"Community" in Review from an International Perspective: A Snapshot Examination of Its History, Salient Issues, Creation and Development in Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, and Latin America

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Abstract: This paper examines the concept of community and its various aspects from an international perspective. This is the second article to introduce the inaugural issue of this journal. The first article *"Community" in Review: A Snapshot Examination of Its History, Salient Issues, Creation and Development in the United States,"* delved into the issues, challenges, and conceptualization of community from a U.S. lens. This second article examines mostly the same aspects of community as the first article, but focuses on communities in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South and Latin America. Like the first article on the U.S., the main purpose of this paper is to provide an in-depth discussion of both the physical and social components of communities to highlight their central role to both people and society. In addition, this paper explores the various research methodologies used to investigate communities in these different regions, and highlights how these methods have been employed to advance communities. Approaches to Community development, the different types of challenges international communities experience, and how these communities interact with society from a mico, meso, and macro perspective are discussed. Finally, a brief overview of the limitations for the current paper is provided, and potential avenues for future research are suggested.

Keywords: International communities, development, challenges, research methods, society.

INTRODUCTION

Community has been an important component of research, activism, and social connection in the United States and the entire world. The article, *"Community" in Review: A Snapshot Examination of Its History, Salient Issues, Creation and Development in the United States*, which is also published in this issue, discusses several important issues relating to communities but in the context of the U.S. The present article examines the same issues but in an international context covering Europe, Africa, Asia, and South America. Like the U.S., international community scholars have examined various issues including developing a community resilience index in England (Camacho *et al.* 2024), community participation in rural China (Zhang, 2024), health promotion and the use of community capital in Taiwan (Hou 2024), and community participation and decision-making on maternal health services in 102 low to middle income countries (Cocoman *et al.* 2025).

The main goal of this paper is to provide an in-depth overview of communities, examining how they are defined, researched, characterized, developed, and their challenges from an international perspective. Thus, this article generally follows the structure of the U.S. article by investigating the same areas of focus. Communities that exist in Asia, Europe, or Africa are very different compared to communities found in the U.S. Therefore, to present a complete picture of community dynamics for the first issue of this journal, the decision to write a second article that specifically focuses on international communities is warranted.

Like the U.S. article, part I includes a discussion of how communities are defined, community research from a historical perspective, an explanation of different types of communities, and an exploration of why communities are important in any society. Part II examines the research methodologies used by international scholars to study communities. Part III investigates how community challenges are addressed, examining possible solutions, and understanding community building and development internationally. Part IV discusses how communities are connected to different societal levels, including the government, from local to national governments, and other organizations and institutions.

PART I: DEFINITION, HISTORY, TYPES, AND IMPORTANCE

Defining International Communities

On an international level, communities share several definitional features, including a group of people with shared experiences that have some form of social interactions. Communities also include people

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who have a sense of belonging or a shared identity as well. Communities generally include geographic proximity, but this only applies to place-based communities. Communities also tend to assemble to provide support and assistance. A community in Europe is largely linked to religion, politics, tradition, and geography, particularly earlier iterations of community. According to Spierling and Halvorson (2008), early modern European communities were defined by religion, political authority, rituals, shared memories and beliefs, and either rigid or flexible community boundaries. More recent European communities are generally defined by a shared ethnicity, culture, beliefs, geography, and identity, where most people emphasize belonging, trust, and cultural awareness when defining a community. Many people in Europe see the community as much more than physical proximity (Bandesha and Litva 2005).

Across Asia, communities are generally based on culture, geographic area, and functionality of services. An Asian community consists of people with shared norms and values who emphasize family ties and religion. There is a strong sense of collaboration with community development, public health concerns, and issues surrounding conservation efforts. In contrast to most European communities, Asian communities emphasize location where people live and are served by local resources and services, along with the social aspects of community, such as belonging and shared identity (Jaafar *et al.* 2021; Mahmud *et al.* 2015).

Like Asian communities, African communities emphasize shared norms, geography, beliefs and the importance of family ties. African communities also focus on solidarity, collective identity, interdependence, community membership and well-being (Intech open). An emphasis on the collective as opposed to the individual is clear in both African and Asian communities. Traditions are important and play a key role in most African communities with an emphasis on rituals. Thus, a sense of community is deeply ingrained where expectations of participation and the adoption of the community as a shared whole is essential. African communities are also characterized by relational ties, with many communities consisting of extended families in villages. Given the importance of villages and other informal settlements in defining communities, geographic location is a key feature of communities (Appiah 2020; Fontana, Peverelli and Giacomazzi 2022; Wissing *et al.* 2020).

Latin American and South American communities extend beyond geography and are generally defined by a shared culture, beliefs, norms of reciprocity and participation, and inclusivity of diverse cultures and peoples. However, community definitions are shaped by political history, inequalities, including ethnicity and social class, indigenous identities and communality; thus, there are some variations depending on the region or country. Overall, Latin American and South American communities emphasize social cohesion and shared beliefs along with high levels of participation and engagement. Communities are often built around an identity tied to ethnicity, exclusion or marginalization, and political actions. Communities emphasize shared space and location, and shared needs based on space, such as health care services and education (Mesa, Nores, and Vega 2021; Tonon 2017).

History of International Community Research

Research on communities in Europe began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries among several disciplines. Various issues, such as social structure, social class, migration and immigration, urbanization, families, and labor were explored by European scholars using community or neighborhood levels (Griffen 2016). By mid-20th century, research focused more on community building research and how to address government policies, damage, and displacement due to the aftermath of both world wars. In addition, comparative community research became popular as well with a focus on cross-national comparisons to inform a more broadly theory on communities (International Sociological Association 1983). Subfields in sociology, specifically urban and neighborhood studies and social history, began emphasizing the importance of neighborhood social ties and community identity and belonging. Community-based social ties and how they evolved over time became more studied with an emphasis on migration, work commute, and impact on communal relationships (Garrioch and Peel 2006). Several research areas have been explored in more recent years among European scholars, including, but not limited to community discourse, multiculturalism, ties that involve multiple communities and places, and migration. To better understand discourse and the relationship between identity, belonging, and community, scholars have looked to various methodologies, such as oral history, ethnography, and observational methods (Couperus and Kaal 2016).

Early community research in Asia mainly consisted of case studies drawing from anthropological and rural

studies (Bayley 2008; Wu 2009). However, community research aimed to support government/colonial needs, development, and services (Nuttavuthisit, Jindahra, and Prasarnphanich 2015). After WWII, community development became a major focus of research in Asia, and participatory research that involved community organizations were key. Also important were community projects that emphasized health and health education (Hossain *et al*. 2004). East Asian research emphasized culture along with globalization, modernization, politics, and democracy during times of uncertainty (Ku, Wang, and Choi 2022). Recently, research has shifted away from community development and participatory methods due to imbalanced power relationships between scholars and community organizations. Present research in Asia emphasizes transnationalism, urbanization, unofficial settlements, and migration patterns (Pawar 2009).

There are similarities between Asia and African community research, particularly for early research. Because of colonialism, early African community research relied on anthropological case studies that emphasized colonial administration, public health, and missionaries. Research heavily focused on traditional culture, kinship ties, and social structure as it related to colonial rule. Also, like Asian research, African community research shifted to an interest in community development participation to address infrastructure, rural development, health, and education. However, questions of power imbalances and whether community participation provided meaningful information led the shift away from development toward research focused on agency within African communities. More recent research focuses on the resistance, adaptability, and the reshaping and negotiations of developmental policies that impact communities, such as natural resource exploitation (Shanguhyia 2022). Finally, present community research trends include utilizing approaches or methods that are more indigenous, post-colonial, and participatory in nature, along with a focus on urban life and inequality in cities (Schmidt and Arthur 2018).

South and Latin American community research was also influenced by colonialization, but by the middle of the 20th century, anticolonial sociology began a movement toward Participatory Action research as a new methodology. Also, Latin American sociology grew rapidly during this time in opposition to Western or American sociology. Sociology became the framework to examine community, identity, autonomy, and local studies. Recent research that explores Latin American communities focuses on the importance of democracy and identity, decolonialization, community health, informal settlements, indigenous communities, the rights of indigenous groups, social movements, and the growth of urbanization (Maia 2025; Zabludovsky 2024). Moreover, Latin American sociologists are denouncing Western theories in favor of developing theories that more aligns with Latin American life and ideology (Elizaga 2006).

Historical and present research across these regions do share some similarities that are worth noting. Historically, research often began with ethnographic observations and case studies of rural areas and small villages. Research was also used to support colonial governance. However, community research shifted toward community based participatory research, but critiques of power imbalances emerged from all regions. Research interests on globalization, migration, urbanization, and identity were common in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Post-colonization influenced how community research was conceptualized in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Research currently emphasizes local culture and knowledge, indigenous groups, identity, and rights, and other post-colonial ideological shifts.

Types of Communities

European research reveals several different ways of classifying communities. However, and most commonly, scholars use the terms urban, suburban, and rural communities to describe different communities and regions in Europe. The distinction between these three types of communities is based on population density (Eurostat 2024). Some studies also consider certain characteristics of communities, including how disadvantaged a community is, the degree of social connectivity (social and community bonds), and the community's infrastructure (availability of services, public health, transportation) to differentiate between different types of communities (Tocchi, Pittore, and Polese 2025). Other methods used to classify communities in Europe include applying a hierarchical structure to urban-rural areas or using the degree of remoteness to make an urban-rural distinction among communities. The hierarchical structure of communities considers both the size and functionality of the community, exploring the potential for population growth, how connected the community is, the administrative status, and function, such as whether the community is a centralized location that includes a wealth of services (Korcelli, Korcelli-

Olejniczak, and Kozubek 2008). Using degree of remoteness to determine whether a community is rural or urban takes into consideration spatial isolation, proximity to services, and population density (Eurostat 2024).

Typologies used in Asian scholarship mainly focus on distinguishing between village and small town/city communities, or between strictly rural (farming) communities, urban areas/major cities, and rural-urban hybrid communities, which are rural farming areas that exist alongside major urban areas (Cairns 2018; Jones and Dommaraju 2012). Hybrid communities create a diverse economic landscape as income is acquired through both farming and corporate industries (Cairns 2018). Village or rural communities are characterized by low population density, strong kinship ties, traditional culture, and an agrarian economy, while city communities have weaker kinship ties, increased social mobility, and a varied economy (Jones and Dommaraju 2012). Finally, other typologies characterize Asian communities based on socio-economic and political landscapes. Examples offered by Inoguchi (2017) include determining whether a community is based on a materialism or post-materialism ideology, or how the community is structured politically, such as whether the community is dominated by the public sector or other sectors.

African research on community typology is based on physical space or the function of the community. The majority of Africa is classified as rural villages, characterized by incomplete infrastructure, farming as the main source of livelihood for residents and the village's economy, shared land, and strong kinship ties (Lunt *et al*. 2018). However, Africa has also experienced a dramatic increase in urbanization resulting in informal communities within urban areas, which are also referred to as slums. These large urban communities are characterized as having a high population density along with a large amount of poverty (Weimann and Oni 2019). Other places are typified as urban periphery communities, or those areas that are in between urban and rural villages. These areas consist of many indigenous farmers who have lost their land due to urban development. Many factors have contributed to the negative outcomes for these farmers, including a lack of intervention from the government and local municipality (Mohammed, Kosa, and Juhar 2020). Academic scholarship also characterizes African communities according to their function as opposed to geographic location. Some of these communities include social savings and investment groups, or

Chamas in Kenya (Agesa and Agesa 2025), and scholarship communities (higher education institutions) that work with outside communities to establish civil engagement, such creating student internships (Hjortsø *et al*. 2025).

There are some similarities in the types of communities found in South and Latin Americas, Asia, and African. There are urban areas or cities, gated or closed-style communities, informal settlements, informal/formal hybrid communities, urban-rural circulation type communities. While not communities per say, Santos and colleagues (2023) identified several types of cities based environmental patterns, socioeconomic status, and social variables across 11 Latin American countries. A study that looked at gated communities in Brazil and characterized them as fortified enclaves as opposed to a community integrated with other surrounding municipalities. These communities are isolated, and researchers classify them according to degree of accessibility, their distance from the nearest city, and socioeconomic status (Costa *et al*. 2014). Favelas, or informal settlements are differentiated from formal-informal hybrid communities that are a combination of formal and informal housing or settlements. Some of these communities are upgraded favelas as state interventions have produced some infrastructure, invested economically into the community, and have created a more appealing location to draw people to move into them. However, these the investment of these communities have erased traditional culture and have driven indigenous groups out creating gentrification (Comelli, Anguelovski, and Chu 2018; Serapião 2016). As a result, more indigenous people are relocating to urban areas, thus creating what is termed in the literature "indigenous urbanization" and inhabiting informal settlements that are the most impoverished areas of a city. Common communal patterns among indigenous groups are urban-rural circulation. Examining Amazonian communities that are rural, but also have ties to urban areas and may live in housing in both areas. This is also a hybrid community where some uphold dual residence, while others may change residence. Regardless, these hybrid communities are fluid among indigenous people (Del Popolo *et al*. 2007; Peluso 2015).

Virtual Communities

Virtual communities may be based on shared interests or linked to a specific place, and are commonplace globally, particularly in developed

nations. These communities consist of a group of people who engage due to a shared interest and such interactions are largely supported using the internet (Porter 2004). While not bound by physical location and interaction, virtual communities are still important sources of support, collaboration, bonding, and exchange of ideas and information (Ridings and Gefen 2004). Nonetheless, there are other virtual communities that are linked to physical locations, including city government/official or community-based websites that enable residents to interact and communicate, especially over issues surrounding a community, neighborhood, or city. Virtual communities have become a part of everyday life for many individuals and have allowed for additional means for people to participate and become more civically engaged (Harris and Abedin 2016).

Many virtual communities in Europe are interest-based, however, there is also a major virtual presence of location-based or "hyperlocal" communities, particularly activist groups that aim to change negative aspects of their communities or nations, neighborhood or community forums and discussion groups, community interest groups and networks (Bingham-Hall 2017; Ognyanova *et al*. 2013) Europe has a strong digital infrastructure where nations are connected through education and research. The GÉANT is a network that connects educational institutions across Europe, yielding a vast virtual community that supports the sharing of science and culture across borders. Hence, European scholars have been considered both the creators and sustaining body for virtual communities (GÉANT 2024; Leimeister and Balaji 2024). Virtual communities have long been a part of Europe's socially innovative thinking, offering vast support for all forms of such communities.

East Asia has particularly seen a growth in virtual communities based on interest and local community building purposes. Qiu *et al*. (2016) suggest that messaging groups are popular in Asia and reveal how integrated these communities are for Asians. Messaging groups, such as WeChat, are used for various reasons, and may be a brief group discussing a single event, while other groups are long-term and involve daily discussions, shared interests, and support. Specialized virtual communities that are centered around those with disabilities, such as those who are deaf, or those who are neurodivergent are significant in Asia. These communities have been found to be positive among this group by providing an inclusive space not always found offline. Other

specialized communities include those centered around Asian youth who use online forums, such as Weibo, to build group cohesion, collective identities, and discussions on intergenerational conflict (Zhang and Ji 2023). In addition to interest and specialized communities, several virtual communities are based on physical location. For instance, Li and colleagues (2025) show online forums and platforms play a major role in connecting communities in urban areas. These virtual spaces provide ways for people to form social bonds and increase community cohesion by enabling residents to share information on events, services, and safety issues, and online platforms are also a way to plan local activities and events. Finally, a study conducted in China reveals a positive impact of virtual communities with urban respondents reporting an increase in community cohesion. However, results further show that there is still a positive impact with offline community interaction. Thus, it appears virtual communities and offline interactions reinforce and support each other.

An investigation of virtual communities also reveals the digital divide among poor, underdeveloped areas in the world, including in Europe, Asia, African, South and Latin Americas, and the United States. Many structural barriers are present in Africa, including limited access to bandwidth, an unreliable infrastructure, along with digital illiteracy among residents and the sheer cost of technology, which hinders the opportunity to create and engage in virtual communities. Virtual communities hold a lot of potential for younger Africans regarding making connections with others, sharing information, and support, but making accessibility more equal is the challenge (Counted and Arawole 2016). However, in areas where the Internet is available, virtual communities are a positive presence. Africa, like Europe, participates in education and research networks around the world. For example, RedCLARA is a Latin American network that is linked to African networks, such as ASREN. Thus, international collaboration can be established through these virtual communities that open possibilities of scholarly exchange (GÉANT n.d.). In smaller areas, virtual communities tend to be place-based with an emphasis on community networks. Because of the structural challenges of digital accessibility, many smaller places form smaller, community-level networks that are locally governed or grassroots-owned that allow residents to engage, share, and participate in their communities. These types of networks also help to buffer the impacts of any natural, social, or economic disasters, providing

a means to support entire communities (Mulligan, Gadh Kumar, and Berti 2025).

Regions in South and Latin Americas face digital inequality, thus not every community and its residents are able to participate in virtual communities and reap their benefits. There are strong scholarly virtual communities that have enabled collaboration and the sharing of research across these nations. These virtual communities are organized by academic groups and other interest groups to disseminate knowledge across all borders aiming to eliminate both geographic and resource inequalities (Silvio n.d.). The rise of health-based virtual communities, such as the Virtual Health Library, has provided access to key information, including healthcare providers and institutions. This virtual community enables open access to information across Latin America, thus serving as a network for health professionals and the public ("Virtual Health Library" n.d.). Like in African communities, community networks also play a major role in this region. Virtual community networks have provided vast benefits ranging from health to economic information and support to underserved areas (Baca *et al*. 2018). Grassroots organizations have used technology for community development purposes to equip those with the skills and equipment to become digitally literate. These organizations have established community centers equipped with computers, education in digital literacy, and information on how to become a digital citizen, in impoverished, underserved areas (Recode 2024). Gleducar, an educational community in Argentina, has created a virtual community that links students, educators, and activists to decentralize education (Free Knowledge Institute 2011).

Globally, virtual communities serve many functions and provide vast benefits from inclusivity, connectivity, and education. While barriers do remain in many regions of the world, community- led or grassroots organizations create local-based virtual communities to address issues central to that specific area. However, research in this area is clear - virtual communities reveal the importance of technology for the daily lives of many people (Counted and Arawole 2016; GÉANT 2024; Li *et al*. 2025; Mulligan, Gadh Kumar, and Berti 2025).

Physical & Natural Aspects of Communities

The physical and natural aspects of communities are similar, but also variable across the world. Many factors impact communities, including topography, climate, vegetation, soil quality, ecological systems, the presence of rivers, lakes, coasts, and mountains, natural hazard risks, land use, and the built environment. European communities are highly influenced by the natural environment, such as proximity to green space, despite the impacts from robust built environments. For instance, people who live close to natural outdoor environments, but also live in European cities that are considered high population density, are not deterred. If people are living close to these natural areas, they are more likely to use them, and report increased physical activity (Binner *et al*. 2024; Hincks *et al*. 2023; Smith *et al*. 2017; Triguero-Mas *et al*. 2017). However, Europe is a vastly different continent where the natural environment varies for each community depending on country and region. Thus, hazard risks, climate, soil quality, and the built environment all impact the many different communities found in Europe, and these variations mean diverse health and accessibility outcomes, along with some communities having strong infrastructure features, while others are poorly built and maintained. These differences in the natural environment also impact where communities are developed. Factors, including elevation, soil quality, fault activity, and the amount of precipitation influence whether a community can be built and thrive in that area (Binner *et al*. 2024; Estreguil, Caudullo, and de Rigo 2014; Hincks *et al*. 2023). Overall, European communities are just as much shaped by the built environment, or the presence of man-made buildings, roads, bridges, tunnels, and so forth as it is the available green spaces that promote physical activity.

In Asian communities, the natural environment restricts what communities can do due to conservation efforts, hazard risks, climate, terrain, or ecosystems. The physical environment generally determines settlement resilience, thus availability of space, the type of space and land, and the ability to build are key factors in creating a sustainable human community (Jafaar *et al*. 2023; Zhong, Chen, and Yan, 2023). Communities built near hazardous terrain must deal with the potential for environmental disasters, such as landslides or mudslides. The impacts are devastating as whole communities can be eliminated with one single event (Xia and Dong 2019). Hence, the physical environment determines where and how people live and communities are created and maintained, such as the ability to implement any infrastructure or built features (Jafaar *et al*. 2023; Zhong, Chen, and Yan, 2023).

The development of communities in Africa, like Asia, are highly dependent on the physical environment. The natural or physical environment determines where crops can grow (soil quality) and access to water sources. Thus, communities can only be inhabited if people can live sustainably in that area (Bettencourt and Marchio 2023; Ryan *et al*. 2015; Salami, von Meding, and Giggins 2017). Additional environmental constraints include soil degradation, pollution, disease, and proximity to wildlife, where protected areas are inaccessible (Pereira *et al*. 2024). These constraints impact infrastructure development, access to services, and quality of life for citizens. Communities and their residents are also influenced by resource exploitation, which leads to deforestation, soil degradation, air and water pollution, and potential population growth (Ryan *et al*. 2015).

South America has endured a lot of changes due to human land use, indigenous burning and fire regimes, climate, vegetation changes, and European ranching and logging over one thousand years. Human land use, such as burning, ranching and logging, and creating pastures for livestock have led to physical changes in the physical landscape for South American communities (Nanavati *et al*. 2022). Also, natural land cover has been degraded or eliminated due to human land use, thus prompting environmental changes for many communities, including changes in water sources, food sources, elimination of green spaces, microclimate, or climate changes in smaller areas, and other ecosystem changes (Zalles *et al*. 2021). For South America, communities have undergone much change in the physical or natural environment, which can negatively impact communities and the quality of life for their citizens.

The Importance of Communities

There are several factors that make communities important, and for many regions across the world the dynamics are similar. Communities enable its residents to receive services and the opportunity to have a role in civic engagement that can result in policy change, residents in a community can be supportive of each other, the social institutions serving them, and of public policies if mutual trust is established. Resources can be shared, residents would help and support each other, which in turn increases social capital, well-being, and promotes better health outcomes. Communities serve as social support networks during times of disaster, thus enabling shared adaptation and coping. Communities can also provide a buffer to alleviate the

impact of poverty, marginalization, other inequalities, and weak social structures or systems (Cramm and Nieboer 2011; Delhey and Dragolov 2016; Eurofound 2024; Mpanje *et al*. 2022; Vincens, Emmelin, and Stafström 2018).

Community research conducted in Europe reveals the importance of social cohesion, and how communities can foster cohesion, mutual trust, and networks. Citizens from more cohesive communities report better physical and mental health, higher levels of happiness, and increased life satisfaction (Delhey and Dragolov 2016). However, social cohesion has been found to be impacted by the housing system that is in place in a community, and the role housing plays is key to community cohesion. For instance, housing policies that increase poverty, create segregation, and are not supportive of demographic changes erode social cohesion in a community, which results in poorer outcomes for residents (European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2007). Finally, healthy communities in Europe are characterized by political participation and civic engagement, which also results in developing a trust in the social institutions that serve the community. These communities are also found to be more inclusive compared to communities that are not politically or civically engaged (Eurofound 2024).

Notably important in Asian communities are how social norms are shared among citizens. Peer influences and social networks create accountability for others to follow norms and expectations, including health and hygiene practices. Research conducted in India reveals a positive association between social interactions and toileting. Thus, if other community members and neighbors are consistently using the toilet and practicing better sanitation, this influences others to do the same (Ashraf 2023). Communities are also important for health outcomes and the health services they provide. For example, Hu and Feng (2025) suggest that access to community services that promote health, such as direct health services or places to exercise and engage in other recreational activities is related to adopting a healthy lifestyle, improved health and well-being among older adults. Moreover, communities play a key role in bridging the gap between remote areas and the healthcare system. Community health workers in several Asian countries work to improve the health of such communities by providing health education and implementing public health measures that improve the health of many Asian communities (Jongdeepaisal *et al*. 2024).

Communities are important in Africa for the social capital they provide. Communities provide social capital, enables residents to cope with disasters and other crises, provides resilience, particularly for impoverished communities (Mpanje *et al*. 2022). Moreover, communities with social capital are related to positive health and health behaviors among residents (Cramm and Nieboer 2011), and better overall outcomes, including reduced poverty, occur when Africans engage in a practice that intertwine different communities join to combine resources. These intertwined communities are called "socially complex districts," and are common in rural areas (Scuderi *et al*. 2023). African communities rely on their community's social capital for networking, bonding, and facing adversity, and social capital is extremely vital for informal communities as it is the central source of resilience, coping, and aid (Mpanje *et al*. 2022). Social capital is related to increased health education and higher engagement in preventative health behaviors among residents, which characterizes a healthier community. Like Asian communities, African communities also provide social norms and expectations for its citizens. Thus, interactions with others in the community create influence for individuals to engage in better health practices (Cramm and Nieboer 2011).

Like other regions across the world, social capital is important for the health of South American communities. Social capital is found to serve as a buffer on the impact income inequality has on health. Societies that have higher levels of social capital include trust among community members, which has a positive relationship with self-reported health (Vincens, Emmelin, and Stafström 2018). Community participation is important for health outcomes as well. Communities that have accessible health services and outreach programs are related to positive health outcomes, but communities that are more equitable tend to have the most positive outcomes. Moreover, the impact of social capital is stronger for communities that belong to areas characterized by equality (Bernal-Ordoñez *et al*. 2024; Vincens, Emmelin, and Stafström 2018). For poorer communities that are marginalized and lack access to services and other important institutions, citizens rely on their social networks and neighbors. Such networks are a safety net in the absence of services and play a fundamental role in helping those who are sick or in need. Network members may provide emotional support, instrumental support, and financial support (Martínez-Martínez and Rodríguez-Brito 2020).

PART II: RESEARCH METHODS UTILIZED IN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY RESEARCH

There are many different and commonly used methodologies that researchers employ to study international community dynamics. The case study method or comparative case study provides a detailed exploration of at least one community, if not multiple communities to assess similarities and differences. While this type of methodology has limitations, including researcher bias, limited to no generalizability, and accessibility to documents and other materials that are factual and backed by resources, there are several strengths as well. Case studies can generate in-depth details of the community characteristics, dynamics, and its residents, this method may be used to generate theory allowing for an inductive approach, and case studies enable researchers to examine topics that either lack prior research or where little is know about the phenomena under study (Yin 2018). This methodology (along with employing a mixed methods approach) has been used to explore mental health care planning across different countries, specifically England and Wales (see Simpson *et al*. 2015). Yet, some critics argue that the limitations of using case studies or comparative case studies can be mitigated with the use of mixed methods, such as pairing case studies with survey data (Sakata, Oketch, and Candappa 2020).

Qualitative methods, such as participant observation, focus groups, interviews, and ethnography, have also been used to study communities across the globe. One example of research that utilizes qualitative methods (the authors employed interviews and observation) to understand skilled birth attendance and improve maternal and neonatal health outcomes in Mozambique (Cole *et al*. 2018). Qualitative methods typically involve collecting narrative data through observations and interviews to capture rich, in-depth details about community dynamics, such as interactions, culture and norms, attitudes, and behaviors. Participation and interviews enable researchers to capture distinctions that are specific to the community under investigation and allows for the possibility of unexpected findings that bolster findings. Yet, qualitative methods do have limitations. Researcher bias may occur during observations and interpretations. Qualitative methods tend to be time intensive and requires a lot of resources. Moreover, qualitative methods cannot establish a standardized comparison for cross-cultural research. Thus, employing mixed methods can be used to overcome the limitations of qualitative methods

(Denzin and Lincoln 2018; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019; Maxwell 2013).

Quantitative methods generally include collecting numerical data via surveys or questionnaires. Survey data on communities from different regions of the world may be either a cross-sectional design or a longitudinal design (panel data). A cross-sectional design collects data at only one time point, while a longitudinal design collects data at multiple time points. Both designs are excellent to measure attitudes, behaviors, and the demographics of community residents (Fowler 2013). If standardized survey measures are utilized, cross-cultural comparisons can be generated allowing researchers to assess similarities and differences and other relationships (Harkness and Presser 2004). Surveys can reach larger numbers of people, and results are generalizable or representative if researchers utilize a random sample of residents from the communities they are investigating. However, unlike cross-sectional designs, longitudinal studies enable researchers to make casual inferences, track changes over time, understand the temporality of events, and see data trajectories. Limitations include sample bias and not ascertaining the in-depth detail found with qualitative methods (both designs), and limitations specific to a longitudinal design include attrition, or loss of respondents over time, time and resource intensive (researchers often need reoccurring funding), and researchers must ensure measurement consistency across data points (Fowler 2013; Menard 2002).

Several international, community-based studies have been employed using qualitative methods. One study conducted in the Czech Republic employed cross-sectional and longitudinal designs to examine how community social cohesion influenced perceptions of control among adults over the age of 60 (Lee 2021). Turvey and colleagues (2009) used a longitudinal community-based study to examine cognitive function, physical function, chronic illness, and depression among a national sample of elderly respondents. Finally, Heitzinger and colleagues (2014) conducted research on noncommunicable disease and risk factors in a poor community or "shantytown" in Lima, Peru. Field workers were used to distribute questionnaires to respondents, and the survey, due to using a randomized cluster sample, was generalizable to the larger community.

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is a commonly used method where partnerships between researchers and community members and stakeholders are forged to ensure the best interests of the community are considered. The community is involved in each step of the research process, which means the research is more relevant to the needs of the community. Partnerships also ensures more ethicality and applying the findings to determine community priorities and inform the means used to improve the community. While creating such partnerships has many advantages from building trust and ensuring the data will be used for the benefit of the community, there are limitations (Israel *et al.* 1998; Minkler and Wallerstein 2008). Significant challenges are possible power imbalances between researchers and stakeholders and researchers may encounter resistance from the community regarding publishing the results in academic resources (Wallerstein *et al.* 2018). CBPR has been used to: Examine marginalized communities in the U.S. (see Campbell *et al.* 2021), improving maternal and child health service accessibility in Kenya (see O'Mara-Eves *et al.* 2015), formulating HIV prevention methods based on culture targeting youth in South Africa (see Khan, Pillay, and Maharaj 2017), develop solutions to mitigate contaminated water sources and provide accessibility to clean water sources in India (see O'Fallon and Dearry 2002), improve nutrition, farming practices, and create food security for those in Mayan communities in Guatemala (see Chávez, Israel, and Hernández 2020), and researchers involved community members in the research process to address environmental concerns in impoverished communities or favelas in Brazil (see Porto and Aguiar 2017).

Most researchers aim to use mixed methods to examine community dynamics. Mixed methods combines both qualitative and quantitative data to gain a detailed understanding of the phenomena under study and generalizability using larger, random samples. Mixed methods provide an understanding of both patterns and trends and detailed experiences of community residents. Mixed methods can also validate findings, such as the quantitative data supporting the qualitative data, thus providing stronger results (Creswell and Clark 2018; Jick 1979; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010). Yet, researchers, or the research team, must be trained and have the skill set necessary to implement both types of methods, and the one data source may not validate the other resulting in divergent findings (Bryman 2007; Jick 1979). Nonetheless, mixed methods provide a better understanding of community dynamics and the social phenomena that impacts

residents. There is some international research that utilizes a mixed methods approach. For instance, Simpson and colleagues (2015) implemented a mixed methods approach along with case studies to study community mental health settings in England and Wales. Trushna *et al*. (2020) employ mixed methods to examine community stakeholders' attitudes and opinions on the impact of crop residue burning in India.

Finally, program evaluation methods may also be used to examine the impact of public policies, programs and infrastructure on communities. These methods help researchers better understand the real-world impacts and can be used to investigate causality when experiments are unable to be used due to ethics or practicality. Some program evaluation methods examine data prior to policy, program, and infrastructure changes and after implementation to determine the effects on communities (Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman 2004: Weiss 1998). For example, one study evaluated how the built environment and other policy changes impact Canadian schools over time, specifically the health and developmental impacts of students. Longitudinal data was utilized to examine a sample of students from 90 secondary schools (Leatherdale *et al*. 2014). It is also worth noting that program evaluation research often relies on both qualitative and quantitative methods.

There are several issues researchers must consider when implementing the above methods to conduct international community research. Researchers that are not from that region should partner with local scholars to ensure cultural differences, such as norm variations, laws, religion, political landscape and polices are taken into account (Temple and Young 2004). Similarly, researchers must ensure that survey instruments and interview questions are applicable to different cultures, thus language translations need to be accurate (Brislin 1970; Harkness *et al*. 2010). Scholars need to be mindful of the power dynamics between them and the community, thus there needs to be a genuine power balance between researchers, stakeholders, and other residents (Muhammad *et al*. 2015). Respect for communities is vital, ensuring informed consent is obtained, participants are not being exploited, results are provided to them, and prior to conducting any international study, non-native researchers will need to acquire access to communities, establish partnerships, attain funding, and understanding the culture of the area and the language (Deardorff 2006).

PART III: HEALTHY COMMUNITIES, CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS, AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

Healthy Communities

There are several factors that indicate whether communities are healthy. Some of these factors are similar across the board, while others vary depending on the region. Across Europe, health communities include a strong sense of social cohesion and trust among members. This is a key factor because cohesion and trust prompt higher levels of civic and political participation, which often leads to advocacy for policies and programs to improve the community (Delhey, Newton, and Welzel 2015). Accessibility to needed services, such as healthcare, and the availability of green spaces that promote physical activity are indicative of a healthy community (Eriksson *et al*. 2024). Finally, housing equality and low levels of residential segregation are important factors associated with healthy communities across Europe (McNamara, Rigby, and Franco 2017).

Issues that pertain to healthcare availability and accessibility were found to be an important indicator of a healthy community across the Asia, Africa, and South America. Communities that develop health worker programs to improve accessibility and utilization (Asia) (Shrestha *et al*. 2024), integrate both traditional and modern health practices (Asia) (Park and Canaway 2019), emphasize informal health support (Africa) (Kisangala *et al*. 2024), and community participation in health and other social programs (South America) are invested in their residents' well-being (Maceira *et al*. 2024). Like in Europe, trust and cohesion, informal social networks that can provide support, and a focus on collective identities, were found to be vital components to creating a healthy community in Asia, Africa, and South America (Goodman *et al*. 2021; Eriksson, Kawachi, and Subramanian 2011). Finally, environmental concerns, such as cleanliness and sanitation, and social justice are key to community health in Asia and South America (Chaudhry 2024; Pham *et al*. 2018)).

Challenges to Developing Healthy Communities

While the factors that characterize a healthy community are clear, there are several challenges that inhibit communities from becoming places that strive to provide the best for their residents. For instance, in Europe, civic engagement and community participation is a challenge for many people in several communities, and some areas exhibit mistrust of authorities and a

lack social cohesion make it difficult for residents to participate (Dooris and Heritage 2011). Rural communities and those that comprise of marginalized populations face additional challenges that make community engagement more difficult, such as depopulation, limited economic opportunities, and an aging population in these areas. Moreover, impoverished or marginalized communities tend to be underrepresented in the civic engagement process, which limits chances of equality (Tsobanoglou and Vlachopoulou 2013; van Twuijver, Olmedo, and Hennessy 2020).

Due to inequalities based on technology, infrastructure, poverty, policy, and diversity, service learning, or applying educational standards to aid communities, has been a challenge in some Asian communities (Saif-Ur-Rahman *et al*. 2022; Talaat and Hamed 2024). In the health professions, much of the community health-based curricula is not applicable to the community because members and stakeholders did not have a role in creating them. Students are also being hindered by a lack of resources and not being trained to understand diversity issues (Choi, Han, and Kim 2023; Talaat and Hamed 2024). Thus, community health training is limited. Moreover, because of poor research implementation, a lack of agreement among stakeholders, resource deprivation, and limited institutional support many community-based participatory programs that address healthcare fail (Saif-Ur-Rahman *et al*. 2022; Talaat and Hamed 2024).

Like Asia, South and Latin American communities also face inequalities that make education, service learning, and providing quality healthcare a challenge. Programs and other initiatives are created by the government and other agencies without including the community's voice, needs, and priorities. Thus, communities may not benefit from them. Implementing any applied research in communities, and developing policies and programs is a challenge given a scarcity of both physical and digital infrastructure to serve marginalized communities, vast socioeconomic inequalities, a lack of civic engagement, and the disintegration of many policies in Latin America (Lavaux *et al*. 2025; Regina and Ferrara 2017).

Challenges to creating healthy communities in Africa include a lack of research collaborations, specifically involvement in international research projects and collaborations, power dynamics between academic researchers and citizens, thus creating inequities in grant funding and other resources, and an absence of community engagement, particularly with community health programs (Ali *et al*. 2025; Rose *et al*. 2024; Sharpe *et al*. 2024). There are several issues that many African communities face when it comes to accessing healthcare. One study found poor communication between citizens and providers, a lack of resources, lack of trust in health programs, and other cultural barriers in the Horn of Africa or IGAD region (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda (Ali *et al*. 2025). Other challenges that citizens of many African communities face are an absence of programs that consider socio-cultural beliefs as community members and stakeholders are excluded from the development of programs, and many disadvantaged community residents have poor health literacy further creating health inequalities (Sharpe *et al*. 2024). Research colonialism is also a challenge, which explains an imbalance of power, exploitation, and incorporating Eurocentric ideologies with research collaborations, which diminishes the creation of programs and policies that aid communities (Rose *et al*. 2024). Finally, a study revealed that African nations were underrepresented in international collaborations, which hinders the development of a healthy community characterized by cohesion, trust, equality, a clean place to live, civic engagement, collective identities, and informal networks (Cerdeira, Mesquita, and Vieira 2023).

Solutions to Address the Challenges

To address the above challenges, there are several solutions suggested in the literature depending on the region. In Europe, institutionalizing participatory or citizen-based budgeting is linked to supporting community empowerment and the development of green spaces. Institutionalizing participatory based budgeting is related to increased community participation, especially in marginalized communities. This type of strategy increases trust, ensures transparency, and establishes legitimacy with local governments (Costa, García-Esparza, and Kimic 2024).

The central solution to aid Asian communities is implementing service learning in higher education institutions. This helps train health and other professionals to be cognizant of cultural differences and to better reach those who are in marginalized communities. This can help to create social cohesion, trust, build social capital in communities, and build regional networks (Kung and Liu 2018). For this to be

successful, service-learning programs must include cultural competency, and programs and policies must be adaptable to local needs and not follow a Westernized model. Thus, community partnership is vital in any research or program/policy (Ma Hok Ka 2024; Xing and Ma Hok Ka 2010).

The focus in addressing Africa's challenges is strengthening community health programs. One suggestion is creating health committees as research shows an increased rate of community participation in healthcare when committees are convened. These health committees are utilized in sub-Saharan Africa with positive results. Health committees act as the voice for community residents, holds healthcare workers accountable, and work to bring resources to the community. However, committee members must be chosen transparently and include community participation to be successful. Also, support from all levels is important for such committees to survive, and national health agendas must work with these committees by providing resources and training to help community health workers successfully address the issues in the communities they are serving (Karuga *et al*. 2022). Increasing community engagement is another means to address community challenges, such as raising awareness through outreach programs, involving communities in any research collaborations that address community concerns, and this involvement must be at all stages, from research question, design, data collection, dissemination of results, and implementation of findings. They key is partnership with the community, not just for stakeholders to serve as consultants (Sangong, Saah, and Bain 2025).

To tackle challenges in South and Latin America, there is an emphasis on community resilience, building capital via community-based Agricultural technology, and digital advancement. Community involvement in both planning and development, emphasizing local self-governance, and increasing social capital helps build resiliency among communities and their members (Lachapelle, Gutierrez-Montes, and Flora 2020). Although limited accessibility to the digital world remains, research suggests digital participatory tools have help build and sustain civic engagement among communities in South and Latin America (Lima 2025). Developing farmer research committees can help farmers by linking them to researchers and other agencies to promote relevant and sustainable practices, with an emphasis on applying such practices based on the local region (Gómez *et al*. 2025; Waters-Bayer *et al*. 2015).

Community Building & Development in Different Regions of the World

When it comes to community development, there are three main approaches that can be taken: Self-Help, Technical, and Conflict Approaches. The self-help approach is used when community members want to decide for themselves the nature and direction of their community's development and be active participants in the development process. The technical assistance approach is used when the knowledge and skills of outsiders are needed to discern what and how development is to occur in a community. The Conflict Approach is used when community members feel they have been treated unjustly or neglected by governments, corporations, and other entities, and they organize to confront these entities about the situation, to resolve the problem (Lyon 1989). In the sections below, example cases of how each of these approaches to development have been used in different regions of the world are presented.

A. Self-Help Approach

In the European Union, there are government policies that encourage local community asset building, participation in planning, and delivery of services (European Commission 2014). For example, in Ireland, local community development is promoted through community councils and volunteer groups, to foster a community identity (Local Government Ireland n.d.). In many European nations, there exist many voluntary, peer-led health support groups for those facing different illnesses. These groups allow people to reduce their dependency upon formal health systems for help, and they also serve as a complement to assistance people receive from hospitals and doctors (Khan and Giucra *et al*. 2023).

The self-help approach is employed in a variety of contexts in Asian communities (Gugerty 2018). In India, the nongovernmental organization PRADAN assisted with the creation of village savings groups for women. The women were then able to obtain additional financing from banks to fund projects addressing hunger and impoverishment (PRADAN 2023). Villages in rural areas select a woman to be trained to serve as a community health worker to compensate for the lack of fully educated and licensed doctors and nurses in these areas (Sundararaman and Gupta 2010). In Sri Lanka, residents were involved in the Million Houses Program, where they planned, designed, and built affordable housing. In the process of participating in the program, many residents were also able to acquire important skills (World Habitat n.d.).

In African communities, the self-help approach is utilized in numerous ways (Gugerty *et al*. 2018). There are the Village Savings and Loan Associations, women's agricultural groups, community-driven development projects, and local housing initiatives. These efforts are used to build the community infrastructure, employment, and other resources within the communities (Rodima-Taylor 2022). For example, in Kenya, women's agricultural groups received training from Self Help Africa on how to use social media to sell produce they have grown from their own gardens (Self Help Africa 2024). In Nigeria, teams of residents build roads, markets, and other infrastructure to improve their living standards (Ignition633 Ministries 2013). Funding for many self-help efforts often comes from donors or the government (World Bank Group 2024), but the decision-making about what projects to pursue and how to pursue them are decided by the residents. With that said, in the formation of self-help groups, the most marginal members of the community are still excluded from participation (Matunga and Kontinen 2023).

In Latin and South America, the self-help approach to community development often involves residents combining their resources. These resources may be diverse in nature, including financial, labor, and/or knowledge-based assets. For example, in the Moravia area of Medellin, Colombia, residents work together to build homes in a place that was once a trash dump. Residents also operate community gardens and share community cooked meals, which fosters cohesion and a shared identity. They operate initiatives for the youth, to foster empowerment, resilience, and sustainability, in the face of poverty and invisibility (Scott 2021). In Uruguay and Bolivia, savings circles and credit cooperatives are used to fund development projects. They support many small businesses, enterprises in rural areas, and operations led by women and indigenous populations (Adams and Canavesi 1992).

B. Technical Approach

In European nations, the Community-Led Development method, a directed citizen approach is used to decide how government funds will be applied (Martinos 2025). There are also stakeholder analyses that are conducted, where the identification and mapping of individuals, organizations, and institutions that impact local development takes place (Fejzic and Usher 2025). Third vulnerability and risk assessments are used to identify areas and populations that need additional assistance to be resilient (Goujon and Jovanovic 2024).

In Asia, focus has been on implementing new technologies too. In the Philippines, community communication centers have been created for residents to use Wi-Fi, printers, and online sites for work, and to engage in online education (Association for Progressive Communications 2025). In several Asian nations, such as Japan, India, and Thailand, public-private partnerships have been used in eco-smart development. Residents and companies work with government officials to reduce pollution and use of resources, integrating sustainability into everyday living activities (OECD 2020).

The implementation of advanced technology and the development of specialized skills that accompany its use is becoming more commonplace for African nations (Allen 2021). Many nations, including Nigeria, are making use of solar mini-grids to provide electricity to local villages (Uwemedimo and Zimmer 2025). Also in Nigeria, drones are being used to generate maps of soil, irrigation, and crop wellbeing to boost the productivity of local farmers (AI Precision, 2025). In Rwanda, GIS is sued in the planning of roads and other infrastructure (Geospatial World, 2011), as well as land ownership conflicts that impede development in needed areas (Mushimiyimana 2023).

In Latin America, a variety of technical approaches to community development are used. For example, in Cuba, community architects involve residents in housing design through role-playing exercises, to accurately assess what needs are to be met in housing plans (Valladares 2013). In Venezuela, community-based clinics are critical participants in efforts to address health related inequalities. Policymakers, doctors, community workers, and residents work together to develop solutions (Briggs and Martini-Briggs 2009).

C. Conflict Approach

A variety of conflict-based strategies have been used by communities in Europe. In Ireland, women advocated the Good Friday Agreement, to remove guns from the streets and foster reconciliation between religious groups (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security 2024). In Hungary, mediation and cooperative planning efforts are used to address police abuse of force and segregation in communities containing large proportions of the Roma population (Hera, 2016). Conflicts over energy infrastructure have also existed between urban and rural populations, as urban areas are using the most energy, but the energy

infrastructure is often located in rural areas (Nieminen and Laitinen 2025).

In Asia, local nongovernmental organizations such as LI-BIRD have enabled communities surrounding Rupa Lake to better manage and repair degradation of the lake (Chaudhary *et al*. 2015). In China, People's Mediation Committees handle local conflicts in organized, culturally responsive way (Evans 2020). In Indonesia, local communities clash with logging companies and plantation owners over traditional indigenous land rights. Efforts to recognize these rights and engage in communication have helped to lessen these tensions (World Resource Institute 2024).

The conflict approach is one method used to address resource extraction disputes, ethnic and tribal tensions, and governance vacuums in Africa (Ajayi and Oluwafemi 2014). For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, violence between communities and militias over mineral extraction continues to halt the development of the one of the world's poorest areas (Panzi Foundation and Hospital 2024). In Nigeria, clashes over oil resources and pollution continue, requiring both government and community engagement to resolve the disputes. Extremist violence fueled by poverty, religion, and politics impact many nations, including Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, requiring development that addresses issues of governance, security, and reconciliation (Egbe 2025; Mofoluwawo 2018)

As for South and Latin Americas, the conflict approach tends to center around issues of natural resource extraction, land use and ownership disputes, and tensions from the history of civil war. For example, in Peru and Chile, mining companies and communities fight over the impacts of mining on soil, water, and other natural resources (Oh, Shin, and Ho 2023). In Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Ecuador, and Colombia, conflicts exist between communities and corporate logging and agricultural enterprises over land use (Boron n.d.; Froese *et al*. 2022). Other Latin American nations such as El Salvador are focused on rehabilitating and rebuilding areas once occupied and ruined by militias and drug cartels. (Montgomery and Boerman 2024; Paradela-López and Antón 2025).

PART IV: INTERFACING COMMUNITIES – A MULTI-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE

Communities are impacted by the society in which they are housed, being shaped by culture, laws, norms, policies, government, institutions, organizations, and the people who live within them (Sampson 2012). Communities, regardless of region, interface with society on a micro (individual), meso (formal and informal organizations), and macro (national policies, transnational relationships and networks, global economy) level (Bronfenbrenner 1977; Coleman 1990). Communities rely upon the local government and organizations to provide needed services, including utilities, hospitals and clinics, schools, sanitation, transportation, and general community/town/city maintenance (Warner 2011). However, communities also help shape the organizations, institutions, laws, and policies that serve them when citizens are engaged civically and participate in their community or neighborhood (Putnam 2000). Thus, communities have a reciprocal relationship with society, which results in important impacts for both the individual and the nation or region (Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002).

Micro-Level

At the micro level, face-to-face community interactions that involve individuals and small groups, such as families and neighbors, are key to building social capital, developing social cohesion, mutual trust, and social support. Delhey, Newton, and Welzel (2015) reveal the importance of social support and trust among communities in Berlin. Specifically, interactions with different ethnic groups not only increase tolerance and provide a better understanding of diversity but are also found to establish such support and trust, which in turn aids in sustaining multi-ethnic communities. Hence, a general trust in the people who share a community encourages unity and support that can serve as a key resource during times of crisis, promotes civic engagement, and increases citizens' interest in the well-being of their community.

Research conducted in Brazil emphasizes the important role of neighbors and other community groups because they become informal social networks that provide support and assistance. Moreover, this research reveals the importance of these informal networks in urban communities or favelas. These social networks provide the community with safety nets to cope with poverty, violence, and other injustices. They are also important for sharing information, delivering trust and mutual social support, and other resources. Such community networks are crucial for survival in many favelas (Arias 2004).

While Europe and South America focus on community or neighborhood trust and support, Asia and Africa rely on extended kinship and other family systems that create communities, particularly in rural communities. For example, family support was found to be an important factor influencing the health and wellbeing of Chinese elderly (Nie *et al*. 2023). Rural communities in South Africa are often developed through extended kinship ties and the creating of clan systems that provide informal social networks. Such networks form the basis of social interaction, social support, mutual aid, and resource sharing (Spiegel 2018).

Meso-Level

The meso-level consists of formal social institutions, organizations, and other groups, such as schools, religious organizations, government agencies, civic organizations, and other community groups. These institutions and groups connect residents to needed services and provides a means for citizens to participate in local governance thereby increasing civic engagement and addressing community needs. Kearns and Forrest (2000) discuss the importance of civic organizations in Europe and the urban government structure. Local government and institutional agencies facilitate resident participation in decision-making, which suggests the needs of the entire community are taken into consideration. Institutions and organizations also deliver needed services to the communities they serve. In Brazil, citizen participation in community matters is also important. Social movements and grassroots organizations advocate for community rights and community participation in governmental budgeting. According to Avirtzer (2009), social institutions that are considered participatory play a large role in maintaining democracy in Brazil.

The organizations and groups that serve neighborhoods and areas in Asia and Africa are largely groups for specific communities. Community-based organizations, or CBOs, in conjunction with tribal leaders, chiefs, and elders, work together to ensure needed social services are provided to residents. For instance, health researchers and workers have been found to work with traditional leadership to develop a community-based public-health project to implement health services in Ghana. Including traditional leadership members helps to legitimize the group and their goals, which encourages community acceptance (Tindana *et al*. 2011). Community-based workers, or CBWs, and CBOs play a vital role in ensuring needed

services, such as health care, vaccinations, and services that address food insecurity, are delivered to residents in many African communities (Wilson *et al*. 2023). Like Africa, many community groups and programs aim to connect Asian communities to essential services. These groups focus on various community needs, and addresses different issues and challenges, including but not limited to health and poverty. Moreover, CBOs, will work to activate resources to help aid impoverished communities in rural Asia (Perera *et al*. 2024). Thus, local or CBOs and CBWs are key to ensuring the needs of African and Asian communities, particularly rural and impoverished areas, are met.

Macro-Level

Community and macro-level interfacing or interaction involves the impact of national policies, laws, culture, the global economy, and transnational networks. Some of these impacts are Welfare states and European Union (EU) policies (Bolt 2009 and Arbaci 2007), state programs and international aid to assist Asian communities (Ooi 2009), structural adjustment programs, regional government bodies, and international aid in Africa (Moyo 2009; Konadu-Agyemang 2000) and national policies and global markets in South America (Balakrishnan *et al*. 2021; Niedzwiecki and Pribble 2025; Williamson 2010). Moreover, some of these factors have created more negative outcomes in communities despite the intentions of the policies and programs (see Awortwi 2016; Bolt (2009); Arbaci (2007); Ooi 2009).

Bolt (2009) and Arbaci (2007) found that various EU housing policies influence community dynamics and segregation. For instance, market-oriented housing systems, based on housing costs results in income-based segregation and segregated neighborhoods by ethnicity. Even though certain housing policies were created to reducing market-based segregation successfully, an unintended consequence is the clustering of disadvantaged groups in social housing. Also, policies that intend to create a socially diverse area generally yield genuine integration, social cohesion where middle-income class residents tend to socially segregate from their lower-income counterparts. Finally, community dynamics and interactions are based on community cultural patterns, informal networks, and economic opportunities, as opposed to top-down policies aimed at eradicating inequalities.

Asian communities are not generally independent of their nation, but it does depend on the nation, thus the government determines whether communities and their organizations or committees can function autonomously. Many Asian nations lead community development efforts, including appointing or organizing community committees, organizations, agencies, and groups. Community participation is encouraged but is structured and regulated by the state. Local committees serve as mediators between national, and communities are used to back national goals. Furthermore, local committees are used to ensure needed services, such as healthcare and sanitation, are accessible to communities. However, community development is also used to maintain social order, to surveille citizens, and legitimatizes the nation's political system (Ooi 2009).

Many macro-level factors impact African communities, including structural adjustment programs, foreign aid, and the African Union. Structural adjustment programs involve privatization, decreased public spending, deregulation, reducing subsidies, and devaluing currency. The negative impacts are profound for communities as there are fewer social services due to a reduction in public spending, increased economic inequality, and a weakening of local governments (Konadu-Agyemang 2000). International aid can weaken local governments as the support donated and the programs funded are often initiated without the involvement of local officials. While such aid has also made a positive contribution to African communities, including programs targeting health and education, priorities regarding how the aid is to be used can change quickly resulting in certain programs losing funding and no longer existing (Mkandawire 2001; Moyo 2009). The African Union is one of a few regional bodies aimed at protecting and stabilizing communities through resolving conflicts, providing security, implementing community development projects, and preventing election corruption (Asumbeng 2025; Makgale 2022). Awortwi (2011) and (2016) notes challenges with dual government systems that are common in African nations. Conflict between the formal (elected) and traditional (chiefs, elders) government occur, particularly over who has authority, jurisdiction and resources. While the traditional government still holds a lot of power, the formal government have legal authority, and they tend to exclude traditional officials in government business.

Communities in South America have been affected by national policies, such as social policy retrenchment that followed an economic surge in commodity prices during the early 2000s that yielded large export revenues to many countries. However, when prices fell, the reductions in poverty and inequality either slowed or became worse as many nations faced depleting economic resources. Social policy retrenchment, or polices that underfund or unfunded assistance programs, occurred post economic boom, yet the need for such services increased among those in several communities. As a response, grassroots organizations formed and rallied seeking justice for those who are marginalized, oppressed, and are dependent on aid to live (Balakrishnan *et al*. 2021; Niedzwiecki and Pribble 2025; Williamson 2010). Nations and their governing bodies and policies impact communities in all regions of the world, but communities can mobilize and enact changes at the macro-level.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to provide an overview of communities from an international lens, specifically examining Europe, Asia, Africa, and South and Latin America. A definition of community from a place-based perspective, the history of community, and different types of communities. The paper also discusses the types of research methods used to study communities in these regions, the important aspects of community building and development, and concludes with an investigation of how communities interact with society from a micro, meso, and macro level.

This paper contributes to the discussion of communities as it delivers an in-depth exploration of the many different elements that comprise of and impact international communities. Nonetheless, there are some limitations that need to be addressed. First, entire regions or continents as opposed to individual nations are examined, which provides a general approach to communities in these areas but masks the different intricacies unique to each nation. For example, community-based information that applies to Kenya, may not apply Nigeria. Nevertheless, the research included in this paper suggests there are similarities across these regions. Second, the application of research methods, or how to specifically conduct community-based research are not discussed. This information is important to guide novice or early scholars who wish to conduct community-based research but is outside the scope of this paper. Third, a detailed discussion on how to develop a community, or specific projects that should be used to promote community building are not discussed. This information

is useful for communities who wish to improve and further develop positive ways that will achieve a healthy community. Moreover, an application of community development projects will need to consider the local context, such as culture, traditions, language, and value systems of that specific community. However, this is also beyond the scope of this paper, which was to provide a wide-ranging overview of communities from an international perspective.

Future studies should emphasize the importance of collaborative research, especially any research that focuses on international communities. Scholars need to include community leaders, governments, and residents in the research process to conduct research that will fully address the needs of those from a particular community. In addition to collaborative research, an interdisciplinary approach is vital to ensure the multifaceted issues that impact different communities are considered. These disciplines include, but are not limited to sociology, healthcare, public health, urban studies, political science, psychology, geography, history, and environmental studies. Finally, future research should further investigate how technology can be used to help strengthen communities, particularly applied research that investigates how to increase accessibility for communities in developing nations, and how virtual communities impact place-based communities, but in specific nations or communities.

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