

# Decolonisation and decoloniality

## A position paper for research and evidence cultures in Christian Aid

*'The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.'*

Michel-Rolph Trouillot

### Purpose of the paper

The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the key definitions and 'asks' surrounding the work towards decolonisation and decoloniality. By laying out these definitions and 'asks,' we aim to highlight the crucial concerns that should guide research and evidencing teams dedicated to decolonization, with a special focus on fostering epistemic justice. Throughout the paper, we explore key concepts, provide clear definitions, and offer actionable recommendations. Our intention is to create a reflective and interactive space within these pages, therefore, reflection points have been included after each discussion to allow for meaningful contemplation.

### Epistemic justice or knowledge justice

*The problem of who has power over knowledge and whose knowledge counts as authoritative?*

At Christian Aid, amidst our pursuit of various forms of justice like economic justice and climate justice, we also emphasize the importance of 'knowledge justice.' This term, coined by Christian Aid, aligns with the more widely used concept of epistemic justice. It encompasses the necessary work to recognize how colonial knowledge

This paper was initially written for Christian Aid's [Research Evidence and Learning Team](#) in November 2022. It was updated in June 2023 in recognition of its potential value for a broader range of audiences.

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structures shape our understanding and formalization of knowledge. We must bear these key considerations about knowledge justice in mind:

- Acknowledge the perpetuation and replication of colonial knowledge structures within our cultures of evidence and learning.
- Recognize that knowledge is not created or produced in equitable ways.
- Certain communities, cultures, and individuals are not seen as 'legitimate' sources of knowledge, or what they offer is not even defined as knowledge. Activists and scholars argue that this delegitimization of knowledge from specific sources was a central objective of the European colonial project.
- This delegitimization resulted in the everyday representation of colonized communities and/or their postcolonial descendants being viewed as lacking in authority in comparison to the norms and procedures of the 'civilized' colonizers and their descendent societies.

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*It's important to be aware that the pursuit of knowledge justice is not specific to the decoloniality project but is significantly bolstered by its aims and purposes.*

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- Culture and context matters. To ensure our work is responsive to the needs of those living in poverty, we must consider and be aware of who owns knowledge and how knowledge is sustained.
- Colonial power structures are often reproduced in post-colonial contexts. As illustrated in this paper, colonial logics and processes endure beyond the end of physical colonization. Therefore, this conversation holds equal importance in for example, Kenya as it does in the UK.
- In essence, the pursuit of knowledge justice involves affirming that the living knowledge traditions of formerly colonized communities possess authoritative knowledge when it comes to identifying **'what counts as a problem, what constitutes the problem, and what are the means of redress'**<sup>1</sup>.
- Activists and scholars agree that working for knowledge justice is a fundamental part of repairing colonial injustice. Sylvia Wynter, a Caribbean writer, often notes that we must recognize that the method and methodology of constructing knowledge categories is a form of discipline, and that the exercise of discipline was a central aspect of Empire<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, many scholars argue that we should be mindful that knowledge production itself can be exclusive and accumulative. Scholars writing from indigenous perspectives, such as Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, Robbie Shilliam, Sophia Chirongoma, and Elia Maggang, remind us that the knowledge traditions of numerous indigenous communities use practices of relating and valuing relationships that are embedded in

The concept of empire encompasses colonialism and imperialism. Empires are political organizations that are expansive, militarized, and multinational, and that place limits on the sovereignty of the polities in their periphery.



What is the word or phrase that can mean empire in your language/context?

particular locales and peoples, and thus offer ways of engaging without claiming any kind of 'universalism'. This approach places participation at the centre, actively rejecting the separation of researchers from those being researched. Viewed in this light, knowledge production is less a creative endeavour and more an accumulation process and imperial extension disguised as **'knowledge for knowledge's sake'**<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, scholars argue for knowledge cultivation where we **'till, to turn matter around and fold back on itself so as to encourage growth'**<sup>4</sup>.

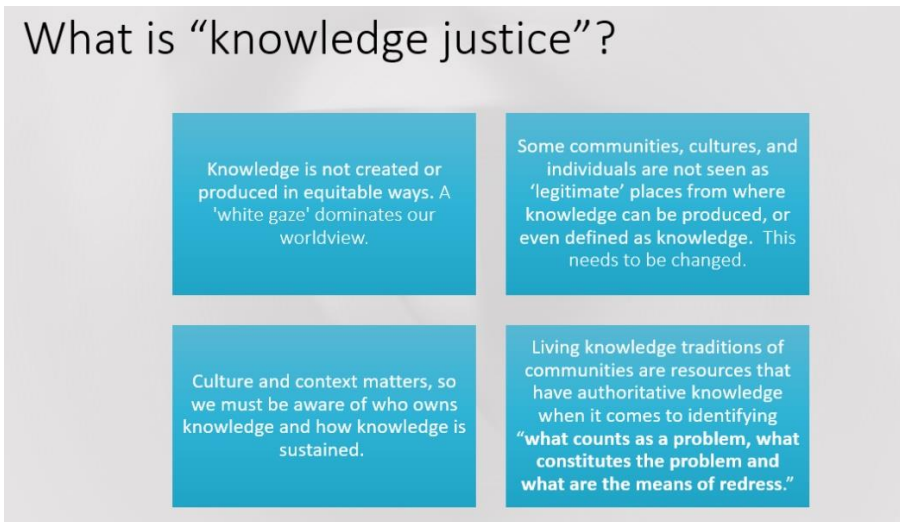
The diagram on the next page (Figure 1) may be useful in teasing out the key arguments regarding knowledge justice (epistemic justice).



#### REFLECTION POINT

***In what ways might you approach research, evidence and learning cultures in your organisation as a creative endeavour? How might we encourage knowledge growth rather than just producing knowledge?***

Figure 1: Key arguments regarding knowledge justice



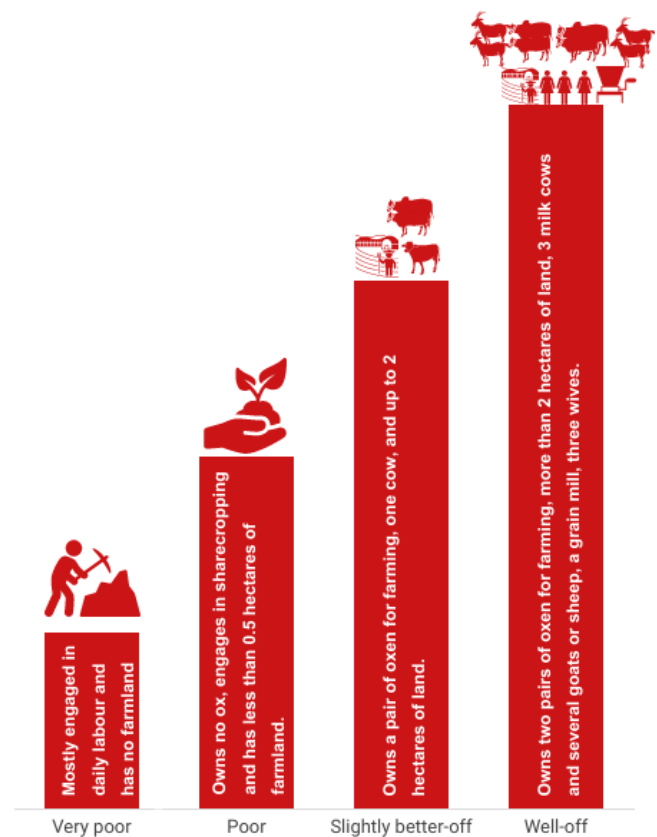
### Knowledge justice in the development sector

In international development, it is crucial to recognise that although what constitutes development is a contested set of ideas and practices, there is an increasing consensus that aid and development perpetuate colonial power structures and uphold Eurocentric logics. This means that the realities of the global majority are determined by a handful of powerful institutions and a global elite. Consequently, we can argue that ‘development’ imposed its own understanding of poverty, wealth, justice, and injustice, thus categorizing certain subjectivities and knowledge systems as inferior. Given this, it may be necessary to expand our approach to knowledge production beyond the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda for 2030 which many scholars and activists argue are still tied to Eurocentric logics. As an example, scholars often highlight that the SDGs continue to reinforce the dichotomy between developed and underdeveloped regions, measuring progress against indicators rooted in a specific interpretation of development standards. These standards are defined by what is perceived as 'civilized' and 'developed', with ways of life prevalent in the Global North being deemed as the 'norm' or 'ideal standard'.

Christian Aid’s research provides a clear example

of how wealth and progress have very contextualised meanings. For instance, during a study on social protection in Ethiopia, agropastoralists were asked to define status<sup>5</sup>. Figure 2 below illustrates their responses.

Figure 2: Agropastoralists in Ethiopia's definition of status



Some activists and academics also note that the SDGs remain tied to ideas of consumption and growth that promote globalised capitalism, a system that has historically disenfranchised many. A further critique highlights that the Eurocentrism of the SDGs tries to 'reconcile the irreconcilable: growth and sustainability. We cannot have both. We cannot continue to treat the non-human world as a resource to be exploited'<sup>6</sup>.

What does this mean for those of us working in and from international development? As the Convivial Think collective aptly suggests, it means we need to:

- Critically evaluate and reflect on our ways of doing research and defining learning agendas.
- Question underlying assumptions that may be inherent in our thinking. Decoloniality and anti-racism prompts us to recognise other ways of existing in the world that may be similar or quite different to our own. This requires us to examine our identities and critically reflect on how they influence our emotions, thoughts, and actions in various situations.
- De-link colonial biases of knowledge production and sharing from approaches to research, teaching, and learning.
- Revisit the basic frameworks of research, especially the notion of objectivity and consider taking on more reflexivity within our research frameworks.

Christian Aid and Tearfund have a [guide](#) on doing research and evaluation ethically which provides some guidance on how to engage reflexively in our work which you might be interested in using.

Eurocentrism represents a specific mode of understanding the world that begins and ends with Europe. It has many characteristics but is rooted in four fundamental assumptions:

- ① Modernity originated in Europe.
- ② Europe's autonomous production of modernity renders it superior to the rest.
- ③ European modernity and its associated institutions and practices are destined to become universal. The actual mode of their universalization is derived from the first assumption.
- ④ Internal development processes unfold in stages, albeit with time-lags, in every society throughout the world. These processes, both normatively and historically, will in time converge and form a homogeneous global space inhabited by a sociality which is European in essence.

Eurocentrism therefore, universalizes Europe as the original and privileged space of modernity, and that progressing towards become this idealised state is where all other cultures and communities must work towards.



#### REFLECTION POINT

**Find a document in your organisation such as a learning review or a research report. What kinds of knowledge assumptions and structures do you see? What knowledge and ways of knowing the world are not present?**

## What is decolonisation?

Discussions on decolonisation are not novel. While it has become trendy to append the term 'decolonise' to most processes, the push for decolonisation and the envisioning of a transformed world can be traced back to the anti-colonial movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is crucial to acknowledge that this narrative extends beyond European colonisation but also encompasses the collusion of the elite and upper class/caste individuals from the colonies with the colonisers to deem certain lands and communities as inferior and disposable. For instance, in Sankaran Krishna's insightful examination of the Dongaria Kondh people's struggle against the Vedanta mining company, he highlights that the primary beneficiaries of development, both historically and presently, have been upper caste/class urban communities<sup>7</sup>. Those who did not fit into these categories were displaced and left destitute. As cited in Ranawana, 2022, Casement, in his study of the Peruvian Amazon company in Putumayo, remarks that once an indigenous tribe was taken over, they became the exclusive property of their conquerors<sup>8</sup>. Local magistrates, he noted, 'actively intervened' to capture indigenous escapees.

Therefore, the conversation necessary in decolonisation is not only a question of what the West did to the South, but also how Southern elites profited from the colonial era. It also raises questions about how certain institutions continue to benefit from laws or processes established during the European colonial project, such as churches that still possess vast amounts of land and wealth. A case in point is Zimbabwe, where numerous institutionalised churches have significant land holdings with major agricultural investments and other businesses, some of which were inherited from the colonial era<sup>9</sup>.

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*Decolonisation is about dismantling power. This is not meant to be a comfortable process. It is intended to discomfort.*

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Another significant aspect of decolonisation is the dismantling of power relationships. Decolonisation can have different emphases in different contexts. Here are a few examples:

- Indigenous scholars and activists note that decolonisation is not a metaphor for them; it is about material reparations, about '**land back**'<sup>10</sup>.
- For scholars and activists in South Asia, it can be more about the rescue and reclamation of a diversity of language and culture, and the need to resist neo-imperialist forces that are acting in the same way as the European coloniser<sup>11</sup>.
- For scholars and activists in the United Kingdom, decolonisation entails grappling with Britain's imperial past.
- In Caribbean nations, it involves both breaking away from proto-imperialist organizations like the Commonwealth and seeking material reparations.

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*As scholars and activists have noted, decolonization is not only about making room for the historically excluded, or the recognition of the violence that has been done, but it is about **radically altering** the terms of the conversation to change the colonial order of things.*

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Why scholars and activists continue to speak about decolonisation is because, although physical colonisation ended in many parts of the world, colonial infrastructures that govern knowledge, culture and bureaucracy persist. It is a fact that the modern, capitalist world economy is one in which colonisers and colonised were systematically bound into relationships of extraction, colonisation, and dispossession. This is about a long struggle, and it's not meant to be straightforward.

Decolonisation encompasses various approaches which we aim to explain below. These approaches must all occur simultaneously. For Europe, it entails engaging with the legacies and afterlives of colonialism both 'within' and 'without' its changing (and colonial) borders. This can involve both material and cultural reparations, depending on the context and the forms of justice sought by different communities. It means not only providing reparations to formerly colonised nations but also transforming systems within institutions in the Global North that marginalise individuals from previously colonised nations. As discussed in the section below regarding the ways in which Southern elites wield power, it is crucial to understand how some individuals within formerly colonised nations perpetuate the same colonial logics, resulting in minimal change for those living in poverty. Additionally, we should question whether the 'Southern' representatives at policy-making tables are drawn from those who already have access to power.

For the previously colonised, decolonisation entails resisting and rejecting colonised ways of being. The colonised must recentre their own undermined but varied cultural resources. This implies that decisions on decolonising aid practices must be driven by the Global South and not centred in the Global North. It must be an agenda set up by the South, rather than merely responding to an agenda set by someone else.

Let us not overlook the fact that ultimately, this is about a long struggle that has at its aim, the overturning of power relationships. It is not solely

about shifting power but also about redistributing and reclaiming power. For organizations like Christian Aid, this may require a commitment to the eventual dissolution of the organization or its existence in a different form.

A [paper](#) by our colleagues Talatu Aliyu, Cathy Bollaert, and Kaz Sempere effectively initiates the discussion on shifting power in research.



#### REFLECTION POINTS

*How can aid alternatives and concepts in /from the South be fostered and included in your work?*

*In what ways can organisational strategic planning be linked to local realities and resources and not necessarily to the SDG or other global goals?*

*What is the end point of decolonisation for an organisation such as yours?*

## What is decoloniality?

*A mindset, a praxis.*

To join in the journey towards decolonisation, we must engage in decolonial praxis. Decoloniality, that is, taking on a decolonial praxis, requires us to first address epistemic questions: **Who gets to know the world? Who gets to shape the world? Who or what is silent or silenced?**

Decoloniality can be seen as the ‘how’ of decolonisation — a process of liberation to unmask and reveal coloniality, and challenge its endurance across three dimensions: power, knowledge and being<sup>12</sup>. It seeks to understand the persistence of coloniality, not just in the legacies of imperialism but in the very organisation of the world. It resists the instrumentalization of reason produced by coloniality<sup>13</sup>.

Decoloniality is a mindset or praxis — it is an orientation toward culture marked by a commitment to root out that which remains in culture, education, society, and so on from the colonial era. Decoloniality **‘disobeys and delinks from [the colonial matrix of power], constructing paths and praxis toward another way of thinking, sensing, believing, doing, and living’**<sup>14</sup>. Its goal is liberation through the dismantling of power that was centralised through colonial processes that centralised control of knowledge, gender, economic systems and authority.

Decoloniality involves a critical mode of analysis that challenges the assumed universality of coloniality and its associated systems.

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*Decoloniality seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis and thought*<sup>15</sup>

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Figure 3<sup>16</sup> below by Dr Cathy Bollaert (2019) provides an example of such how such rationality and ways of seeing the world (worldview) underpinned racism and Apartheid in South Africa, resulting in a deeply divided society based on race. Dismantling Apartheid required disrupting the belief systems (rationality) on which its racist policies were based. To build a more equitable and peaceful society this work needs to continue.

Figure 3: Worldview that underpinned racism and Apartheid in South Africa

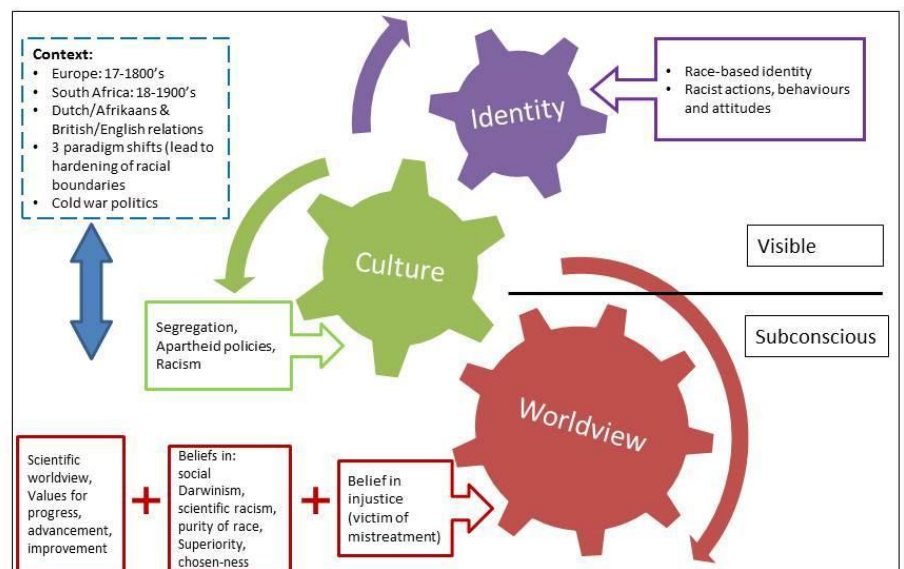


Figure 4 below is by researchers from the University of British Columbia detailing an Indigenous approach to knowledge<sup>17</sup>. How might it differ from how you understand a Western rationale for research and knowledge that is based on linearity and individual, objective ways of knowledge making? As an example, quite often our research cultures do not look to incorporating the spiritual aspects of the research process. How is the researcher transformed by the process? How is the community affected by the process? Research is often extractive, taking knowledge from a community. Research that is reciprocal would look to build deep relationships with the community and be guided by this to build community.

Figure 4: Indigenous approach to knowledge



### Final comments

What elements might make up a decolonial praxis? From a research, as well as programme design point of view, it would entail:

- A call to disobey or to 'refuse' what we know.
- Recognition that methodology itself is a disciplinary tool.
- Asking questions of our chosen methodology - what is the role and purpose of the method? Does it silence certain groups of people? Does it perpetuate inequalities?
- Moving towards more diverse research methodologies. Can we, for example, use less surveys and Focus Group Discussions and incorporate more approaches like oral histories, soundscapes, craft making, life-worlds, community-based design?

### Remember:

**There is no methodical checklist nor a defined endpoint. This is a long process that actively works to dismantle, re-create and push at the limits of methodological boundaries.**



### REFLECTION POINTS

- In what ways can you ensure reciprocity and respect for self-determination in research design and evaluation design?*
- How can we centre community needs, priorities and voices in our research?*
- What are the key elements of a decolonial praxis that would be necessary for your organisation?*



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