

**Working Paper
Volume 2022 Number 566**

Decolonising Knowledge for Development in the Covid-19 Era

Peter Taylor and Crystal Tremblay

March 2022

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First published by the Institute of Development Studies in March 2022
ISSN: 2040-0209 ISBN: 978-1-78118-964-1
DOI: [10.19088/IDS.2022.018](https://doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2022.018)

Suggested citation: Taylor, P. and Tremblay, C. (2022) *Decolonising Knowledge for Development in the Covid-19 Era*, IDS Working Paper 566, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/IDS.2022.018](https://doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2022.018)

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

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Charity Registration Number 306371
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Summary

This Working Paper seeks to explore current and emerging framings of decolonising knowledge for development. It does this with the intent of helping to better understand the importance of diverse voices, knowledges, and perspectives in an emerging agenda for development research. It aims to offer conceptual ideas and practical lessons on how to engage with more diverse voices and perspectives in understanding and addressing the impacts of Covid-19. The authors situate their thoughts and reflections around experiences recently shared by participants in international dialogues that include the Covid Collective; an international network of practitioners working in development contexts; engagement and dialogue with Community-based Research Canada, and their work with the Victoria Forum. Through these stories and reflections, they bring together key themes, tensions, and insights on the decolonisation of knowledge for development in the context of the Covid-19 era as well as offering some potential ways forward for individuals and organisations to transform current knowledge inequities and power asymmetries. These pathways, among other solutions identified, call for the inclusion of those whose challenges are being addressed, reflective spaces for inclusive processes, and connection, sharing and demonstrating the value of decolonised knowledge for liberation and trust.

Keywords

Covid-19; pandemic; decolonisation; inequalities; community-based research; inclusion; participation; indigenous knowledge

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Foreword

The world is divided along many fault lines. People in every nation are experiencing social, economic, and environmental challenges at first hand. Against these widening fissures in society and the massive impacts and implications of Covid-19, this Working Paper seeks to explore current and emerging framings of decolonising knowledge for development. It does this with the intent of helping to better understand the importance of diverse voices, knowledges, and perspectives in an emerging agenda for development research. It also offers, in a spirit of humility and appreciation for what the authors have learned from the enormous wisdom and experience of others, some conceptual ideas and practical lessons on how to engage with more diverse voices and perspectives in understanding and addressing the impacts of the pandemic.

The authors situate their thoughts and reflections around experiences recently shared by participants in international dialogues that include the Covid Collective, an international network of practitioners working in development contexts; engagement and dialogue with Community-based Research Canada; and their work with the Victoria Forum, of which they co-chair the social-divides stream. Through these stories and reflections, the authors aim to bring together key themes, tensions, and insights on the decolonisation of knowledge for development in the context of the Covid-19 era. The resulting exploration should be of interest to other researchers who are working in knowledge generation processes, with community activists and practitioners who interact with knowledge generation processes and are involved in advocacy with other societal stakeholders, and to policymakers who are interested in a closer engagement with the perspectives of citizens and communities in shaping and informing evidence-based policies.

The Working Paper pays particular attention to the centrality of indigenous knowledge systems in decolonising knowledge for development. It also explores potential ideas and approaches for shifting research mindsets and practices. It offers some implications for how researchers can help decolonise knowledge for development, suggesting possible ways to be more intentional about valuing and including different knowledges and experience; learning through research, and as researchers about ways to decolonise knowledge asymmetries; and the need for investing more resources to transform existing colonialities. Finally, it offers the authors' personal reflections on what 'we' need to do if individuals and organisations are serious about taking on the challenge of decolonising knowledge for development.

Proposed actions include:

- Ensuring solutions are shaped/created by those who experience the challenges being addressed if they are to succeed and be sustained.
- Establishing reflective spaces for inclusive processes, in which participants are aware of and interrogate their privilege and how they can use it to make change that disrupts inequalities. Check and challenge policies and practices that discriminate.
- Finding connections and ways in which we belong with each other, as communities, on this shared journey.
- Appreciating that the benefits of decolonising knowledge are not obvious to everyone, nor are they desired by those who believe they may 'lose' status or privilege. Through sharing evidence and experience, demonstrate the value of decolonised knowledge for liberation and a more positive future for all.
- Building trust. Researchers who claim to work in participatory and inclusive ways need to be conscious of who is setting and controlling the research agenda, and of what kinds of power dynamics are at play. They need to be committed to ensuring that the expectations of participants, and the incredible gifts they make of time, energy, belief, and sometimes personal risk, are not taken lightly or squandered needlessly.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of several individuals in this work including Catherine Hoppers, Danilo Paiva Ramos and Nkatha Mercy, as well as James Georgalakis, Paul Lacerte, Martha Mutisi, Kathryn Toure, Aminata Niang, Tariqa Tandon, Joanne Orr, Yamilla Franco, Joanna Wheeler, and Maggie Gorman Velez. A very special thanks to the FCDO-funded Covid Collective; Community-based Research Canada; the Victoria Forum, and colleagues and collaborators at the University of Victoria and the Institute of Development Studies, based at the University of Sussex.

Acronyms

CBR	community-based research
CBPR	community-based participatory research
PAR	participatory action research
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

1. Introduction

The world is divided along many fault lines. People in every nation are experiencing social, economic, and environmental challenges at first hand. The scale of these challenges, and the ways in which people experience them, are magnified because so many of the challenges interact with each other. Humans strive collectively, but not always successfully, to live together harmoniously in a shared planet, as revealed by the enormous challenges associated with climate change. The Covid-19 pandemic has created even further turbulence, throwing off track many of the economic and social improvements witnessed over recent years. Inequalities are now acknowledged as one of the world's greatest challenges ahead, and one that has been worsened even further by the pandemic. As the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response (IPPPR) observed, 'Inequality has been the determining factor explaining why the Covid-19 pandemic has had such differential impacts on peoples' lives and livelihoods' (2021: 43). This view is backed by multiple global development actors, including in the World Inequality Report 2022 (World Bank 2021) which highlights how rising inequality and security challenges are particularly harmful for developing countries (UN News 2022). In addition to the lives lost, the global economic down-turn, the ever-greater threat to social cohesion and resilience, and the many uneven policy responses, there is a rising tide of anxiety and uncertainty over what the future may bring (Marazziti *et al.* 2021; Abbott 2021).

There are many fora in which these issues are being debated and discussed. Some are devoted entirely to a major challenge, the Conference of the Parties (COP) on Climate Change being a case in point. Other platforms are taking a wider view. The Covid Collective,¹ for example, was designed as a means to bring together a collaborative group of researchers from around the world to undertake social science research collectively in order to generate knowledge and evidence which could support efforts to address the impacts of the pandemic. Through its growing series of outputs (including this Working Paper), the Covid Collective is demonstrating that an increasingly interconnected world is witnessing the limitations of national efforts to address the current global Covid-19 pandemic. With its unknown short and long-term socio-economic and environmental impacts, Covid-19 is shining a spotlight on a widening gap between governments and citizens and revealing the stark inadequacies of global governance and institutions to deal with a truly universal challenge.

¹ See Covid Collective website

Another platform, Canada's Victoria Forum², has identified a series of divides that play out in the lives of citizens throughout the world: social, economic, and environmental. In this Working Paper, we consider social divides in particular, evident in the form of systematic, institutionalised inequities, inequalities and injustices experienced due to race, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, age, and many other factors. The Victoria Forum dialogues have highlighted numerous ways that social exclusion is on the rise globally. Women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and two-spirit (LGBTQ2S+) persons continue to face significant systemic barriers across sectors and in everyday life. The rates of gender-based violence around the world have significantly increased since the onset of the pandemic due to a number of contributing factors causing serious concern (UN Women 2021; UNHCR 2020). Modern slavery and an absence of decent work are a growing phenomenon. According to a 2018 BBC-Ipsos global survey, 76 per cent of people across 27 countries believe that their country is divided (Ipsos 2018), citing identity, territoriality, religion, race, economic status, culture, and politics as root causes of increased divisions.

Platforms, dialogues, and conversations such as those hosted by the Covid Collective and the Victoria Forum are revealing evidence of a world in crisis. Bleak though many of their research findings and potential future pathways may be, it is heartening at the same time to appreciate that there is real hope for a different future. Progress is being made through united efforts and international cooperation on many global challenges, encouraged and promoted by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the United Nations Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, even though many of the advances made towards global development progress prior to the pandemic are in danger of losing ground, or even being thrown into reverse (United Nations 2020; 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic is already highlighting the world's vulnerability to epidemics and infectious diseases, and the limited capacities for effective preparedness and response, yet research is indicating multiple ways in which the crisis is also catalysing new local and global solidarities and fresh approaches to science and evidence, which will be invaluable in responding to future health and other global challenges. The pandemic is also adding to existing, and creating new, uncertainties in people's lives and livelihoods; but in responding and adapting to these uncertainties, there are many examples of concerted action at global, national, and local scales to transform the systems that create vulnerabilities, and many efforts are underway to recognise, scale, and replicate the innovative ideas that communities are identifying to improve resilience.

² See the [Victoria Forum website](#)

This wider context of global uncertainty brings its own challenges. In uncertain times there is a tendency to seek technical solutions, even though the challenges are complex and the pathways towards them are inherently unclear. In their book on 'The Politics of Uncertainty: Challenges of Transformation', Scoones and Stirling (2020) explore concepts of 'uncertitude' and observe that:

The hegemonic ideas of linear progress and modernist development that so dominate Western cultures have been exported to the world through waves of colonialism, trade and aid... In non-Western cultures, notions of development, progress and modernity often have very different connotations, rooted in subaltern identities and cultural and religious perspectives.

(Scoones and Stirling 2020: 2)

The notion that simplistic solutions are often inappropriate is not of course new. The writer H.L. Mencken's observation that 'For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong'³ is frequently quoted. Yet even when evidence is available that helps reveal potential pathways towards a fundamentally different world, it enters an arena of contestation within international cooperation where the interplay of power and politics mediates whose knowledge, whose voices, and indeed whose evidence, is taken seriously. Cairney (2021) provides an interesting analysis of whose science, and which scientists, have actually 'guided' the UK Government during the Covid-19 pandemic.

There are, however, alternative visions on whose knowledge and whose reality counts (Chambers 1997). Indeed, Scoones and Stirling argue in their book (*op. cit.*) that a 'globalising version of modernity and progress need not colonise the future in the ways it is presently doing. Instead, a more diverse, plural, and contingent perspective can be advocated, involving an appreciation of uncertainty and its diverse framings' (2020: 3). There are many examples that demonstrate how this bringing together of diverse perspectives may work in practice. Using their social energies and skills, many young people, communities, and marginalised groups are calling for real social transformations, sometimes involving deeper change in political-economic systems and power relations. They are exhorting citizens to act in ways that promote respect for diversity such that every person in a pluralistic society feels they are valued and belong, and where deep-rooted inequalities and exclusions are addressed. Community driven and participatory approaches to knowledge creation are flourishing. International networks including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Chair in Community-Based

³ See [Government Technology blog](#)

Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education⁴, and the Covid Collective, among many others, are calling for a co-production of knowledge and action that can genuinely contribute to just, sustainable futures, in a new era of transformative development. As highlighted in recent Victoria Forum discussions, it is important that efforts to tackle current challenges including the pandemic, or to 'build forward differently', are grounded in the lived experiences of people, including those who are poor and marginalised, with a commitment to including their diverse perspectives and voices in debates, policy, and practice. A new 'politics of hope' (Sacks 2000) would involve covenants of shared responsibility in which families, neighbourhoods, communities, voluntary organisations, and religious groups all have a part to play, transcending turf, welcoming truth, and building trust.

As co-authors of this Working Paper, we (the authors Peter Taylor and Crystal Tremblay) are grateful for the knowledges, shared learning and significant contributions that have shaped our thinking on these topics, and which we aim to develop further in the following pages. A wide range of interactions and engagements (several of which are described later in this paper) have inspired and challenged our understanding of an urgent need to decolonise knowledge production, each bringing a perspective into the ways in which colonisation continues to oppress and undermine the full expression of humanity and associated freedoms. We are also mindful that as authors, we ourselves are engaged in this endeavour. We acknowledge that this is challenging because we are products of, and housed within, the hierarchies that have marginalised so many, and yet which we have successfully navigated in part because of our own privilege and subsequent opportunities for education and other social advantages. Locating ourselves here, although briefly, is an important component of indigenous methodologies and our own decolonial efforts and allows for the refusal of 'objective' Eurocentric ideologies which has a legacy of misrepresentation and exploitation (Gillies *et al.* 2014). We aim to situate ourselves, therefore, with intentions of respect, humility, and gratitude in the ways we engage with and value the learnings that have been shared with us and potential ways we might benefit from this. In practice, this looks like deconstructing the dominant narratives and personal privileges embodied in our race, class, gender, *etc.* that shape the ways in which we understand the world and our subsequent values, behaviours, and attitudes.

With these observations and reflections in mind, and against the backdrop of the massive impacts and implications of Covid-19, this Working Paper seeks to explore current, and emerging, framings of decolonising knowledge for development. It does this with the intent of helping to understand better the

⁴ See the UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education website

importance of diverse voices, knowledges, and perspectives in an emerging agenda for development research, and offering conceptual ideas and practical lessons on how to engage with more diverse voices and perspectives in understanding, and addressing, the impacts of Covid-19. In this paper, we as authors situate our thoughts and reflections around experiences recently shared by participants in international dialogues that include the Covid Collective, an international network of practitioners working in development contexts; engagement and dialogue with Community-based Research Canada; and our work with the Victoria Forum, in which we co-chair the social-divides stream. Through these stories and reflections, we aim to bring together key themes, tensions, and insights on the decolonisation of knowledge for development in the context of the Covid-19 era. We believe the resulting exploration will be of interest to other researchers who are working in knowledge generation processes, community activists and practitioners who interact with knowledge generation processes and are involved in advocacy with other societal stakeholders, and policy makers who are interested in a closer engagement with the perspectives of citizens and communities in shaping and informing evidence-based policies.

2. Why decolonise knowledge for development?

In many ways and in many countries, social divides demonstrate the pernicious influence of race, gender, class, and financial inequities. The #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements have brought these divides into even sharper focus, and provided powerful evidence of not only the depth, but also the widening of these social divides, driven by structural inequalities and systemic inequities. Throughout 2020–22, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and revealed how it is having its greatest impacts where social divides are greatest. Decolonising knowledge is important in this context because it seems crucial to address the basic inequities and inequalities that are inherent in so many knowledge processes. If knowledge is power, then there is a need to address the historic, structural power asymmetries that are perpetuated through the exclusion of many groups, communities, and individuals from knowledge creation processes. Subsequent shifts in power structures and evidence that draws on multiple perspectives may then help to promote more effective responses to the pandemic in the short term, for example more equitable rollout of Covid-19 vaccinations and treatments globally. They may also support wider transformations in the mid to longer term, whereby the underlying inequities that maintain inequalities and exclusion of so many are challenged and fundamentally re-shaped through improved policies and practices.

Why is this so important, particularly now? The world is experiencing massive global disruptions and shocks, in relation to the environment, climate, health economies, politics, societies and technology. Each of these challenges is enormous in its own right, but they are also interconnected and cannot be addressed in isolation. To address them collectively, it seems important to move beyond perceptions of the world as ‘them and us’, as ‘developed and undeveloped’, as ‘North and South’. These distinctions are becoming increasingly meaningless, and even counter-productive to efforts that need to be collaborative, joined-up and inclusive.

One mantra that has gained popular currency recently, particularly on the political front, is that of ‘Building Back Better’. This expression arose out of earlier efforts to address the shortcomings of reconstruction in the wake of major disasters (notably the 2004 Tsunami in Southeast Asia), helping ensure that houses, bridges, roads, and other infrastructure could be restored, but constructed in such a way that they could be more resilient should natural disasters arise again (Fernandez and Ahmed 2019). Underpinning the Building Back Better approach, however, is a certain level of complacency, albeit implicit. Given the need to tackle tacit acceptance of inequalities, especially those that

are less visible, and where voices of those who experience them remain unheard, alternative framings, for example 'building forward differently'.

Such re-framings may help shift the focus of effort towards addressing deeply rooted inequalities, necessary because the Covid-19 pandemic is bringing into sharp relief a range of fissures, cracks, and marginalisations in societies throughout the world (Leach *et al.* 2020). The pandemic is still frequently characterised as a health crisis, but it is in fact multi-dimensional. It is heightening fragilities, exacerbating inequalities, and deepening vulnerabilities in systems of all kinds. These challenges of inequality are universal, felt everywhere including in the UK and Canada where the authors of this paper reside; but those in low- and middle- income countries are suffering most, and also suffering differentially, whether because of gender, age, or poverty.

The pandemic has also stalled or even reversed important progress made in recent years towards universal goals in the form of the SDGs, for example, and more specifically in relation to gender equality and social protection provision (Taylor and McCarthy 2021). It is also accelerating significant inequities. For example, those with power/means can draw on individual resources to 'ride out' the pandemic – in ways that vulnerable communities cannot. Vaccine distribution and rollout has been tainted by nationalism and protectionism. The global call that 'no-one is safe until we are all safe' (Ghebreyesus and von der Leyen 2020) seems hardly to have resonated with countries who are more interested in stock-piling vaccines whilst seemingly almost oblivious to the fact that we co-habit a shared planet and the lives and livelihoods of all people are deeply interconnected.

Against this backdrop, a genuine engagement with decolonising development seems a very concrete, urgent proposition given the deep structural injustices and inequities that characterise this broad field of endeavour. Given the particular interests of the authors in research, and knowledge co-creation, for the purpose of this Working Paper, we pay attention specifically to what it means to decolonise knowledge for development.

3. What does it mean to decolonise knowledge for development?

A great deal of energy, experience, and commitment is now associated with the decolonising agenda. It is perceived increasingly as a global challenge, and one that plays out through lived experience in a wide range of contexts. It is being fuelled by ongoing and growing awareness of inequalities and the ways in which these have been shaped by history, and through uneven and unequal power relations – and the abuse of that power in favour of some over others. These are taking place between regions of the world, between countries, and within national contexts, including in wealthier nations where communities and peoples have been historically marginalised, and whose horizons and opportunities to shape, inform and benefit from different forms of development are restricted to this day by their exclusion from knowledge creation and generation processes.

Rutazibwa (2018) explores questions relating to the overall survival of an aid industry despite many decades of post-development critique, and observes how education and careers in international development, even though these may promote a critical approach, are likely to do little to disrupt the organisational and institutional architecture of aid and development. Of particular relevance to this Working Paper, she identifies a framework involving three recurring issues that ‘help us detect, understand, as well as break with, the perpetuation of these mythological reflexes in our reading of global North/global South relations: (1) Point of origin of departure, (2) Eurocentrism, and (3) fragmentation’ (Rutazibwa 2018: 165). She argues that international development studies practice effectively erases its colonial past; that Eurocentrism continues to create a benchmark for development and it is from here that understandings and interpretations of development emanate; and that knowledge and understandings relating to ‘development’ fail to account for the many and varied stories, knowledges and experience that reflect a truly global reality – and in which the need for co-construction of knowledge become paramount and conscious, intentional efforts are made to ‘de-silence’ voices frequently absent from the table.

In response to observations such as these, many knowledge institutions (universities, think tanks, civil society organisations) are seeking ways to do the research they do, their curricula, their learning and teaching programmes, their institutional culture and life, and the relationships they have with a wide diversity of partners and collaborators. Tavernaro-Haidarian (2019) describes the process of decolonisation as efforts to ‘de-link’, ‘reject’, or ‘struggle against’ the existing norms and other conflictual approaches. Through a development lens, she presents a framework informed by the African moral philosophy of *ubuntu*, as a

‘compelling response for communities and societies emerging from colonialism, transcending neoliberalism, and developing the agency to author their own intellectual, moral and spiritual pursuits’ (Tavernaro-Haidarian 2019: 19). In this way, she describes decolonisation as:

... the process of creating something new rather than fighting the old, something that exceeds the limits of what we have inherited without destroying it. It favors an integrative approach that brings together material and immaterial ways of knowing, Western and Eastern or Northern and Southern approaches and enables a more complete way of seeing, perceiving, and doing. It ‘combines’, ‘enhances’, ‘matures’, ‘evolves’ and ‘brings together’ in mutual dialogue various traditions and wisdoms while ‘transcending’ adversarial postures. (Tavernaro-Haidarian 2019: 26)

Others, such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos, have enhanced an understanding of decolonisation by embracing a diversity of knowledge systems, in what he describes as an ‘ecology of knowledges’ – an intercultural epistemological dialogue that ‘challenges universal and abstract hierarchies and the powers that, through them, have been naturalised by history’ (2014: 90). To decolonise could be thought of as an intellectual task of dismantling the Anglophone, Euro-centric identity and incorporating marginalised knowledges produced in other languages and cultures (Jazeel 2016). It is literally the reversal of colonial hierarchies, and hegemony that shape practices of knowledge production and valuation (Tuck and Yang 2012).

Alongside efforts to decolonise knowledge, many have been calling for the democratisation of knowledge, allowing for the integration of many approaches to knowledge and society – similar to that which de Sousa Santos and others are calling for. This means moving away from European-colonial imposition to locally produced knowledges, languages and the diverse ways knowledge is expressed and shared. Much of the global effort to address the pandemic through international cooperation have been coordinated by Northern-based institutions which draw on Northern-generated research and evidence. Niang and Taylor (2020) ask, however, whether lessons are being learned sufficiently well from how African communities have dealt with diseases and pandemics in past and current times, since historical records and archaeology reveal evidence of how ancient African societies managed pandemics (Chirikure 2020). Even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, reviews by Ripoll *et al.* (2019) had determined tangible ways to address the social, political, and economic dynamics of past and recent Ebola epidemics; and to ensure that interventions build on the social and cultural resources of the communities they aim to support.

Each person has, of course, a different understanding of what knowledge is. This understanding is rooted in their worldviews (or ontology) and their ethical code (or paradigm), which intertwine to inform what they think knowledge is and how it is created (or their epistemology). Worldviews guide how people interpret and navigate the world, and what they know their reality to be. Western and indigenous worldviews 'are very different in terms of the ways in which people come to know and the ways in which knowledge or understanding is shared' (Ermine, Sinclair and Browne 2005).

Knowledge democracy, as described by the UNESCO Chair in Community-based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, refers to an interrelationship of phenomena.

First, it acknowledges the importance of the existence of multiple epistemologies or ways of knowing such as organic, spiritual, and land-based systems, frameworks arising from our social movements, and the knowledge of the marginalised or excluded everywhere, or what is sometimes referred to as subaltern knowledge. Secondly it affirms that knowledge is both created and represented in multiple forms including text, image, numbers, story, music, drama, poetry, ceremony, meditation and more. Third, and fundamental to our thinking about knowledge democracy is understanding that knowledge is a powerful tool for taking action to deepen democracy and to struggle for a fairer and healthier world.

(Hall and Tandon 2017: 6)

Complementing these views, during the 2020 Victoria Forum (Taylor and Tremblay 2021), four central observations emerged regarding how decolonising knowledge can help bridge social divides:

- Decolonisation is an experience – of subjugation and violence, that is ongoing. It is complex, and often individuals only perceive the bits that they 'bump into' or even recognise. Colonisation may be understood by some as 'the elephant in the room' in society today, but it also translates into life and death issues for millions of people. When reflecting on what is really meant by decolonising knowledge, research, and minds, questions are raised over what specific parts of the 'elephant' we are referring to.
- A worldview that is narrow, linear, hierarchical, and competitive is still largely propagated by the development industry. The SDGs are a hugely important set of shared aims and, to a large extent, values which have served well to catalyse momentum, and commitments, in support of people, planet and prosperity. Even though the SDGs and the international institutions that promote them, emphasise leaving no-one behind and reaching those furthest

behind first, some groups whose voices are heard much more rarely receive little attention.

- The spaces in which many academics work – universities – continue to be spaces in which coloniality flourishes with dominant ways of knowing, dominant forms of belief and research practice. But those very knowledge systems are now turning increasingly to indigenous knowledge systems because there is a realisation that that knowledge has answers to some of our most intractable challenges.
- The ramifications of a failure to decolonise has recently been observed through daily events in many countries – including, for example, in Canada through the ‘discovery’ of multiple cases of mass graves of indigenous peoples in and around residential schools.

4. Decolonisation and participation

As authors, we have been engaged over time in various forms of participatory development and research and believe that this field of work offers valuable insights and lessons which help to illustrate ways to approach the challenge of decolonising knowledge for development.

In a recent Covid Collective report on 'Local knowledge and participation in the Covid-19 response', Lenhardt (2021a) cites work by Anoko *et al.* (2020) which indicates that Covid-19 response and recovery risks are frequently inheriting the longstanding history of imposed humanitarian objectives and activities by external actors, leading to limited local ownership and reduced effectiveness. 'During public health emergencies, such as the current Covid-19 [crisis], communities are often poorly involved in the planning and implementation of interventions, yet their commitment is fundamental to control outbreaks' (Anoko *et al.* 2020: 1).

More positively, Lenhardt (2021a: 2) goes on to state:

There is, however, a wealth of guidance building on lessons learned from past mistakes and evidence generated by effective participatory interventions. Many observers have noted that the localised nature of the effects of the pandemic may open space for community participation in relief and recovery efforts, with potential longer-term contributions to the decolonisation of knowledge and participation in development.

In her review and analysis of recent literature on local knowledge and participation, Lenhardt (*op. cit.*) notes several further key findings relevant to the wider debate on decolonised approaches. She observes that failures to learn from 'Southern' knowledge and experience have prompted renewed calls for decolonial, post-colonial and post-development approaches to Covid-19 response, recovery, and beyond. She notes mixed experiences with regards to centralised versus decentralised decision-making but recognises that local-level governments are able to be more responsive to communities, especially when coupled with accountability mechanisms enabling communities to feedback on local government response.

In terms of methods and tools for more equitable engagement, Lenhardt observes an array of innovations in the use of social media, traditional media, and other technological adaptations that have been used to communicate up-to-date guidance on Covid-19, to understand the needs of local communities, and develop tailored government responses. She also highlights adaptations of traditional research methods due to travel restrictions and social distancing

measures limiting face-to-face contact between researchers. These have prompted innovations in participatory research approaches that encourage greater engagement with participants while limiting travel. These approaches also present challenges, particularly around accessibility for certain groups and emerging ethical issues related to participatory research by distance and added strain on participants.

Box 4.1: Research methods for engaging with lived experience

A project led by Covid Collective members at the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) adopted a 'peer-researcher' approach to conduct a process evaluation of BRAC's pilot handwashing station (HWS) installation. Travel restrictions imposed by the pandemic meant that the research team needed to find an alternative way to collect community-level data on sanitation in sampled communities. The team opted to recruit peer-researchers from within sampled communities who had lived experience of using handwashing stations. The peer research approach was adopted as a method in which people with lived experience of the issues being studied take part in directing and conducting the research. The approach aims to move away from the 'extractive' model of social research and to empower people to affect positive change by participating in research on their own communities. Eight peer researchers were trained to conduct conventional anthropological tools including in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. They were also trained to systematically observe the functional landscape of hand washing stations in their communities and were asked to collect visual data (e.g., videos, photographs, and live video calls) to understand the context of the HWS intervention and the existing barriers in compliance in people's daily lives. The full research team held daily debriefing sessions using Google meet to discuss findings from the fieldwork and visual content was shared regularly through WhatsApp. Daily debriefing sessions were based on themes and sub-themes emerging from the findings from daily fieldwork and visual observations and the final analysis included a blending of field data, 'visual observations', peer-researchers' observation and reflection and different level of discussion among researchers. [See BIGD website.](#)

Leonhardt's observations resonate with examples arising from early research findings in projects supported by the Covid Collective. Box 4.1 provides insights from recent research that illustrates how participatory approaches to research and inquiry helps to address the structural barriers and inequalities that characterise many 'development research' projects.

Such examples, revealing both positive dynamics and trends, whilst also highlighting ongoing challenges, demonstrate the importance of creating more inclusive, equitable development processes and outcomes that involve ownership over analysis and needs identification, planning, decision-making and use of resources, by the citizens and communities whose lives will be shaped and transformed as a result of any subsequent actions. A further step towards achieving these outcomes may also involve more equitable, respectful, and transparent partnerships and collaborations, between researchers and development actors in the global North and in the global South, and the promotion of greater international and regional cooperation between research actors and their constituent communities within the global South (Fransman and Newman 2019). The process of challenging and shifting power asymmetries is often central to these efforts (Gaventa and Cornwall 2001; Taylor *et al.* 2006; VeneKlasen and Miller 2002), rather than attempting to solve problems through purely technical fixes and solutions that are unlikely to lead to sustainable outcomes. Interestingly, Lenhardt (2021a) notes some reports of the pandemic opening up space for Southern researchers to lead in research, though it is too soon to know what effect this may have on the effectiveness of the Covid-19 response and whether this will yield longer-term power shifts in research.

5. Insights on decolonising knowledge from community-based research

Some recent conversations in which we, as authors, have participated, have revealed a range of views on how a decolonising agenda sits within broader debates around international development and what the implications of decolonising knowledge for development might be. Many of these views and perspectives are emerging from dialogues involving academics and practitioners involved in community-based research (CBR), and this broad arena of knowledge and experience offers much to an emerging understanding of decolonisation. CBR in particular offers a rich landscape of opportunity for learning from previous work. Over the past several decades scholars and practitioners in the field of popular and community education, social learning, community-based and indigenous-led research have profoundly impacted the debate around decolonisation and the wider human development around the world.

Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon, over the last 40 years and more recently as co-chairs of the UNESCO Chair in Community-based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, have written extensively on this topic with a focus on knowledge democracy, building community capacity and training the next generation of engaged scholars around the world through the Knowledge 4 Change global consortium⁵, now with over 25 hubs around the world. Their publication 'Decolonization of knowledge, epistemicide, participatory research and higher education' (Hall and Tandon 2017) illustrates how Western knowledge has been engaged in epistemicide, or the killing of other knowledge systems. They argue that:

[w]hat is generally understood as knowledge in the universities of our world represents a very small proportion of the global treasury of knowledge. University knowledge systems in nearly every part of the world are derivations of the Western canon, the knowledge system created some 500 to 550 years ago in Europe by white male scientists.

(Hall and Tandon 2017: 7)

⁵ [More information on the UNESCO Chair in Community-based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education website](#)

Their body of work provides evidence for the ways in which community-based participatory research (CBPR) affirms knowledge as an action strategy for change and about the rendering visible excluded knowledges.

CBPR is a particular approach to research that involves active participation of actors, those whose lives are affected by the issues being studied, in all phases of research for the purpose of producing useful results to make positive changes (Israel *et al.* 1998). CBPR is used to promote mutual involvement, change and personal growth through the empowerment of community members. In this approach, both the researcher and participants are actively involved in developing the goals and methods for collection and data analysis, as well as implementation of the results that will promote change and increase awareness, generally to improve the lives of those involved (Kidd and Kral 2005). CBPR has three core principles: 1) community-driven, which means it is relevant to those most affected by the issue under study and leads to their self-determination; 2) participatory, power is shared equitably throughout the research agenda through reciprocal engagement in the design, implementation, and dissemination; and 3) action-oriented, the process and results are useful to community members in making social change (Taylor and Ochocka 2017).

The very aim of CBPR is to bring marginalised knowledges out of the margins. At its core, this approach interrogates the power relationships that are inherently embedded in Western knowledge production – it is decolonising, in that it recognises and supports the establishment of respectful relationships and places the power in the hands of the community.

CBPR traditions are based on critical social theory and pedagogies that are intended to provoke social and political change. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian sociologist and educator, coined the term *conscientização* which can be understood as deepening the attitude of awareness as a result of the emerging social transformation (Freire 1970). His work has been profound in informing the traditions of CBPR, anti-oppressive, and decolonising methodologies. participatory action research (PAR), embedded in many forms of CBPR, and highlighted in an extremely comprehensive handbook, recently published (Burns, Howard and Ospina 2021) is built on Kurt Levin's social psychology applications and is a type of 'social research with empirical basis that is conceived and carried out in close association with an action or with the resolution of a collective problem and in which researchers and participants representative of the situation or problem are involved in a cooperative or participatory mode' (Thiollent 2011: 14).

Several other scholars from Latin America have helped to strengthen political and social movements and disrupt the relations between society and knowledge. Orlando Fals Borda, a Columbian sociologist is considered one of the founders of PAR. He describes this as:

[t]he participatory discourse or counter discourse, on the other hand, initiated in the Third World... postulates an organization and structure of knowledge in such a way that the dominated, underdeveloped societies articulate their own socio-political position on the basis of their own values and capacities and act accordingly to achieve their liberation from the oppressive and exploitative forms of domination imposed by opulent (capitalist) foreign powers and local consular elites and thus create a more satisfactory life for everyone. In this way a more human Weltanschauung, or world outlook, could be fashioned
(Fals Borda 1987: 331)

For Fals Borda, Freire, and others, combining knowledge and action for social change is a pathway to liberation and freedom from oppression.

Perspectives on these issues have been expanded through recent participatory dialogues convened by the authors of this paper. In a roundtable⁶ hosted by the Covid Collective on local knowledge and participation, a view was expressed that unless linked to genuine transformations in practices and behaviours, current debates on decolonisation may become a somewhat tokenistic contribution which generates discussion and reflection but fails to lead to concrete actions which shift fundamental structural imbalances and inequities in society. Research undertaken with support from the Covid Collective is also highlighting the importance of community participation, for example in disaster response to ensure effective, inclusive recovery and promote longer-term resilience, although evidence suggests also that participation of affected communities in humanitarian activities remains limited.

Further reflections from personal experience were shared during an international panel on Decolonising Community-based Research convened by Community-based Research Canada⁷ in May 2021. Participants provided powerful testimonies which highlighted that this is not an abstract concern, but one which has tangible implications for development research. In their presentations at this event, three speakers underscored and brought urgent attention to the ways in which colonisation has been and continues to be a process of violence, dehumanisation, and the hierarchical and systemic exclusion of peoples privileged by western hegemony and its knowledge production.

Dr Catherine Hoppers, Professor and South African Research Chair in Development Education, University of South Africa, commented as follows: 'What does colonialism mean to people and why? Colonialism has created

⁶ [See Covid Collective website](#)

⁷ [See Centre for Community-based Research website](#)

dehumanisation, violence, and humiliation. This is not an abstract debate, it's a matter of life and death.'⁸

Catherine Hoppers observed that to decolonise something, we need to first understand what colonialism means to people and why? Colonialism has created dehumanisation, violence and humiliation and has fundamentally changed people's way of being including their survival techniques and wisdom for relationships with nature. This knowledge has frequently been rendered irrelevant and has been strategically disempowered. Dr Hoppers brings our attention to the different forms of violence enacted by colonialism – individual, structural, and cultural violence – as the social, political, and economic arrangements that harm and cause injury to people and communities.

Hoppers has also expanded on these ideas in a paper (Hoppers 2021) in which she describes the role that universities have as the judges and arbiters of the value of their own research. She contends that going forward, we need to understand the structures that have determined colonialism, and the very ways that colonial research methodologies have imposed racial, social, and political hierarchies. The impacts of which permeate into the very fabric of society and everyday life through the production, valuation, and dissemination of certain knowledges over others. She argues in her most recent paper that indigenous knowledge systems demand several transformative changes including establishing an ethically sound and ecologically constituted way of thinking; affirming the multiplicity of worlds and forms of life; creating a shared paradigm shift; self-reflexive praxis; becoming critical explorers of human and societal possibilities; establishing new evaluation and appraisal criteria; and a transformation to new futures.

Nkatha Mercy, PhD Student, West Virginia University and co-chair of the Nyerere K4C UNESCO Hub, Tanzania, made the following contribution: 'Colonisation as the co-production of colonised/coloniser, and the need for "re-humanisation" as a planetary project. The colonial project assumes that only some people are human enough to produce, understand and be the purveyors of knowledge.'⁹

Nkatha brought to our attention some of the continued barriers (e.g., methodological, epistemological, structural, linguistic) in our attempts to conduct community-based research in order to achieve knowledge democracy. The SDGs as a case in point, with 17 goals and 169 targets, and the intent to 'leave no one behind'. Yet, indigenous peoples are referenced only four times in the SDG framework.

⁸ Discussion panel, Community-based Research Canada, 27 May 2021

⁹ *Ibid.*

Nkatha observed also that the SDGs frame challenges as technical, and which are amenable to being 'solved' by 'field experts'; and that they also prioritise metrics with limited room for lived experiences, those which are essential to fully understand the lived experiences and shifting needs of farmers, migrant workers, or coastal fishermen, for example. She highlighted the importance of being attentive to the potential of PAR and methods to move beyond and deconstruct the more common decolonising characteristics of much development research. She noted too the need for trusting relationships and also to see those engaged in research processes as knowers. In this light, decolonisation is more than just methodological reorientation but a revolutionary concept of 're-humanisation'. Nkatha stressed the need for researchers to consider knowledge democracy if they are serious about being on pathways of true transformation.

A third vignette, as shared by Dr Danilo Paiva Ramos, Professor in Anthropology and Ethnology, Federal University of Bahia, Brazil, describes the experience of researchers working in the Amazon who seek to engage with communities who themselves are indigenous yet extremely diverse, highlighting ways of engaging with, and learning from, their knowledge and experience.

The work is part of a bigger political struggle, amidst an effort to understand deeply the complexity of all power relations in contested contexts, if we are serious about decolonising health, and knowledge, and committed to reducing violence and inequalities.¹⁰

Danilo's work illustrates the ways of generating action which could be part of a wider set of struggles for basic rights. Indigenous leadership, anthropology, and intercultural communication for Covid-19 response in The Alto Rio Negro Indigenous Territory of Brazil. In relation to a collective project called 'unequal voices' which brings together professionals and indigenous leaders and students, he highlighted that communicating in health is not easy in a multilingual and intercultural environment with 22 different ethnic groups and languages. In this very complex context, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, he explained that researchers need to think deeply about interculturality in health. In the unequal voices project, indigenous leaders are leading the initiative – for example discussing social control measures, and they are enhancing the participation of indigenous voices in health policy formation through action research processes and dialogue.

As indicated in this section of the paper, many researchers have written, and spoken, about their perspectives on why decolonisation of knowledge for development is needed and is urgent. In some dialogues, particular emphasis has been made on the urgency of decolonisation of knowledge in respect to indigenous peoples, and their knowledge and experience. Hoppers, in the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Community-based Research dialogue mentioned above, for example, called on all researchers to be ethical warriors – not just ‘researchers’, and to invest in understanding the phenomenon and the basic cultural structures of colonialism. She observed that intercultural debate is necessary, and modern science is not the only form of knowledge. We consider this important issue in more detail in the following section.

6. The centrality of indigenous knowledge systems in decolonising knowledge for development

The role and societal importance of indigenous knowledge has long been recognised (Oloruntoba, Afolayan and Yacob-Haliso 2020; Tharakan 2015). For example, in a recent paper in *Nature, Ecology and Evolution* entitled 'Decoloniality and Anti-Oppressive Practices for a More Ethical Ecology', Trisos, Auerbach and Katti (2021) develop five concrete and useful interventions for the decolonisation of scientific knowledge: decolonisation of the mind, knowledge of histories, the decolonisation of data, the decolonisation of expertise, and working in inclusive teams. They emphasise the need for greater collaborations, a focus on local knowledge and emphasis on relationships, trust, care, and a commitment to sustaining or improving the future – for people and the planet. The literature in several other disciplines over the last five years has emphasised and made calls to action for locally produced knowledge production (UNESCO Chair in CBR 2020) with greater emphasis and appreciation for indigenous and subaltern knowledge systems that are place-based and linked to social and ecological relations as critical for the survival of our planet (Parsons, Fisher and Nalau 2016; Schang *et al.* 2020; Townsend, Moola and Craig 2020).

Colonisation is a process that is ongoing, and research has been one of its tools – appropriating knowledge and racist framing of indigenous peoples, it has been a tool for social control and exclusion (Smith 1999). Alongside the advancement of CBPR has been a strong resistance by indigenous scholars to undo the construction of colonising ontologies and epistemologies and have proposed research with indigenous ways of knowing and methodologies. Some of these notable works include Shawn Wilson's *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (2008), Margaret Kovach's *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations and Contexts* (2009), Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999), Bagele Chilisa's *Indigenous Research Methodologies* (2011), Susan Strega and Leslie Brown's *Research as Resistance: Revisiting Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches* (2015), Lorna Williams *et al.*'s *Walking Side by Side: Living Indigenous Ways in the Academy: Linking Pedagogy to Practice* (2014), Jeff Corntassel's *Everyday Acts of Resurgence: People, Places, Practices* (2018) or Deborah McGregor, Jean-Paul Restoule and Rochelle Johnston's *Indigenous Research: Theories, Practices, and Relationships* (2018) to name but a few. There is no single indigenous research paradigm – these knowledges are

as diverse as indigenous peoples themselves – however they do share a common feature of being distinct from non-indigenous approaches to research. McGregor *et al.* (2018) describe some of these key elements, including ‘supporting diversity and intellectual self-determination, recognising traditional and contemporary indigenous knowledge traditions, the value of community leadership and support, and the community’s ownership of knowledge’ (McGregor *et al.* 2018: 2).

Although often described within the context of decolonisation, indigenous research methodologies are not simply a response to colonialism but have existed for thousands of years (Wilson 2008). They reflect the diversity of worldviews, ontologies and epistemologies of diverse indigenous nations and can be traced to the land, and ancestral sources of knowledge (McGregor *et al.* 2018). Another notable scholar highlighting this point is Ugandan activist Paulo Wangoola, who is known for his work in founding the Mpambo Afrikan Multiversity, a village-based institution of higher education and research for the support of mother-tongue scholars of Afrikan indigenous knowledge. Upon returning to his village, after many years on other parts of Africa and abroad he shared this message with his Elders:

You sent me out, one of the lesser young people of my generation, to gain Western knowledge and to work in the structures and organisations of the Western world. I have been to their universities, have worked with their governments, have created Western style organisations here in Africa and now I have come home to share what I have learned. I have come to tell you that we, the children of Busoga Kingdom, the children of Afrika will never realize our full potential as people in our communities and as contributors to the global treasury of knowledge if we continue to depend wholly on the content and ways of knowledge of the European peoples. Our way forward must be linked to the recovery, replenishment and revitalization of our thousands of years old indigenous knowledge. (Hall 2014: 143)

In 2013, at the University of Victoria, Canada, Paulo Wangoola spoke in the First Peoples House, on the significance of this intellectual revolutionary movement and the creation of the multiversity, ‘because university means one and universal – we wanted to make space and give people the chance to advance their knowledge systems, languages and culture’ (Wangoola 2013)

There is a strong global movement for indigenous-led knowledge sovereignty and self-determination. In Canada, for example, several First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities and organisations have developed their own research protocols and procedures as a measure for increased self-determination and

assurance of respectful research processes. The National Inuit Strategy on Research,¹¹ for example, was launched in 2018 as a guiding framework to improve the way Inuit Nunangat research is governed, resourced, conducted, and shared. Other national advancements include The Canada Research Coordinating Committee framework for indigenous-led research and leadership released in 2019¹², and new funding programmes to support indigenous research and equity, diversity, and inclusion. The Great Plains Tribal Epidemiology Center has also produced an Indigenous Evaluation Toolkit (2018), which is another important example of a resource whereby indigenous communities are generating research methodologies themselves, which are valuable not only for their own use, but also for others.

Approaches such as CBPR and indigenous research are clearly powerful ways to decolonise knowledge by recognising and embracing multiple knowledge systems and disrupting power relations typical of colonial structures. How then may researchers approach decolonising their research approaches and ways of working, and thinking? What does this look like in practice?

¹¹ Please see Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami website

¹² Available on the official Government of Canada website

7. Shifting research mindsets and practices; some implications for how researchers can help decolonise knowledge for development

As this Working Paper has sought to demonstrate, there are many thinkers, writers and practitioners engaged in a variety of activities which either explicitly, or implicitly, seeks to decolonise knowledge for development. Strega and Brown (2015) for example, call for critical reflexivity in research practice, an approach to reflection that focuses on the politics and ideologies embedded within research processes and within the self as researcher. In order to do this, they argue researchers must uncover and challenge the power relations embedded in research, and to uncover and challenge hegemonic assumptions about the nature of the world, the self, and research. These hegemonic assumptions flow from the defining ideologies of the current era time: white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy.

Building on past experiences and lessons learned, and in order to seek transformative progress in addressing some of the most intractable development challenges, we identify four potential priority areas where intentional approaches regarding knowledge may help to make a difference.

7.1 Identifying what, and whose, knowledge is valued, counted and integrated into development processes

As indicated in the previous sections, it is all too common that researchers fail to recognise or value knowledge needed to address some of the world's greatest challenges, because of where it resides and who has generated it. Who can legitimately know and produce useful knowledge? With/for whom, and why? As the previous discussion has indicated, there is no one way of knowing. Wisdom exists in every community. To decolonise knowledge, it seems necessary therefore to recognise people as knowers of their experience and weave together knowledge from various sources, including from indigenous and local knowledge systems. The most compelling narratives, particularly those characterised by 'incertitudes' (Scoones and Stirling 2000) are shaped by multiple perspectives and different forms and expressions of knowledge, and by

working in a spirit of inclusion and in participatory ways. This is not to suggest that in certain areas of knowledge, for example medical science with vaccine development as a topical example, the importance of expertise and validation through processes such as academic peer review becomes invalid. However, the perception often persists that 'expert knowledge' is of a higher order to a wide range of other knowledges simply because of the power structures and hierarchies that give it authority. Experience from responses to the Ebola epidemic provides many examples of how community-based knowledge of culture and context was critically important in finding pathways towards reducing spread of the disease; the same is true in the context of promoting Covid-19 vaccine uptake which varies significantly between communities due to a range of social and cultural factors.

Since power is such a critical element in the struggle for social justice, the concept of 'cognitive justice' – or whose knowledge counts – is helpful in understanding how and in which ways attention is paid to epistemology. Many scholars (Hall and Tandon 2017; de Sousa Santos 2014; Visvanathan 1999) have taken a critical and urgent stance to this agenda. In the context of research and higher education, the UNESCO Chair in CBR¹³ has undertaken several studies that are providing a better understanding of 'knowledge cultures' in diverse communities, and the fundamental assumptions and patterns of meanings around knowledge creation, validation, dissemination and use that characterise diverse knowledge cultures. They define 'knowledge culture' as the set of practices, arrangements and mechanisms bound together by necessity, affinity, and historical coincidence which, in a given area of professional expertise, make up how we know what we know and how knowledge is created (Cetina 2007). 'The differences between the ways that knowledge is understood, constructed, validated, and used in academic and non-academic settings is complex and may create obstacles in working across knowledge cultures' (UNESCO Chair in CBR 2020).

Acknowledging the value of, and engagement with, different knowledges and their creators, therefore seems crucial throughout the research process, as illustrated in the example (described in Box 7.1) of research with indigenous communities on the west coast of Canada¹⁴.

¹³ See [UNESCO Chair in CBR website](#)

¹⁴ See [Canada K4C Hub \(Salish Sea\) website](#)

Box 7.1: Research methods for engaging with indigenous knowledges

The Salish Sea Hub is a partnership between the University of Victoria (UVic), the Victoria Native Friendship Centre (VNFC) and the Victoria Foundation, offering training and expertise in community-based participatory research (CBPR) to local community organisations, First Nations, and public institutions. A project led by the Salish Sea Hub was initiated by the VNFC when Elders they serve wanted to know more about how the Covid-19 public health measures were affecting their communities. Through a Covid-19 recovery grant through UVic, the Hub quickly assembled an Elders advisory and community co-researchers including 12 UVic students in a CBPR course to conduct phone interviews with 80 Elders during 2020–21. The research was initiated, led, and conducted by the VNFC staff, Elders and student volunteers and helped to provide enhanced understanding of the impacts including *emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical* and an evaluation of programming that was quickly initiated by the VNFC in response – such as The Hampers Programme, Elders Tech Time, phone chain and other critical supports. Staff, Elders, and students met regularly to share findings and are producing a report and knowledge tools to share to other friendships centres and indigenous service organisations.

7.2 Decolonising knowledge asymmetries – learning through research, and as researchers

Doing research provides researchers with a wealth of opportunity to learn about, and address, decolonisation of knowledge. But how researchers approach this challenge, with whom, where, and how, is of critical importance. ‘Inclusive’ research methods may not actually provide an opportunity to decolonise knowledge, because this may not be part of the intent, and is often avoided because it is uncomfortable, difficult, and perhaps is not a shared expectation.

In the Covid Collective synthesis paper referred to earlier, Lenhardt (2021a) observes that the Covid-19 pandemic has sparked a renewed focus on the role of local actors and local knowledge in responding to crisis. These disruptions to the ‘normal’ way of doing things have led to adaptations of research and support by distance, but they are also highlighting what local communities can and should be leading themselves through research and knowledge creation. She writes about the importance and critical role of local participation in responding to – and recovering from – the Covid-19 crisis. She also notes the multiple benefits of local participation, including contributing to more effective information sharing, mobilising local life and livelihoods saving networks in the area, and promoting community empowerment, resilience, and trust. She observes also that local

participation is valuable in its own right, ensuring that individuals and communities are empowered to make decisions about their own needs, and how and what they want to rebuild. These community based participatory processes may themselves be designed as action research in which the process is as much an outcome as the impact of results, thus generating important learning about the nature of research, and community action and engagement. Yet agencies supporting communities often struggle to integrate participation in their operations. ALNAP (2014) note the limited integration of local participation in humanitarian activities beyond initial consultation in the project design phase and as in-kind labour in project delivery.

Box 7.2: Research methods for engagement with local communities

The Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), based in New Delhi, India, has been operating for over 40 years throughout Asia, with the aim of supporting the development of grass roots knowledge with the urban and rural poor for social change. One of their projects works to build capacity on the social and economic empowerment of women informal migrant workers in Gurugram, India. The impacts of Covid-19 on women domestic workers in Harijan Basti, Gurugram is multifaceted. In addition to fear of contracting the virus, they also face the fear of discrimination, of joblessness, and a fear of stigmatisation, of being labelled as 'corona spreaders'. In response, PRIA initiated a CBPR project 'Sapne Mere, Bhavishya Mera' and conducted a needs assessment survey in February 2021 with the women informal migrant workers of Harijan Basti it was revealed that 60 per cent of women domestic workers were removed from their jobs as soon as the nationwide lockdown was announced in 2020. A Women's Resource and Support Centre was created to perform the following: an information hub on rights and legal mechanisms; an Adult Learning Center to develop skills like sewing, cooking, business management, and more; a safe, clean, collectivising space for social interaction, recreational activities, and stress-free downtime; and a recruitment/employment advisory.

In addition to responding to the direct needs of the women, 'This project has revealed very encouraging attitudes about how women in the community envision their futures through the Centre. Learning new skills will ensure better employment opportunities.'

For more information about this project please visit the PRIA website.

Researchers can, however, look to examples identified through, and within, changing research practices of increased participation and shifting of power. Box 7.2 provides an interesting example of community-based research and local participation in India towards local communities over the last year, to learn how to do things differently.

Promoting decolonisation of knowledge asymmetries is challenging. As noted earlier in this Working Paper, a number of decolonial, post-colonial and post-development scholars have initiated conversations on the epistemological foundations upon which Covid-19 response and recovery, and development more broadly, will be built (see Kwok2020; Leach *et al.* 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021; Rutazibwa 2020; Vazquez quoted in Rutazibwa 2020; Westboy and Harris 2020). Rutazibwa argues, however, that failures in international coordination and cooperation, and lack of support to lower-income countries, have highlighted colonial legacies in unequal resource capacities and global solidarity. She also comments that ‘individual and local community initiatives painfully and sharply highlight where our structures and national and global systems of governance murderously fall short’ (2020: 2). Such shortfalls may arise in part because of the perceived disadvantages of localisation of efforts within international cooperation. These may include additional costs of interventions in terms of financial resources and time, and the perceived difficulties in aggregating or ‘scaling up’ findings from research that takes place in and with communities, although innovative approaches to scaling innovations are now helping to address this latter challenge (McLean and Gargani 2020). Many are now asking whether these revealed inadequacies in international cooperation may open the space for a reimagining of agency and power in the conceptualisation and realisation of development and research. It is still too early to know whether the rupture of Covid-19 has opened this space and to know how the space will ultimately be filled.

7.3 Investing resources to transform existing colonialities

To learn and change, it is necessary to invest. Multiple, diverse knowledge systems need a strong financial and economic base which allows them to grow. Change however, particularly transformative change which is at the core of the issues explored in this paper, is difficult to achieve, not least because of the level, and types, of investment required. Researchers will need to unpack what they have learned about who they are, the powers and privileges they hold, and their ideas and practices of ‘leadership’. They will need to recognise and break down barriers and walls between them and a wide array of other societal members if they are serious about change. They will need to invoke and experience connection and belonging on this shared journey. The processes

required to achieve this kind of change takes commitment, time, appropriate spaces, and other resources. Taylor and Tremblay (2021) identified the following resources as being critical, in bringing about transformation at personal and systemic scales:

- Patience, humility, time – to allow for the discomfort of ‘unlearning’ and the wonders of continually ‘relearning’ with others
- Transparency about how researchers live and model diversity and inclusion in their activities and in organisations and communities
- Courage to interrogate history and privilege and to work toward change
- Power sharing – be ready to give up what we hold individually and realise the outcomes will ultimately be positive for all
- Recognition of people as knowers of their own experience
- Financial resources since decolonising knowledge, also requires decolonising wealth

Regarding financial resources, it is clear that research funding for international and community development, is subject to a wide array of constraints and priorities, even though the quantum of financial, human, and other resources committed over decades has been very substantial. Research funding is itself threatened by wider cuts to overseas development assistance, some of which have resulted from economic challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic, whilst others are due to shifting ideological and political priorities about the nature of development aid (Lenhardt 2021). These may create challenges for research that seeks explicitly to follow a decolonising path, since the inherent adaptability needed for a decolonising research project may be insufficient, as may be the time allocated for participatory processes of identification of research questions and issues, and engagement of communities in ways that their perspectives, knowledges, and voices are truly centre stage.

There are however examples of more flexible funding programmes, originating from the global North but demonstrating a longer-term view for a transfer of ownership of knowledge and evidence processes, that have sought to create space, time, and agile resources for this kind of approach. Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC) implemented the Think Tank Initiative¹⁵, a ten-year programme of support which offered flexible funding to Africa, Asian and Latin American policy research institutions to enable them to grow and evolve their work in ways that were inherently adaptable and sustainable. Many of the think tanks supported are now in a much stronger position to develop their own research agendas on issues and questions that are

¹⁵ See [Think Tank Initiative website](#)

arising within their immediate contexts, and also contributing to regional and global knowledge systems and development debates.

Other research initiatives, for example the Covid Collective, already described in this paper, adopts a flexible approach to undertaking shorter-term research and which has allowed quite rapid identification of studies that engage with, and in some cases are undertaken directly by, researchers from indigenous communities. An initiative at SOAS University of London has also sought to explore the financial implications directly, as noted in Box 7.3. This is one innovative example of a genuine attempt to shift power asymmetries around knowledge and evidence processes, but it should be acknowledged also that these considerations are not universally shared across research communities in the global North or indeed in the global South. It will be interesting to see how over time decolonising knowledge and research continues to be an issue of global concern, particularly as capacity and capabilities within global South research systems grow, coupled with increased resourcing and decision-making on priorities and agendas through processes that are more localised than at present.

Box 7.3: Applying a decolonial lens to research structures

The Decolonising Research Initiative at SOAS was set up following a conversation event Applying a Decolonial Lens to Research Structures, Norms and Practices in Higher Education Institutions in 2019. This emerged from conversations between Dr Romina Istratii, a critical international development practitioner serving as Research Funding Officer at SOAS, and Dr Alex Lewis, the Director of Research and Enterprise. Both were particularly concerned about the changing funding landscape in recent years – especially in view of emerging schemes that fund research for development (R4D). Through this work they aimed to explore how SOAS and higher education institutions in the UK more generally might better respond to these changes and support egalitarian and reflexive international research. Decolonising research has been a key driver in these conversations.

[See more information on the SOAS website](#)

7.4 'Our' role as individuals, as organisations, as institutions – identifying what 'we' need to do if we're serious about taking on the challenge

Finally, transformative change of the kind described in this paper is certainly influenced by global power and knowledge asymmetries, and the availability of financial resources that set international development research agendas, but there is also a deeply personal dimension. Bringing this issue back to ourselves as authors based in the global North, we recognise that as researchers, given our identity, positionality, and privilege, we need to work on ourselves. We acknowledge we have experienced discomfort when asked searching questions by participants in dialogues that we have co-facilitated 'Am I OK with the status quo? Am I part of the problem? Am I ready to feel uncomfortable? Am I ready to be an "ethical warrior"?' As we seek the answers to these questions, we have often been reminded of the need to personally stand up and work with others in our organisations and in our communities.

Along with other participants in recent dialogues, we have identified the following actions as timely and critical, all with implications for our roles as researchers wherever we may be located, and for the research in which we engage with others in knowledge co-construction processes:

- Ensure solutions are shaped/created by those who experience the challenges being addressed if they are to succeed and be sustained.
- Establish reflective spaces for inclusive processes, in which participants are aware of and interrogate their privilege and how they can use it to make change that disrupts inequalities. Check and challenge policies and practices that discriminate.
- Find connections and ways in which we belong with each other, as communities, on this shared journey.
- Appreciate that the benefits of decolonising knowledge are not obvious to everyone. Nor are they desired by those who believe they may 'lose' status or privilege. Through sharing evidence and experience, demonstrate the value of decolonised knowledge for liberation and a more positive future for all.
- To be able to do this though, we need trust. Unfortunately, trust is very hard to build, but also easily lost. Researchers who claim to work in participatory and inclusive ways need to be extremely conscious of who is setting and controlling the research agenda, what kinds of power dynamics are at play, and committed to ensuring that the expectations of participants, and the incredible gifts they make of time, energy, belief, and sometimes personal risk, are not taken lightly or squandered needlessly.

8. Concluding reflections

As noted in the Introduction to this Working Paper, we have set out to explore current, and emerging, framings of decolonising knowledge for development. We wanted to contribute to better understandings of the importance of diverse voices, knowledges, and perspectives in an emerging agenda for development research. Referring to different strands and streams of literature, but also drawing on stories and sharing of experience with researchers and practitioners we have engaged with, we sought to bring together key themes, tensions, and insights on the decolonisation of knowledge for development in the context of the Covid-19 era.

One key observation to highlight is that in order to imagine, and possibly experience, a world that is significantly different in terms of equality and justice, a range of different knowledges, experiences, and voices, will need to be centre stage in research processes, and built in much more proactively throughout different forms of international cooperation. Otherwise, the risks of perpetuating the structural inequalities that value particular kinds of knowledge remain high; and rather than 'Building Back Better' towards some illusory state of normality, the future may be characterised by more of the actions that have characterised the past. There is a powerful need for forms of real engagement in research, globally, regionally, nationally and at community level, which brings different knowledges revealing how people affected in multiple contexts and draws actively on the lessons being learned from innovation and actions in communities. Yet, this needs to happen in ways that do not diminish the role, contribution, and power of those who have shared their knowledge and experience, as it is taken to a different context. Extractive methods, and disempowerment, sadly remain a characteristic typical of many research projects.

In reflecting on the need for change, even the transformation of existing research and knowledge processes, this paper has inevitably raised many questions for those who do research, including ourselves as authors. How do we become conscious of views and values that are steeped in knowledges that have been forged through colonial histories, and are underpinned by unequal power relations, structures, and systems? How do we become intentional about engaging with power and power relations, if we truly wish to recognise, acknowledge, and address structural inequalities and injustices? Our engagement with the literature and recent dialogues we have been fortunate to participate in has reminded us that even research we believe to be more equitable and respectful is not necessarily so. Participatory research, where it is the most relevant, useful, and appropriate methodology, is itself not always decolonised, or inclusive. It can merely surface knowledge and reinforce

priorities that had been set by previous researchers; or potentially extract knowledge to other locations where communities never interact with it again. We are conscious also that this publication is itself limited in its capacity to represent different voices and knowledges of those whose views have informed it.

Catherine Hoppers challenged the extent to which research reported in typically academic vehicles is equipped to convey the artistic, creative, cultural, and emotional dimensions of knowledge – the cosmology, the fluid processes associated with an African woman as a knower. How, she asked us, do you ‘translate’ all this onto a print page?

Although the challenges associated with decolonising knowledge for development remain enormous, as authors we feel inspired and encouraged by the work and contributions of others. We have encountered numerous insights on how research is helping to address power imbalances and historical inequalities. Many projects described in this paper are helping to demonstrate how research led primarily by universities, or other research institutions, is also engaging with communities in ways that promote respect, accountability, equality, and justice. We have considered early versions of emerging funding models, and alternative ways of thinking about supporting research that has an explicit decolonising agenda. We are aware also that we have learned and gained knowledge ourselves through the rich conversations referenced in this paper. They have challenged the ways we think, they have made us feel uncomfortable, but they have also given us hope. For all this, we are grateful. We welcome the opportunity to continue engaging in these conversations with others.

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