

Transversal subproject — Institutional Strengthening



Flemish Team Leader

Ann Nowé

Local Team Leader

Santiago Zárate

This transversal subproject positions UTN as a Community-Engaged Centre for Transformative Knowledge, recognized nationally and internationally for collaboration with Indigenous communities, inclusive education, and revitalization of *saberes ancestrales*. Through the Kawsay Living Lab, UTN strengthens education via master and PhD programs, doctoral school, and English/Kichwa training; research via institutional agendas and labs; and outreach via workshops and knowledge transfer, integrating ancestral and scientific knowledge to co-create solutions enhancing well-being, cultural preservation, and sustainable development in MUR communities.

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Empowering marginalized urban and rural communities to enhance well-being and quality of life through the Kawsay Living Lab

Universidad Técnica del Norte



Institutional University Cooperation (IUC)

Universidad Técnica del Norte (UTN) is a public university in Ibarra, Ecuador, serving 14,000 diverse students in a multi-ethnic region rich in *saberes ancestrales*. The VLIRUOS IUC project EMPOWER2LIV@UTN aims to improve well-being and quality of life for Indigenous marginalized urban and rural (MUR) communities in Imbabura. Through inclusive and community-driven efforts in education, health, environment, economy and nutrition, the project fosters long-lasting systemic change. *Saberes ancestrales* are revitalized through scientific validation and innovative fusions with contemporary practices. The Kawsay Living Lab, coordinated by UTN, serves as a dynamic platform for co-creation with these communities.

Main Topics

- inclusive education
- integrated healthcare
- circular economy
- improved nutrition
- preservation and revitalization of *saberes ancestrales*
- academic English
- development of MSc and (pre-)doctoral programs and schools
- participation
- co-creation within Living Labs
- sustainable environment
- quality of life



Inclusive Education

	Flemish Team Leader	Local Team Leader
	Anniek Orye	Sandra Guevara Betancourt

This subproject promotes inclusive and culturally responsive education for marginalized urban and rural (MUR) children in Imbabura, addressing structural inequalities affecting girls and Indigenous youth. Through the Inclusive Education Hub (IEduH), teachers, students, and community leaders co-develop intercultural curricula integrating *saberes ancestrales* and Kichwa. UTN-trained future teachers act as change agents, fostering gender equity, cultural identity, and experiential learning.

Sustainable Environment

	Flemish Team Leader	Local Team Leader
	Koenraad Muylaert	Paúl Arias

This subproject strengthens environmental stewardship among Karanki and Kayambi communities in Imbabura, who depend on Páramo ecosystems for water and livelihoods. Responding to climate change, deforestation and biodiversity loss, it revitalizes ancestral land management practices. Through the Sustainable Environment Hub, UTN, communities and women leaders co-create evidence-based solutions by combining scientific research and *saberes ancestrales* for sustainable land, water and biodiversity management.

Person-Centred Healthcare

	Flemish Team Leader	Local Team Leader
	Chris Burtin	Kevin Caraguay

This subproject improves well-being and quality of life in MUR communities by transforming healthcare to be culturally safe, person-centered and preventive. High rates of non-communicable diseases and limited access require integration of scientific and ancestral practices. The Person-Centred Healthcare Hub at UTN enables collaboration among academic staff, students, health professionals, local healers and community promoters. Health curricula embed *saberes ancestrales*. This integrated approach enhances prevention, trust and access to care and links strongly with other subprojects.

Inclusive Economy

	Flemish Team Leader	Local Team Leader
	Joost Dessein	Wilma Guerrero

This subproject strengthens economic resilience and social capital in Karanki and Kayambi MUR communities, with a focus on empowering women’s leadership. Relying on small-scale farming, livestock, handicrafts, and informal trade, the project revitalizes ancestral practices such as the chakra, crop residue use, and native crops while integrating sustainable techniques. The Inclusive Economy Hub fosters collaboration among UTN staff, communities, and entrepreneurs, supporting income diversification, women’s participation, and synergy with nutrition, education, and environmental initiatives.

Childhood Nutrition

	Flemish Team Leader	Local Team Leader
	Paul Cos	Anibal Lechón

This subproject reduces chronic malnutrition and improves child development in Karanki and Kayambi communities. Through the Nutrition Hub, UTN assesses nutritional and developmental outcomes while co-creating culturally relevant interventions with communities. Ancestral foods and scientific research guide nutritional programs for caregivers and educators, linked with education, healthcare, environment, and inclusive economy initiatives.

Transversal subproject — Saberes Ancestrales

	Flemish Team Leader	Local Team Leader
	Philippe Meers	Carla Sandoval

This transversal subproject empowers Karanki and Kayambi MUR communities by revitalizing and integrating *saberes ancestrales* into research, education, and policy. The *Saberes Ancestrales* Hub within the Kawsay Living Lab links all subprojects, promotes gender equity and women's leadership, and ensures community control over research, data, land, and cultural rights. UTN validates, teaches, and applies ancestral practices to foster sustainable, culturally vibrant development.