models through a decolonial lens that incorporates relational African philosophical perspectives. In particular, we explore Ubuntu as a critical lens that emphasizes interconnectedness and communal well-being. We advocate for a shift away from exclusively individualized compensation systems, toward models grounded in restorative justice practices [136] and reciprocity, where accountability is recognized as relational and focused on community enhancement rather than singular transactions [13, 14, 95]. By applying principles of relationality and restorative justice, HCI research can embed practices that honor long-term relationships with communities and prioritize their rights over data, ultimately working toward relationships and frameworks that resist exploitative structures [98]. While ethical compensation is discussed in adjacent fields, this paper focuses on the distinct challenges arising from HCI's iterative design cycles, the creation of artifacts and intellectual property, and its specific institutional grant structures. With this in mind, we reflect on four community-based research projects with communities located in the Global South. We explore how our compensation models were inadequate for our community partners, how they evolved, and how HCI research in similar contexts can leverage our lessons learned to establish sustainable, reciprocal, and meaningful research collaborations with communities. We aim to do this by addressing the following research questions:

(1) How do current compensation practices reproduce coloniality in HCI research?
(2) How can compensation be re-designed as reparative practice rather than transactional extraction?
(3) What does a framework for relational research economies–informed by Ubuntu–look like in practice?

The paper consequently makes the following contributions: (1) A critical lens for identifying and understanding how common compensation practices can replicate exploitative research economy dynamics and foster dependency; (2) It operationalizes a decolonial philosophy into a concrete, actionable framework for ethical practice; and (3) Generative principles for ethical research economies that translates critique into practice by providing actionable approaches for researchers to navigate pervasive tensions.

2 Related Work

The Belmont Report [56] has become an instrumental ethical document in guiding researchers and ethics review boards on the importance of protecting human participants in research [20, 58]. Additionally, the Global Code of Conduct for Research in Resource-Poor Settings [121] and the Minimum Ethical Standards in ICTD/ICT4D Research [36] provide guidance for researchers to conduct research with due consideration of the well-being and concerns of participants. These codes are integral to all interactions with participants and their contributions to research activities.

A growing body of literature within HCI grapples with the ethics of participant compensation [113], yet this work remains largely confined to Western ethical frameworks that prioritize transactional models and procedural oversight [77]. In this section, we discuss and critique this limited discourse, arguing that it does not address the dynamics of colonial power and structural inequities inherent in research within low-income communities. We first examine compensation and associated processes in research, and the most common ethics discourses of these processes. We present structural critiques of research in low-income communities, including critiquing the "gigification" of research participation. Analyzing coloniality in "ethical" guidelines reveals how institutional review processes often perpetuate harm. We, therefore, briefly survey calls for decolonizing HCI's approach to compensation and what this might entail.

We then explore decolonial alternatives in practice to lay the groundwork for our proposed considerations of relational compensation. We discuss a few African Indigenous philosophies and their application to restorative compensation practices [1]. Finally, we focus on Ubuntu as an African relational ethics and philosophical foundation for alternative practice. We motivate the use of Ubuntu in this context as a pervasive and valued idea across southern Africa, while recognizing some potential concerns for the use of this lens.

2.1 The Semantics of Paying Participants

In order to explore ethical challenges within research compensation practices of community-centric work in low-income contexts, we begin by unpacking relevant terminology. This requires nuanced definitions and disambiguation of terms such as incentives, compensation, remuneration, reimbursement, and honoraria, each of which conveys distinct connotations and implications for participants.

Before engagements begin, *incentives* are often used as a recruitment strategy; these are defined as payment to encourage participation [54, 62]. However, like compensation, incentives can take multiple forms, including grocery gift cards, university-themed gifts, or priority selection for engaging in future research projects [54]. The use of incentives is highly controversial, as it is usually premised on participants needing enticement to participate in a research study; thus, it does not create conditions for fair exchange [62].

Compensation and *remuneration* are often used interchangeably in research reporting. Compensation (the term we use henceforth)

[1] In this paper, we capitalize Indigenous to acknowledge and represent a group of political and historical communities, peoples who have longstanding ties and connections to particular lands, and who have been negatively impacted by the invasions of industrial economies, as well as the displacement and occupation of their ancestral territories by others. This decision conforms to Younging's Elements of Indigenous Style [153].

is understood as payment for labor, time, or inconvenience for being a part of a research project [60, 62]. This is usually framed as addressing any harm or effort required to contribute to the study. However, compensation does not have to be financial and can take the form of vouchers, airtime, or a gift of appreciation [119].

Reimbursements are payments intended to cover any financial costs that participants incur as a result of research engagements [3, 62]. For example, in section 5.3, we discuss reimbursing participants for the cost of childcare during the workshop. Finally, an *honorarium* is framed as a token payment for voluntary expertise offered during research engagements [110]. This is often, as with most of the aforementioned transactions, determined by the researcher based on a variety of factors, including: budget; community sentiment; historical practices; and ethical guidelines [7, 8, 112].

2.2 The Murky Notion of Fair Exchange

Making the determination of fair compensation is challenging in low-income and high-underemployment contexts. It requires ethics boards to walk a tightrope, risking coercion or undue inducement if they pay too much, and exploitation if they pay too little [109]. Many ethics boards respond by resorting to "payment conservatism", practicing caution and only offering minimal compensation to participants [86]. To understand this quandary, let us briefly distinguish between undue inducement, coercion, and exploitation.

Undue inducement, which describes how a form of payment could compromise people's perception of risks associated with participating [65, 150], has raised legitimate concerns and continues to be debated within bioethics and research ethics disciplines [93, 99, 101]. This is often likened to an "offer [you] can't refuse"[2] [44]. Furthermore, *unjust inducement* is also of concern, where lower incentives primarily encourage participation from low-income individuals while the outcomes primarily benefit other groups [38, 43, 143].

Coercion can be likened to the common villainous threat of "your money or your life"[3] [44]. It usually involves a serious threat with considerably worse consequences than cooperating [146]. Payment for research participation in low-income communities risks becoming coercive when economic precarity leaves no true "voluntary" choice [55].

Exploitation, on the other hand, occurs when there is an asymmetric distribution of benefits during an interaction, often due to taking advantage of the socio-economic position of one of the parties [44, 147]. This is akin to taking and giving little to nothing in return[4].

Without a contextual understanding, compensation practices can exploit survival needs, turning poverty and scarcity into a recruitment tool [80]. When a participant joins a study solely because it offers their only income, "consent" is structurally compromised [9, 109]. This mirrors the neoliberal *gig economy*, where desperation dictates "participation" [138]. The gig economy is typically understood as on-demand labor facilitated by technology [35] and is usually a "contract" with an individual. In this case, instead of technology-based labor platforms supporting the exchange of services for pay, universities and research institutions act as the forces facilitating this ecosystem [61, 138]. The production of research data through participation can be described as labor in Marxist terms, since the experiences of participants become ways in which the academic mode of production is sustained [96, 97, 100].

Crowdsourcing, in contrast to the gig economy, is the engagement of groups, mediated by technology, to address challenging problems, complete tasks, and innovate new ideas [16, 75, 135]. However, both are characterized by inconsistent income [145], economic precarity [52], and fluid regulatory guidelines that significantly affect worker behavior [66, 82]. Research with communities can take the form of crowdsourcing, especially to promote community participation [126], but it is usually associated with group-based online engagement [46]. Its complexities have been well documented in HCI [73, 74, 94, 117]. While crowd- and gig-work scholarship has primarily focused on digital platforms, our work extends this critical lens to in-person, community-centered research contexts where the relational stakes are particularly high due to ongoing physical presence and the potential for deeper social impacts. This wider recognition that research participation often functions as gig labor across contexts strengthens our argument that certain compensation models systematically produce precarity, whether online or in-person. Furthermore, both crowdsourcing and gig work are not inherently bad per se, but rather have shared ethical concerns that potentially exploit communities in precarious socio-economic conditions.

2.3 Coloniality in Ethics Language

The language we use as researchers in community-based HCI projects is vital to how we collaborate in large projects. This includes the language used when budgeting for participation in research; framing informed consent and ethics documentation; and growing community-researcher partnerships. This language has often centered on financial transactions for various levels of participation in research and has been determined by the researcher group [17, 111]. From terms such as compensation to recruitment to stakeholder, the language of research perpetuates colonial narratives that inadvertently affect behavior and perceptions [118]. Through this lens, *compensation* can be represented as the acquisition of resources with an unequal, minimal, or symbolic value provided in return, resulting in dependency and reinforcing a superiority of the economy imposed by the dominant research partner; *recruitment* as identifying and utilizing the most accessible and malleable resources, which could potentially create internal divisions and dependencies; and the role of *stakeholders* as community members and leaders who are engaged with on a transactional basis while researchers maintain decision making power on the research agenda, creating the illusion of true collaboration. This is not how these terms are always defined in practice, but we highlight how they potentially reframe power relations in community-researcher partnerships.

Modes of engagement characterized by our use of language, while practical in the community-researcher "exchange", are potentially in conflict with community values and introduce ethical

[2] A modification of a quote by the character of Don Vito Corleone in The Godfather (1972), directed by Francis Ford Coppola: *I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse.*
[3] Echoed by the character of Hans Gruber in Die Hard (1988), directed by John McTiernan: *Then, you'll give us what we want and save your friend's life.*
[4] A maxim of pirates in Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl (2003), directed by Gore Verbinski: *Take what you can, give nothing back.*

concerns. For example, the ways in which we engage with low-income communities, especially including our processes and the language we use, can negatively shape the relations and contributions of the researcher-community collaboration and misrepresent underrepresented communities [106]. This can potentially reinforce power dynamics between researchers and the community in the process. How we value and frame community contributions, "data", or Indigenous knowledge, is also worthy of examination in the questions concerning reciprocity and ethics [37]. Perspectives from the Global South, where many low-income and underemployed communities are located, can offer some critiques of these Western-guided practices and provide alternatives to community-centered HCI research.

2.4 Decolonial Critiques of Compensation

Community-based research with human participants is often guided by institutional review boards (IRBs) and research ethics councils (RECs), with few examples of community-established ethics review processes [12, 15, 90, 124]. Among many items of concern, participant compensation often depends on budgetary capacity and historical practices. One of the ways this manifests is the use of individual consent and payments for participation with less focus on communal rights and benefit [120]. If and when this is reported in HCI research [113], the means of compensation are not elaborated on beyond value. It is regarded as purely transactional [77]. This has implications for how communities view and participate in research.

It is important to acknowledge that current compensatory approaches are not without merit and were often developed with a genuine intent to protect participants and recognize their contributions. In low-income communities, especially, compensation can be a vital source of financial support that provides meaningful choice and dignity [1, 31]. It can also serve as a mark of due respect and a signal that the time and effort spent during the project is valued and not overlooked [77]. This serves as an important ethical shift from historical extraction modes of engagement without reciprocity. However, this transactional reciprocity has limitations in that it does not interrogate asymmetric value exchange [72], nor does it account for unquantifiable contributions [77].

Current compensation practices in HCI research involving low-income communities can perpetuate structures reminiscent of colonial exploitation, where capital is leveraged in an environment of scarcity to facilitate research engagement [121]. This phenomenon arises from compensation frameworks that prioritize academic institutions and researchers over the communities from which knowledge and labor are extracted. Such practices can be understood as reproducing coloniality by engaging in extractive transactional relationships, where the labor of marginalized communities is undervalued, leading to inequitable distributions of benefits from research activities [87, 108].

Decolonial perspectives emphasize that normative research paradigms have been heavily influenced by Western hegemony, framing knowledge production and the economic benefits of research in ways that undermine community sovereignty. This "coloniality of knowledge" maintains cycles of extraction that privilege those in academia [108], while failing to address the adverse socio-economic conditions faced by these communities [4, 5]. Moreover, many current compensation models in HCI research echo neoliberal frameworks that commodify participation. These models fail to honor the cultural contexts from which contributions emerge, categorizing contributions solely within a transactional narrative that sees participation as a form of labor rather than a relational engagement based on mutual respect and reciprocity [4, 87].

The reproduction of coloniality within current compensation practices in HCI research manifests through the disproportionate flow of benefits favoring academic institutions over low-income communities. Engaging with decolonial perspectives and African philosophies can illuminate pathways towards more equitable and just compensation models that recognize the rights and contributions of these communities, rather than perpetuating cycles of extraction and marginalization.

2.5 African Indigenous Philosophies

In presenting African Indigenous philosophies as an alternative to Western conceptions of design, there is a risk of reifying these philosophies, turning them into hollowed-out buzzwords to give the veneer of ethicality to unexamined and unchanged practices. Indeed, this process has affected the use of "participation" [88, 125] and "co-design" [22, 92, 134], with such terms being used to legitimize neocolonial practices. An "Ubuntu-inspired" project could thus use the language of community and relationship, but maintain extractive processes.

To counteract this, we frame Indigenous philosophies as inseparable from the Indigenous people who carry them [10] and their surrounding environment [37], rather than artifacts that can be taken out of their context and applied anywhere. Second, we recognize the pluriversality of these philosophies [45, 129] and offer our contribution only as one interpretation among many. Taking these steps also conforms to the relationality within the philosophies we discuss, situating research within a larger ecosystem.

2.5.1 Gift-Giving Philosophies. Osotua is a Maasai concept, described by Wijngaarden and Ole Murero [149] as related to collecting together into one place, to connection as an umbilical cord connects child to mother, and to curing disease. Osotua describes relationality in the form of kinship, sharing, symbiosis, and accountability [148]. This accountability makes research a covenant of mutual care, rather than a transactional contract.

Another gift-giving system is the Zulu practice of *ukusisa*, where "more wealthy" people in a rural village give a cow and bull to "less wealthy" newlyweds. Eventually, the cattle will be returned, but the newlyweds will keep any offspring [105, 139]. This act of neighborly assistance is not just an exchange and patronage, but an important part of community building.

2.5.2 San Code of Research Ethics. Published in 2017, the San Code of Research Ethics represents the first ethics code issued by an Indigenous group in Africa [23, 130]. The San community of southern Africa is considered among the most "studied" Indigenous groups in the world [23]. As a result, this ethics code is borne, not only out of a dissatisfaction and resistance to extractive research practices [27], but also a history of "dispossession, enslavement, cultural extinction and recorded patterns of officially sanctioned genocide" [120, p.

75] [114]. The code requires researchers to commit to four central tenets: justice and fairness, respect, care, and honesty, in addition to formal community approval [130]. It represents what is possible when considering the holistic identity of communities that enriches community-researcher collaborations.

2.5.3 Ubuntu – Relational Ethics. We now turn towards *Ubuntu*, which forms the core relational philosophy and ethics of the rest of the paper, warranting a more extensive exploration of its values and opportunities for HCI research. To understand Ubuntu as a concept, many refer to the phrase put forward by Archbishop Desmond Tutu [140]: "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours", or in the isiZulu maxim,

Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,

roughly translated as: "A person is a person through other persons." With characteristics emblematic of community values—such as connectedness, communalism, justice, harmony, and propriety [14, 28, 64, 136]—Ubuntu is seen as both an intrinsic concept and a philosophy predicated on external behavior, creating pluralistic manifestations, and making it a challenging concept to expound [49, 91]. As an example of Ubuntu's relevance to related schools of thought, Cornell and Van Marle [33] propose Ubuntu feminism as a means of addressing what they deem the shortfalls of Western feminist values, i.e., individual autonomy and politics of care. Ubuntu can thus be seen as a meaningful lens to approach ideas around participation and community, reframing how engagement and relations are constructed in HCI projects. Winschiers-Theophilus et al. [151] reflect on participatory design using Ubuntu's relational ethics and implications for research methodologies in cross-cultural design. Farao et al. [49] expand on these ideas by exploring the practical ways in which Ubuntu can be used in HCI and PD projects [50, 51]. While these studies are important contributions to the integration of Indigenous and communal philosophies in HCI and PD research, there remains an opportunity to envision Ubuntu within the research engagement cycle as a whole, and in this paper, we explore this with regard to compensation practices with low-income communities specifically.

Incorporating African Indigenous philosophies into participatory research offers an alternative framework that champions communalism and relational ethics. This perspective advocates for an approach to compensation that emphasizes restorative justice [136], enhances community agency, and ensures long-term benefit for marginalized populations [5, 87]. By working toward a model that legitimizes these frameworks, researchers can actively resist the extraction that currently characterizes many research practices and move toward ethical engagements that prioritize community voices and ensure fair representation in data ownership and research outcomes [4, 87]. However, it is imperative that these philosophies not be used to obscure material outcomes within community-researcher relations. Instead, those outcomes should serve as a measure of ethical commitment. This includes co-defining value, sovereignty over knowledge and contributions, and increased capacity and access to resources with the community [77, 121]. [5]

2.6 Compensation in HCI: Distinct Challenges and Opportunities

While ethical compensation is discussed in anthropology and development studies, HCI and Participatory Design (PD) present unique challenges that merit specific examination [21, 42, 53, 144]. Liang et al. [89] point to four tensions when conducting HCI research with marginalized people, one of which directly relates to exploitation. They explicitly indicate that definitions of compensation and post-study relationships with participants should be (re)considered while attempting to mitigate harms. A recent review on social justice in HCI [30] also highlights financial compensation as an existing approach through which community-level support can be provided; however, there are also opportunities to reframe relationships and the value offered by participants in an effort to build socially just futures. Below, we introduce three distinctive aspects of HCI practice that shape its compensation ethics.

First, a prevalent pattern in HCI practice–often driven by institutional pressures for rapid publication and demonstration–is the use of short, intensive iterative cycles. Unlike anthropology's traditional long-term immersion, HCI typically employs short, intensive iterative cycles–co-design workshops, usability tests, and prototyping sessions [122]. When left unexamined, this temporal structure inherently frames community engagement as a series of discrete, extractive tasks, fostering the 'gig economy' model we critique. A decolonial approach, therefore, must challenge not only how we pay within these cycles, but the very presumption that such rapid, phasic engagement is the appropriate or only way to work with communities. Our Ubuntu-inspired framework provides principles for resisting this default, advocating for timelines and rhythms co-designed with communities to support sustained partnership over fragmented extraction.

Second, HCI research often produces tangible artifacts and intellectual property with commercial potential [42, 72]. When community contributions inform patentable technologies or fundable systems, a significant asymmetry emerges: participants receive one-time payments while researchers and institutions may reap long-term benefits from publications, patents, and career advancement.

Third, HCI operates within rapidly evolving global funding structures that create complex ethical tensions. While traditional 3-4 year project cycles with rigid "participant incentive" budgets persist, new funding models are emerging that reshape compensation possibilities. The European Union's shift toward 10-year projects with 40+ partners creates opportunities for long-term relationships but risks diluting direct community benefits across complex consortia [47]. Meanwhile, the UK's increased focus on measurable impact outside academia could be leveraged to argue for ethical compensation as a form of social impact, though it may also pressure researchers toward more extractive "hit-the-market-sooner" timelines [47].

The situation is particularly challenging in Global South contexts. In South Africa, reduced national funding forces reliance on

[5] It should be noted that we base our relational framing on Ubuntu instead of the San Code of Research Ethics, the latter being specifically designed with Indigenous San people and for research with San communities. The code can thus serve as an ethical guide to research with Indigenous communities. While the code provides crucial specific protections, Ubuntu offers a broader philosophical foundation for reimagining the entire researcher-community relationship. Ubuntu's emphasis on mutual interdependence makes it particularly suited for rethinking the economic relationships at the heart of compensation practices.

international collaborations where African researchers are often "sidelined [...] as they cannot be lead investigators" [47, p. 1211], creating power imbalances that inevitably affect how communities are compensated. Additionally, against the best intentions of researchers, long-term engagements remain challenging to implement financially [141]. Brazilian HCI must compete with other fields for limited government funding despite stated priorities for universal access [47]. These structural constraints make ethical compensation even more crucial, yet more difficult to implement, as researchers navigate complex international partnerships and commercial funding that may limit publishable research to "highly applied scenarios" [47, p. 1211].

These intersecting factors–iterative engagement patterns, valuable artifact creation, and constrained institutional frameworks–create compensation challenges distinct from those in other fields. By addressing these HCI-specific dynamics, our work contributes to emerging debates about data justice and epistemic ownership in technology design [6, 71, 116].

3 Methodology

> ...the researcher is as much a part of the social world as anyone else. In an important sense, therefore, the social world is as much "in here" as it is "out there". Accordingly, it seems reasonable to us that the beginning of social inquiry can be the researcher's own experiences and activities, and self-reflection upon these. After all, the first and most accessible thing for observation is yourself. [57, p. 35]

3.1 Research Team and Positionality

We are a group of nine researchers, part of the same HCI lab in the Global South. We are one non-binary person, six women, and two men; eight of whom are undertaking post-graduate qualifications and two of whom are academics by profession. All of us are fluent in spoken and written English, with our mother tongues including Afrikaans, Akuapem (Akan), Bengali, Oshiwambo, and Yoruba; by nationality, we are one American, one Ghanaian, one Namibian, three Nigerians, and three South Africans. Our lab focuses mostly on community-centered co-design in low-income, under-resourced communities with the aim of supporting the development of technological infrastructure, up-skilling, and digital health initiatives. We are guided by feminist and decolonial HCI theories and approaches [40, 72, 85, 151], re-imagining the ways in which HCI is practiced in the Global South [128, 129]. Since our work has covered similar socio-economic contexts, we have experiences that include tensions, conflict, cultural differences, and alternative practices in the field. Our goal is less to develop theory than to create a foundation for an empirically informed relational research agenda, to influence HCI and co-design researcher practices.

3.2 Methodological Approach: Collective Autoethnography

We adopt a collective autoethnography (CAE) approach, which Chang et al. [26] define as the engagement of two or more autoethnographers sharing life experiences related to a particular social phenomenon, analyzing and interpreting these experiences collectively. They use a musical analogy to differentiate CAE from autoethnography: "Autoethnography is to a solo performance," in the exploration of self, "as CAE is to an ensemble" [26, p. 24]. As researchers concerned with how we can approach co-design and collaborate with communities meaningfully with reciprocity, self-examination, and reflection, we find CAE to be an appropriate approach to explore the complexities of a vital relational engagement, i.e., compensation in HCI research with low-income communities.

Our collective autoethnography follows established reflexive practices in HCI [11, 69], where researcher introspection serves to expose often-invisible power dynamics. As academically-affiliated researchers, we acknowledge our privileged position in setting the terms of compensation. Our method centers our experiences precisely to interrogate this power–not to speak for participants, but to critically examine the researcher's role in perpetuating or challenging extractive economies. However, we note this approach's limitation: it necessarily privileges researcher perspectives. Future work should directly center participant voices in evaluating these compensation models, particularly regarding whether our Ubuntu-informed principles indeed foster the dignity and reciprocity they intend.

3.3 Reflexivity, Power, and Decolonial Praxis

Applying CAE effectively requires researchers to critically engage with their positionality–in this instance, acknowledging how our academic privilege, institutional power, and cultural backgrounds shape both the compensation dilemmas we encounter and our reflections on them. As such, it requires critical reflexivity, emotional awareness, humility, and an embracing of dialogue and vulnerability. This method demands skilled introspection to recognize how our own assumptions about value, fairness, and reciprocity may blind us to extractive patterns we perpetuate. It also demands time and is labor, "a great effort emanating from and toward materiality that ironically encompasses imagination and futurity" [131, p. 131]. The validity of our analysis depends not on objective detachment, but on our capacity for honest self-examination of how we benefit from and participate in the very systems we critique. It is within the systems of university structures, external funding bodies, and an ever-changing political climate that we find ourselves. Not only as researchers but as people-in-community [63] with our collaborators, seeking to establish relationships that flourish and reflect our shared humanity.

> When I am doing my embodied/written performance autoethnography from the borders, I cross the places I live and labor. I am performing community. [41, p. 82]

The approach utilized in this paper may be unconventional for a traditional HCI paper. We persist, however, as a means of asserting the decolonial project as "both a political and an epistemic process [where] subaltern academics must advocate for the legitimacy of subalternized epistemologies [and] put them into practice" [48, p. 21]. CAE is particularly well-positioned as a means of "confronting certain colonial durabilities" and working towards epistemic justice, considering African realities [2, p. 417]. By recognizing our role as both researcher and collaborator in the research process, we, through our multivocality, aim to illustrate the many

ways in which we can practice HCI in more connected and humble ways [128].

Autoethnography is often used as a means of reducing the power imbalance between researcher and subject [26]; however, CAE has the potential to reintroduce it [2]. The group becomes the "researcher", potentially adding power differentials between individual members with "the distribution of power within the group [...] subject to its processes" [2, p. 422]. Societal norms around gender, age, level of education, seniority, and other factors may complicate the work to a significant degree, regardless of how equitable the group aims to be. In particular, author 4, self-identifying as white, feels that their background privileges their voice over others'. That said, we sought to offer each member and their contributions space and opportunity to be accurately represented where appropriate. It should be noted that while some group members may have been members of low-income communities that have participated in other research previously, they do not find themselves in that position during the writing of this paper, and are not currently members of the communities referenced.

3.4 Research Process and Analysis

Our methods included initial individual activities of reflection and ethnographic journaling. Weekly meetings over three months (a total of ten meetings) followed, during which we discussed, coded, and reflexively analyzed our notes as a collective. This was not a process of seeking consensus, but of critical dialogue to surface patterns. Finally, a week of intermittent online writing sessions followed, during which we re-emphasized and iterated our arguments and critical points, while ensuring our voice as a collective was represented. The skills of different members determined much of their contribution to the thinking and formulation of this paper. For example, author nine has been embedded in research with low-income communities significantly longer than others, and thus contributed toward understanding existing compensation practices in these contexts, while author four offered their skills in English language writing. Author one took the lead as first author due to their specific research interests in decolonial researcher-community engagement and their involvement in the multiple community-centered projects represented in the paper.

We employ collective autoethnography not as a substitute for participant-centered methods, but as the appropriate approach for investigating our research questions: on the colonial and extractive nature of research compensation, and how we could re-imagine and re-design these frameworks through relational and reparative thinking. By examining our own reflexive accounts and decisions, we make visible the often-unexamined power dynamics in setting compensation terms. Our analysis reflects how we, as academically-affiliated researchers, perceived and navigated compensation dilemmas, but does not directly capture how community members experienced these same dynamics. Additionally, shared positionalities within our research team may have created blind spots that external perspectives might have revealed. We offer these reflexive accounts not as comprehensive truths, but as provocations for the HCI community to examine its own practices, with the understanding that future work should center participant voices in evaluating these ethical frameworks.

The results of this paper are presented as ethnographic vignettes, described by Humphreys and Watson [70, p. 44], citing Van Maanen [142], as "personalized accounts of fleeting moments of fieldwork in dramatic form." These vignettes inform a collective reflexive thematic analysis [18, 19, 24] that in turn generates a set of guiding ethical principles for compensation. The ethical considerations of this paper are present throughout the representations and the analysis of our experiences, in an effort to exhibit care and consideration, not only for ourselves but for the communities we have collaborated with. We should note, however, that authors were at liberty to withhold any confidential or sensitive information. We briefly describe the community collaborators below as a means of introducing the contexts of the subsequent vignettes.

4 Research Context

Since the research team worked in four different communities, with some overlap, we provide a summary of those communities and their contexts below. All communities are low-income and under-resourced, facing numerous socio-economic challenges. Geographically, they are all located on the African continent.

- **Ocean View (OV)** is an under-resourced, peri-urban township located within the city of Cape Town, South Africa. Ocean View was established in the 1960s under the Apartheid regime, which forcibly relocated people from their homes in surrounding areas. According to the 2011 census, Ocean View had a population of 13639, although more recent estimates suggest that the population is closer to 40000. Over the decades, the community has endured both technological and economic exclusion.
- **Sweetwaters (SW)** is 97km outside Pietermaritzburg in the uMgungundlovu district of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and is zoned as a rural area with a household income of ZAR 2400 per month[6] (USD 1 ~ ZAR 17.53). This community comprises around six hundred thousand people with 76% of the population listed as isiZulu speakers[7].
- **Ga-Dikgale (GD)** is zoned as a rural, low-income area with a monthly income of ZAR 1250[8] and is located 90km northeast of Polokwane in Limpopo, South Africa. 95% of the 9353 people in this population are listed as speaking Sepedi[9].
- The **Nyire (NY)** community, of the Banda district, is located in the Bono region of central West Ghana, with its capital in Banda-Ahenkro. The population of Banda District in 2021 was 28179 with 35% of the population living in poverty[10]. The District shares boundaries with Bole to the East, Tain to the West, Kintampo South to the South, and La Côte d'Ivoire to the North.

5 Collective Contemplation

Our collaborations with the aforementioned communities were primarily focused on engagement and the vision of a shared outcome and benefit. Much of our reflections represent a perspective, which

[6] http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182019.pdf
[7] https://wazimap.co.za/profiles/municipality-KZN225-the-msunduzi/
[8] http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182019.pdf
[9] https://wazimap.co.za/profiles/ward-94703017-makhuduthamaga-ward-17-94703017/
[10] https://statsghana.gov.gh/gssmain/fileUpload/pressrelease/Banda.pdf

we have the advantage of experiencing, that intends to grapple with scenarios and discomforts that arose during community engagements. We present them here as short vignettes [142], followed by a brief analysis, and finally suggest some generative principles that we intend to be actionable ways in which the HCI community can learn from our work. This informs a set of principles presented in Section 7. We begin with a vignette including personal and institutional reflections on "data collection" and compensatory frameworks, before moving towards how research participation can be seen as a "gig", issues related to community-researcher relations and gendered participation, and concluding with the researcher-subject binary and time as a reciprocal gift.

5.1 The relationship between data quality and payment

Vignette: During the exploratory phases of a nationwide project (OV, SW, and GD) focusing on maternal and child health and digital technologies, we financially compensated participants for their time and any inconvenience caused due to their participation in the activity [ZAR 100 (~USD 7) as an honorarium, ZAR 50 (~USD 4) for transport, and refreshments and snacks during the engagement]. Their attendance and agreement to participate were sufficient to deserve this. There was no discrimination, and usually is not, by how long engagements are with a particular participant or how much they contribute. After a few engagements, the researcher and community liaison noticed that some interviews were significantly shorter than others. This was usually paired with terse responses to questions and what we considered poor data quality. We began questioning the motivations of some community members for participating, asking: Can payment be a primary motivator for some, regardless of the degree of their participation?

Analysis: As researchers, we cannot truly know our participants' motivations, backgrounds, or emotional circumstances. This is true for all participants regardless of data quality. It would also be inappropriate to assume any malicious intentions on the part of participants should the engagement be less than advantageous to the research collaboration objectives. There is currently little evidence of difference in data quality between paid and unpaid participants [103], with payment having a positive correlation with data recruitment and collection rates instead. How this manifests in low-income, high-unemployment communities is unclear. This perspective exemplifies an individualistic view of participation and benefit, where the quality of a particular data collection activity is linked to how an individual is compensated. However, the lived realities of individuals should not be divorced from the social conditions of the community. An Ubuntu lens can shift this framing towards one of collective quality and engagement that understands the interdependence of individuals-in-community [63], their experiences, and their contexts, with the aim of collective benefit. The tension here arises from a contractual logic of the research collaboration, i.e. X hours equate to Y amount of money. While compensation is formally offered for time and attendance, researchers often subconsciously evaluate the 'return on investment'–questioning the payment's worth when data quality is poor. This creates an unspoken tension between the official policy (paying for presence) and the researcher's internal calculus (valuing output). Instead, an Ubuntu-guided framework advocates for covenantal logic, where payment is not to purchase data or compensate for inconvenience, but rather to: recognize inherent worth; establish reciprocity; and manage power differentials. We shift the question from "Did we get our money's worth?" to "Did we honor the reverence of this exchange?" Poor data quality is then not a symptom of the compensation model but rather an indication of relational weakness.

Generative principle: Before engagements begin, the language we use to construct budgets, ethics documentation, and informed consent should be designed for the relationship and reflect the values participants have [106, 118][Principle 2]. Instead of incentives or compensation, payments can be termed as "Honoraria for Cultural and Experiential Expertise"[11]. Secondly, the principle of unconditional payment should be established beforehand [Principle 1]. Payment should be for the act of showing up and being willing to engage, not dependent on the quality or quantity of data produced. In the case that data is considered "poor" or responses from participants are terse, self-reflection should be the primary reaction of the researcher [25], not judgment. Reflections could examine the methods used or how space and time in the research environment may have contributed to the discomfort of the engagement. Lastly, if considering the long-term relationship with the community, one should prioritize sustaining goodwill and respect within the community-researcher partnership, with payment being a minor part of a larger reciprocal relationship [Principle 4]. We should recognize that an Ubuntu-inspired approach looks at what else is inspired through the collaboration, such as: transparency about academic research; sharing findings; celebrating community values; and supporting skills development.

5.2 The Double Bind: Research as Livelihood vs. Partnership

Research participation exists in a double bind: for community members facing economic precarity, it can represent a vital livelihood, while for researchers, it ideally represents a collaborative partnership. This tension between economic necessity and relational aspiration creates fundamental challenges for ethical engagement.

Vignette A:. During research activities for a project aimed at supporting digital participation in OV, our team included a community liaison who was leading recruitment. We were able to include a diverse group of community members during the first phase and wanted to expand the recruitment net in the subsequent phase. We realized that the same group of people was recruited once again, and asked the community liaison if this was intentional. They explained that this group includes those who are available for frequent research activities, many of whom are unemployed. To be efficient and practical, the community liaison did their best to adhere to the project directive, but they were limited in their practical options. The fact that most of the recruits were unemployed (and thus available for research activities) forced us to think about the context within which we do co-design work, which often requires multiple engagements and iterative phases. This was paired with questions from multiple community members:

[11] A version of this is the Indigenous Honorarium Payments Procedure of Alberta University of the Arts (https://www.auarts.ca/indigenous-honorarium-payments-procedure)

"Will there be jobs for us?" Additionally, we could not avoid the fact that our position as researchers (requesting and compensating participation) created a setup that provided community members with vital financial support for their essential needs. This introduced significant power differentials and a consideration of the research economy, which illuminated a complex question: How is the work of participating in research perceived in high-underemployment contexts?

Vignette B:. A project focused on early childhood development and co-designing tangible user interfaces in SW, consisted of semi-regular workshops with the same group of people for over a year. At one point, the lead researcher was unable to conduct research workshops on the scheduled day due to unavoidable health challenges. The workshop was rescheduled to a later date, and the community was informed with apologies and the suggestion of a new date. Community members were dissatisfied with this shift, with one saying: "I planned for the workshop to happen on that day? What must I do now because I expected the money?" It became clear that many in the group relied on the compensation to cover their expenses for that week. In the same vein, for a scheduled workshop, a community member requested that the workshop be held at an earlier date because they needed the money to cover basic needs. We were facing a challenging conundrum: How can we balance the needs of the researcher and the dynamic nature of research with the essential needs of the community members, when they become reliant on engagements to support them?

Analysis: These vignettes reveal the fundamental double bind of community-engaged research: participation simultaneously functions as an essential livelihood for community members navigating economic precarity and as an idealized partnership for researchers. Vignette A exposes how this dynamic can replicate the very neoliberal precarity research aims to address, creating a "research gig economy" where community members must "hustle" for income through repeated participation. Vignette B demonstrates how this interdependence creates shared vulnerability—where a researcher's personal emergency can trigger someone's financial setback.

In many under-resourced communities, compensation for research is seen as a means of income [1, 127]. When we put a number on how much to compensate participants–a number we have the privilege to decide on–we may be determining someone's income, and how their family and community benefit from their engagement in our research. This can introduce challenging tensions between our roles as researchers and how we might be perceived, in this case, perhaps as employers with a particular expertise. Existing power differentials are amplified, which can lead to a dependence on research as an income stream. Vignette A represents qualities of neoliberal economic precarity, as community members "hustle" to participate in research amid systemic exploitation and scarcity [1]. The community-researcher relationship, thus, has parallels with platforms such as Uber[12] or TaskRabbit[13]. The recruitment system functions with algorithmic-like efficiency. While not identical to digital platforms, these practices create similar precarity, treating participation as discrete tasks rather than meaningful partnerships. In this way, the work is on-demand, with participants available in a prescribed period performing a temporary "gig" with an unpredictable income, their livelihoods dependent on the demand for research in their community. Regular participants in this scenario understand what researchers want, and thus are seen as reliable and available. However, their participation could be a survival strategy and rational response to systemic economic exclusion [80]. Academic research can potentially reinforce the precarious nature of neoliberal gig platforms, and there is an opportunity to "create the conditions" [34] where this is challenged or dismantled. It's important to note that treating research participation as precarious labor pre-dates digital platforms [32]. These modern gig economies simply make visible and systematize neoliberal logics that have long operated in research relationships with marginalized communities [100].

The power differentials that exist between communities and researchers should always be acknowledged, but it is also important to recognize vulnerabilities that can arise within the collective [148, 149]. In vignette B, we encounter a complex situation with a clear conflict between the needs of the researcher and those of the community. The ethical challenge requires humility and care, attempting to ensure that a personal emergency or scheduling decision does not cascade into a crisis for others. The Ubuntu principle "I am because we are" becomes critical here. It is apparent that the well-being of the community and the researcher are interconnected, and a threat to one can jeopardize the larger relational ecosystem.

Generative principle: There should be a conscious movement away from research as one-off "gigs" to an investment in sustainable roles for all collaborators. Community-researcher collaborations should consider how to formalize community co-researcher roles, or ethics advisors, where communities can advocate for their own position within such collaborations, regardless of who the researcher is. Co-design, while in principle collaborative, can maintain ways in which the researcher's decisions (such as applying for ethics approval and setting up the parameters of the research engagements) dominate relations. Thus, even the compensation model should be co-created in a way that reflects the community's values and supports sustainable future partnerships where researchers are not acting as "platforms" offering work opportunities [Principle 2]. There should also be an effort to move from individual hustle to collective benefit when structuring community-researcher partnership agreements. This could exist as a community-managed fund that is part of the project budget and supports technological education or WiFi infrastructure.

Considering Vignette B, the objective here is to manage the crisis in a way that affirms interdependence while minimizing harm. Immediate and transparent communication should be prioritized, led by humanity rather than logistics. Researchers should understand the meaning of the engagements to the community and build empathy and honesty within the relational ecosystem [Principle 3]. Secondly, and perhaps more challenging from a financial point of view, an Ubuntu-inspired approach would provide unconditional payment for time reserved. This is a shift from a transactional framework to a relational one [Principle 1]. Providing the compensation separates the payment from the performance of the workshop and instead attaches value to the relationship and the kept commitment of the community. The community is not regarded as a data

[12]https://www.uber.com/
[13]https://www.taskrabbit.com/

point, but instead as a partner whose well-being is considered, even when the researcher is unwell or unable to commit. On the other hand, if workshops are requested primarily as a means of gaining income, the situation becomes more complex. Honest discussion about the community-researcher relationship, shaped by an empathic understanding of the economic position and well-being of all collaborators, should guide these engagements. This approach, while difficult to implement fully, can deepen trust and demonstrate unwavering commitment, especially when things go wrong.

5.3 The gendered burdens of compensation

Vignette: During a series of co-design workshops with women in OV, the researcher noticed a pattern: several participants were visibly stressed and often had to leave early. Upon gently inquiring, the researcher learned that these women were using a significant portion of their workshop compensation to pay for childcare, which negated the financial benefit of their participation. In response, the researcher proactively instituted a separate childcare stipend for all subsequent workshops. However, this well-intentioned solution created a new tension within the group. Some participants argued that providing a separate childcare stipend was unfair. They felt that it rewarded poor planning, suggesting that those with childcare needs should have arranged familial help, as they themselves had done. Other participants were more than willing to support mothers, passing around the children and taking turns occupying them. The researcher's position grew more complex, however, when a participant privately requested the childcare stipend to pay a family member who had agreed to watch her children, blurring the line between formal compensation and informal family support. We were forced to face the following question: In what ways should we consider gendered participation and care obligations within the compensation framing we have decided on?

Analysis: This scenario is indicative of how unpaid social reproductive labor—the historically gendered work of child- and eldercare, household management, and community [104]—is systematically devalued. When this labor is not explicitly acknowledged, the women and caregivers bearing the costs of care are effectively penalized, paying a "participation tax" that others do not. However, in Ubuntu, care is not an individual responsibility but a communal one. This spirit is exemplified by babies brought to workshops being passed between participants, sharing both the burden and joy of childcare. An Ubuntu framing of this setting would replace the notion of individual fairness with equity of participation, asking: How can the community-researcher collaboration support all members to participate fully and with dignity? The community should have the prerogative also to ask: How can we structure our time together so that no member is prevented from sharing their wisdom because of the care they provide? In this way, we emphasize reducing barriers to participation and our collective responsibility for supporting our community's needs. Secondly, as has been advocated before [115, 152], but not nearly enough, childcare should be baked into research grants as a non-negotiable line item. Ubuntu, as a means of recognizing the humanity of others, would encourage us to normalize and de-stigmatize the cost of care.

Generative principle: A way to achieve this is to provide free, professional, on-site childcare at all workshops [Principle 5]. What needs to be reiterated before and throughout research activities and engagements is the priority of the well-being of the community. As a researcher, this requires reconfiguring one's role as a distributor of funds into a facilitator of communal care, leveraging one's privileges and resources to create the conditions for truly equitable and dignified participation.

5.4 The dissolution of the researcher-subject binary

Vignette: In another project with OV, we were working towards the development of a community radio program with a youth organization. The research started with a series of interviews with the organization staff members, for which each participant received an honorarium of ZAR 120 (∼USD 7). We then shifted to group-based engagements, in which we were collaborating with a team on the production of a resource for the community. Compensating for time over the long period of collaborative work was no longer tenable at our normal research rates; it was difficult even to estimate what time was being put into the work. We struggled with this impossibility and realized that our usual models of payment, individual and time-based monetary compensation, would inevitably recreate the very hierarchies we sought to dismantle. The community team, consisting mostly of volunteers, was devoting time to a shared future benefit, not an hourly wage. We, as researchers, stood to gain publications, career advancement, and degrees, taking a significantly larger share of the "academic pie". An alternative reconfiguration was suggested: We would position ourselves as volunteer members of the community team, in the same way the community collaborators were. Additionally, we had to shift perspective on what is being compensated, since individual participation dictated a particular approach that was incompatible with group work. Though this was not a new compensatory model, our shared efforts towards the community-identified goal created new ways of being in partnership. The researcher-community partnership had to confront a fundamental question: How can compensation be fair when individual contributions in a group are fluid and immeasurable?

Analysis: The shift in positioning here is not a radical choice, and is an ethically coherent one that aligns with an Ubuntu-led relational framing. Instead of viewing the researcher and community as distinct, they can be perceived as part of a nascent community, temporarily becoming "we" with their well-being intertwined. Multiple shifts are occurring in this example. The shift from data extraction to communal actualization: where the completion of the research project and resultant compensation are reframed to the well-being and success of the collective endeavor. From researcher as director to contributing member: moving from the researcher's role as primary leader that sets timelines and budget, in a "human resources" capacity, towards a contributing collaborator with specific skills to offer. The researcher's expertise is their contribution to the collective potluck, and leadership can be reconfigured based on what the project needs during particular tasks. From determining the value through monetary quantification to reciprocal contribution: the transactional framing of time and output, which can be described as individual and fungible, reduces engagement to an accounting problem, intensified when considering a group. Viewing value as

inherent in the act of contribution to the whole recognizes the multiple ways of being and engaging. There are different forms of contributions that are incommensurable, and as such, ascribing monetary metrics to them is erroneous. Lastly, the shift from compensation as solely payment to reciprocal sustenance: compensation as a payment resembles the end of a transaction, whereas a relational Ubuntu framing would consider compensation as mutual sustenance and shared dedication to a common future. Communities may regard sustenance in the form of material outcomes as their goal, while researchers consider sustenance as the data and findings that inform academic outputs. Acknowledging these differences can be the beginning of a non-extractive relationship that explores how collective labor can generate fair sharing of the outcomes. A relational approach, inspired by Ubuntu, offers an opportunity to embrace a fluid and rotating leadership structure, including the consideration of existing community hierarchies, and a pluriversal lens of participating [45, 128].

Generative principle: Firstly, the task and context of a project should determine how leadership is structured [Principle 3]. For example, the researcher could lead methodological design, while a community elder leads cultural protocol, and a local organizer leads outreach. This can introduce ways of disrupting the default hierarchy within the researcher-community dynamic. Secondly, the direct relationship between contributions and monetary metrics should be rejected in favor of recognizing the diverse ways of contributing, including emotional labor, physical space, childcare, and knowledge. Lastly, the conditions for symbiotic success should be co-created, including how success is defined and how activities can support each collaborator's goals [Principle 2]. These transform the research process from a process of studying a community to one of building with a community.

5.5 The gift of time

Vignette: For a project aimed at capacity-building for development in an under-resourced Ghanaian community, our research team was preparing to immerse itself in NY, with a population of over 2000 people, for nearly two months. We had trained and studied the literature regarding monetary compensation as a tool for ethical reciprocity and building rapport. However, the sheer scale of our project—including interviews and focus groups—made individual cash payments a financial and logistical impossibility. The following dilemma arose: How could we honor the immense gift of time and personal disclosure elicited by engagements, without reducing the relationship to a transaction we could not afford? The solution did not emerge from the financial arithmetic of compensation, but from living within the community and witnessing the challenges and opportunities firsthand. We focused on a local school experiencing capacity strain, with limited educators serving hundreds of students. Our team possessed the necessary skills, including teaching literacy and mathematics. We approached the community leadership and proposed, not a payment plan, but an offer of our time and support for the understaffed school throughout our stay. This approach was not a simple one-to-one exchange but rather a messy and holistic one. We transformed from "researchers who take" to temporary community members who contribute, building rapport instead of paying for it. We moved beyond ethical compensation as a research requirement, asking a pertinent question: Can research resemble reciprocal giving that addresses a community need, rather than a financially dependent exchange creating market-based dependencies?

Analysis: This experience demonstrates a critical evolution in the concept of reciprocity, moving from a model based on direct money-for-time exchange to one informed by Ubuntu, where there is an indirect exchange of skills for community benefit, strengthening the relational fabric. Before engagements, the team relied on previous compensation practices, but instead decided to expand on the suggestion made by Kawulich [78, p. 14], that: "the researcher has the responsibility to give something back, whether monetary remuneration, gifts or material goods, physical labor, time, or research results." The team, through deep immersion, identified that their well-being and successes were linked with that of the community, a direct embodiment of Ubuntu's core principles. Through the process of communicating needs and offering skills to support them, they enacted a form of relational accountability, offering a "counter-gift" in lieu of a payment, honoring the community's gift of time and knowledge. As a result, they proactively avoided creating the conditions of the research "gig economy", by preventing the inclusion of a small subset of the community that could reasonably be budgeted for, which could have introduced internal community tensions. The benefit, in this case, was a public good that supported schoolchildren and an overburdened education system.

Generative principle: This scenario introduces three principles. The first concerns skills-based reciprocity in which researchers should audit their skills and resources, aiming to facilitate a reciprocal exchange within the community-researcher collaboration. The form of exchange should be co-designed with the community so that it addresses a clear and stated need. This could include ICT training, helping to develop funding proposals for community projects, or, as in this case, supplementing educational capacity [Principle 7]. The second principle relates to communal benefit over individual payment. When embarking on large-scale, longitudinal, and immersive research engagements, reciprocity should primarily be directed toward a community-owned asset or public good. Instead of compensating 50 people for interviews, one could use the equivalent budget to contribute to a community resource such as a library book fund, or a skills development workshop [Principle 3]. Lastly, the principle of integrated contribution should be considered, where compensation is not a separate transaction, but incorporated into the daily research practices, blurring the lines between a researcher collecting data and a contributing community member [Principle 4]. The researcher could participate in community events, volunteer at the public library, or clean public spaces. These acts could build trust and reciprocity in ways that money cannot.

6 Discussion

The proposed shift towards a relational, Ubuntu-informed model of compensation is ethically necessary but pragmatically fraught. It exists in tension with powerful institutional, economic, and social forces. Acknowledging these challenges is not a weakness of the framework, but a critical step toward its practical application. We identify two core sites of tension.

6.1 Institutional relational frameworks

The scenarios and reflections detailed above present moments of tension and discomfort. The reason is often that we are approaching the community engagement with a particular mindset preconditioned on various personal and institutional constraints. On the one hand, we are limited to projects that expect certain outcomes, which can be associated with personal gain in the form of degrees, promotion, and recognition in the field [87, 108]. This, in turn, significantly economically advantages the researcher. The community collaborators are not necessarily guided by these motivations, and this may cause friction within overall expectations. It is one thing to be aligned on supporting community ambitions and development; it is another for those ambitions to lead to reciprocal outcomes.

Ubuntu presents a framing of reciprocity that encourages direct engagement with research practices, shifting the priority from material outcomes and artifacts to community-researcher relations that enable an environment of flourishing and innovation. Compensation plays a significant role in creating the conditions for this environment, especially in low-income settings. We cannot divorce the role financial exchange plays in our research practice in such contexts, the effects of which filter through the entire research process.

When we consider institutional constraints, academic projects with communities rely on a grant system that influences all forms of payment in the research project, including compensation. The academy is structured around grant cycles, overheads, and publication outputs, which are inherently extractive economies. These include bounded time frames and budgets that are often fundamentally incompatible with restorative ones [136]. The tension here is how we can budget for "unconditional payment" (Section 5.1) in a canceled or postponed workshop, or a "community legacy/solidarity fund" (Section 5.4) within an academic context that demands line-item budget specificity and limits on participant incentives to minimize coercion. Researchers who are concerned about this risk becoming brokers trying to implement a justice-oriented model within a system premised on extraction, which can lead to opting for creative accounting or personal financial sacrifice. This can lead to activist burnout [79, 133] and is not a sustainable or scalable solution. The efforts to address these tensions should be directed towards the institutional process. This should include advocating for "justice overheads" in grants, reforming IRBs to include community representatives, and approving budgets that prioritize long-term reciprocal benefit in the relevant research circumstances [123] (See Principles for Institutions). The issue of inter-community power dynamics should not be disregarded here, but it potentially shifts the way we as researchers can begin encapsulating a relational approach to our projects.

6.2 Navigating internalized coloniality and community heterogeneity

Perhaps one of the most uncomfortable tensions to grapple with and reflect on is the ways in which neoliberal precarity shapes our research engagements. What communities need, and the time frame within which they need it, is not up to researchers to determine [130]. Their demands may be shaped by the socio-economic circumstances, which may be in contrast to what a researcher collaborator deems "better". For instance, if a community member requests financial payments instead of funding a community-owned data server, who are we as researchers to insist on the latter? *We* may consider it to be for communal good and beneficial over the long-term, but this insistence may itself produce a colonial dynamic of arrogance and resemble paternalistic impulses [108]. On the other hand, unquestioning acceptance of monetary demands, while aware of the reinforcement of the precarious gig-like dependency, can be seen as outsourcing our ethical responsibility. We risk becoming a funder of extraction and merely giving communities "what they want." Navigating the murky space of respecting immediate and expressed needs and fostering long-term, community sovereignty and relationships is the challenge for the collaboration. There is a risk of embodying the researcher-as-savior role if this is not managed delicately [4]. This requires critical reflexivity and a deliberate engagement with the underlying theory guiding research practices, in this case, Ubuntu, and what it means practically for the research relations. Ubuntu does not provide an easy answer, though. What it does is offer us a process to navigate it. That is an essential step to incorporating a relational philosophy into our research practice. It does not produce a definitive and prescriptive outcome, but rather it opens up a communal perspective, facilitating critical consciousness and transparency. From which we can begin creating ways to foster shared future-building and mutual care.

7 Operationalizing Ubuntu and Relationality: A Framework for Ethical Research Economies in HCI

When introducing theory as a basis for interventions, one can run into the risk of using "off the shelf" theories that are convenient, yet ill-adapted for other contexts [102, 137]. The previous tensions represent not mere abstraction but are an invitation to create alternative modes of relational engagement, with the foundational support of relational philosophies. In order to expand the utility of Ubuntu and other relational philosophies within HCI research as an ethical guide to compensatory practices, we introduce concrete responses for researchers, institutions, and the CHI community as 10 guiding principles.

For Researchers—A New Relational Praxis

Principle 1: Honor the sacredness of the exchange

- Compensate presence, not performance.
- Honor the time reserved unconditionally.
- Recognize inherent worth and dignity
- Budget a contingency fund for unexpected and unavoidable disruptions to the research engagements.

Principle 2: Co-design the terms of exchange.

- Facilitate a community dialogue to collectively define what constitutes valuable compensation, which should include an exploration of non-monetary options (infrastructure, skills training, media exposure)[14].

[14] Kleine [83] provides a useful breakdown of resources and their relationship to agency.

- Consider the language used in communications and framing of the project and engagements.
- Participatory budgeting should take place during project initiation.
- Deliberate on the efficacy of individual honoraria, community-directed investments, and hybrid models in the community context.

Principle 3: Audit for relational impact.

- Consider the potential tensions and inequality that could result because of the project, e.g., recruitment of the same group (convenience) or reinforcing power hierarchies within the community.
- Co-design protocols that encourage rotation of not only co-designers themselves, but also the leadership during different project phases.
- Explore contributions towards community-wide initiatives, e.g., supporting local libraries and recreational areas, when individualistic models are untenable.

Principle 4: Embrace relational accountability.

- Consider how the community-researcher relationship evolves after the activities of the project are concluded.
- Co-design a post-project relational plan that includes regular communication and updates, e.g., after a community event or a presentation at a conference.

For Institutions—Restructuring the Research Economy

Principle 5: Mandate "justice overheads" in grants.

- Restorative Funding Models: Grants must budget for long-term community technology infrastructure and the hosting and preservation of their data.
- Funders should also require a line item that budgets for community-determined legacy projects.

Principle 6: Decolonize IRBs.

- Include community elders in ethics review, not just academics.
- Collaborate on formalizing a community-based framework that the community can always turn to and leverage in their engagements with any researcher/institution collaborator [130].
- Ensure that representatives of the geographies of the communities are involved in the formulation and approval of protocols, with opportunities to veto any extractive approaches and approve context-specific compensation plans.

Principle 7: Recognize relational labor.

- Research institutions should value and reward the significant, often invisible, relational labor that community-centered research requires in criteria for career advancement, moving beyond counting publications.

For the CHI Community—Shifting Norms

Principle 8: Introduce a "Compensatory Ethics" statement.

- Require authors to disclose participant benefit-sharing in submissions [113].
- Require authors, especially in research involving "human subjects", to include a subsection or statement detailing how compensation was determined, who was involved in the decision, and how the project tangibly benefits the community beyond publication, where appropriate.

Principle 9: Create additional review criteria.

- Evaluate appropriate papers on relational ethics, not just technical novelty.
- Consider "Relational Ethics and Justice" as a potential formal review criterion for relevant papers, which appraises fairness, inclusivity, and long-term thinking about the community engagement.

Principle 10: Center marginalized expertise.

- Actively include and fund community organizers, ethicists, and activists from the Global South, and Indigenous scholars within the conference location context to be keynote speakers, panelists, and lead workshops and relational experiences.
- Consider and support efforts that can expand the ways of knowing and being within the HCI community (e.g., the SIGCHI Development Fund), recognizing the knowledge that may be considered alternative within academic spaces.

7.1 Practical considerations

These principles provide a guide to the relational design of a compensatory framework for research engagements with low-income communities. As with many community engagement guidelines, there are complexities and nuances to consider in the diverse spectrum of HCI work.

7.1.1 Applying the principles in diverse HCI activities. Firstly, co-design approaches can take different forms, and as such require refined applications of the principles. This includes accounting for long-term and short-term engagements, online interactions, and technology trial or in-situ studies [15]. In Table 1 we illustrate the application of our principles within these scenarios, demonstrating that a relational approach is not a one-size-fits-all model, but a flexible ethos that must be contextually adapted. For instance, in a one-off workshop, the principle of "Compensate Presence, Not Performance" might manifest as paying participants in full even if the session ends early. In contrast, for a long-term co-design project, the same principle evolves into providing stipends and paid leave for core community researchers, acknowledging their

[15]We purposefully do not use the phrase "in-the-wild", which has been critiqued for its colonial undertones [132]

Table 1: Application of Principles Across Research Contexts

Research Context	Application of Principles	Principles Applied
One-Off Workshop	Co-design payment form (cash/vouchers); pay for time reserved, not data quality; share findings back.	1, 2, 3, 4
Short-Term Study (2-6 weeks)	Hybrid model: individual honoraria and community fund; pay for canceled sessions; transparent data agreements.	1, 2, 3, 4
Long-Term Co-Design (6+ months)	Stipends for co-researchers; community-owned IP; capacity building; co-authorship.	1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 10
Technology Trial / In Situ Studies	Pay for commitment period, not usage; ensure technology becomes a community asset; plan for local support.	1, 3, 4
Remote/Online Engagement	Participatory budgeting; pay upon commitment; pool funds for collective goals; transparent communication	1, 2, 4

sustained intellectual labor. The core commitment is to replace unilateral, transactional decisions with co-designed, context-sensitive exchanges that honor the dignity and contribution of all involved.

7.1.2 Preventing new inequities. Secondly, we acknowledge a valid concern that shifting to community-level compensation risks creating new inequities through elite capture or mismanagement. Evidence from environmental justice contexts demonstrates this danger clearly. As research on African carbon markets in livestock sectors reveals, community funds often "lack standardization and transparency" and may be "controlled by a local community leader" without meaningful community oversight [76, p. 32]. In some cases, certain decisions could privilege certain community interests over others. For example, preferring not to include direct cash transfers to participants, instead "rely[ing] heavily on conflating monetary benefits with non-monetary 'co-benefits' [76, p. 32]", a dynamic that could privilege certain community interests over others.

This evidence reinforces why our framework emphasizes co-design and transparent governance rather than simply replacing individual payments with communal funds. The carbon market scenario suggests that requirements on participatory processes ensuring local stakeholders are actively present in co-designing the exchange are more crucial than specific benefit-sharing formulas. Community-managed funds are not a panacea; therefore, our approach centres on community-determined governance structures that prevent the concentration of benefits and maintain accountability to all participants. The specific form of these structures–individual payment, communal infrastructure, or hybrid models–must be determined through democratic community processes that weigh immediate needs (e.g., food) against long-term investments (e.g., WiFi infrastructure).

7.1.3 Researcher workload and capacity. Implementing relational compensation as we propose here undoubtedly requires additional labor, from facilitating community dialogues to managing more complex payment structures. For early-career researchers or those without administrative support, this creates real constraints. We advocate for two approaches here: First, start small by applying one principle at a time rather than overhauling entire research protocols. Second, advocate for institutional support as suggested in Principle 10 through dedicated staff positions, like community engagement managers, and revised grant structures that explicitly budget for relational labor time. We do not want to ignore the unrecognised labour that factors into the work of relational design practices and, as such, advocate for a considered and phased approach to adopting new models. This approach requires more time and relational labor from researchers, challenging academic incentive structures–itself a systemic issue that needs addressing.

8 Conclusion

Compensation in HCI is not merely a line item in a budget, but a fundamental reflection of power and justice in community-engaged research. This paper has critiqued how transactional models commodify participation, creating a "gig" economy that exploits precarity and obscures the true value of community knowledge and relationships. Through analytic vignettes, we have exposed the resulting tensions: where a researcher's canceled workshop potentially triggers a household financial predicament, and where well-intentioned payments foster dependency rather than partnership.

To navigate these challenges, we have argued for a paradigm shift from transactional extraction to relational research economies, grounded in the southern African philosophy of Ubuntu. Our framework re-centers compensation as a practice of mutual accountability, long-term benefit, and shared sovereignty over data and design. Adopting this framework thus necessitates a dual commitment: to redesign our compensation models *and* to critically re-evaluate the temporal and methodological norms of HCI itself, moving from short-term, researcher-driven cycles to long-term, community-co-designed partnerships.

In offering this work, we provide the HCI community with three core contributions: a critical language to name the coloniality in current practices, a decolonial philosophy to guide ethical action, and a practical framework to operationalize change. This is not a final prescription, but a vital starting point. We call on researchers, institutions, and conferences to adopt these principles where appropriate, to co-design their research economies with communities, and to build a future for HCI where our methods honor the dignity

of all collaborators. Where our partnerships are defined not by what we take, but by what we become, together.

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