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# From research to action: the practice of decolonizing ICT4D

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## ABSTRACT

The production of knowledge in Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) research has been characterized by an ongoing shift from dominantly Western-based to Indigenous theory formulations. This editorial puts forward core concepts in the decolonization of ICT4D, arguing that these are fundamental to the creation, reading, and interpretation of ICT4D knowledge. Drawing on a decolonial read of the articles published in Vol. 28.3, we advance the argument that decolonizing ICT4D, rather than simply a means to read and analyze data, is an emancipatory practice to be adopted in an open challenge to Western-centric modes of doing ICT4D research.

## KEYWORDS

Decolonisation; global south; research methods; design; theory development

## 1. Introduction

On 7 October 2020, the University of Sheffield Information School ran a public seminar, titled *Decolonizing ICT4D*, which was due to deeply shape discourse and practice in Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) research. Featuring contributions from researchers adopting decolonial approaches, the event illuminated a pressing need to put ICT4D research into direct relation with theory formulated for and within the local context of elaboration (Davison & Díaz Andrade, 2018), and relating to an explicitly decolonial discourse (Jimenez et al., 2022a, 2022b). It could be argued, on the one hand, that contextuality is an almost tautological principle of ICT4D research: after all, marking the difference between our field and mainstream Information Systems (IS) is the engagement of ICT4D with local context, where lessons are drawn within and for the context itself.

At the same time, openly decolonial takes are recent in the history of ICT4D research. To begin with, early ICT4D work sat firmly within IS research in what was back then termed a ‘developing country’ context, a term then substantially problematized in the field (Masiero, 2022a; Qureshi, 2015). The legacy of the commercially biased, North-centered IS field did not create the conditions for the development of Indigenous theories, potentially contrasting global Northern tenets, to arise as paradigms for conducting research. The fact that ICT4D is rooted in Western-centric IS did not help the development of local understandings, further devoicing the production of ICT4D research outside the global North (Mawere & van Stam, 2019; van Stam, 2019).

Within the IS field, self-reinforcing logics of theoretical development might have fostered Western theorizations even more, with the result that, as noted in Diaz Andrade and Davison (2018, pp. 759–760), ‘of the 104 theories (the vast majority published in English) listed on the IS Theory Wiki or article in which a specific theory appeared, 87 involved authors were based in the United States.’ As argued

in Masiero (2022b), what is lost with such a Western bias is not only contextual nuance, but also the ability of research to voice the systematically devalued and marginalized.

Against this backdrop, this editorial of Information Technology for Development Issue 28.3 accomplishes two purposes. First, it introduces core concepts of decolonization and decolonial approaches, observing them in the context of ICT4D research. To do so it leverages recent work that, unpacking different Indigenous theorizations, shows both the nuance and the importance of decoloniality (Chughtai et al., 2020; Jimenez et al., 2022a, 2022b; Jimenez & Roberts, 2019; Mawere & van Stam, 2019; van Stam, 2019). Secondly, it gives a decolonial read of papers published in Issue 28.3. We conclude by arguing for a decolonial practice of ICT4D, seen in the context of the field's intentionality to voice systematically silenced communities.

## 2. The need for the emancipation of research methods and how we can evidence it

Literature provides a deep account of why decolonization is relevant and important – but what it means to global South contexts, when put into practice, needs further interrogation. In this paper, we follow Milan et al. (2021) in adopting a pluralistic conception of the global South, as a plurality of South(s) characterized by intersecting characteristics of marginalization.

To decolonize is to recognize independent thinking and practice, from previously colonized countries/communities (Escobar, 2018). In recognizing independent thinking and practice, 'value' and human agency come to the core. Questions of what value is determined, how this value is determined, and who determines this value are essential in understanding the struggles global South researchers have experienced to articulate their research and express confidence in their findings and methods. These very tenets that shape their process and experience of research are either predominantly Western in an attempt to be 'included' in scholarly discourse – which can result in what some editors refer to as 'too descriptive,' lacking the depth of critical analysis.

This lack is not because of an inability for critical thinking, but the efforts to squeeze into the boundaries of dominant Western ICT4D research practice that confines global South thinkers and scholars to Western-driven approaches of discovery. For example, to understand the depth of critical thinking already embedded in Africans, one only has to attend an isiXhosa<sup>1</sup> praise poetry session in South Africa, where critical analysis is awakened to express praise for what one holds with great regard (value) in the isiXhosa culture. In another example, a recent publication by McBride and Liyala (2021), attempt to present and express the true value (and challenges) of M-Pesa through poetry, in their paper *Memoir from Bukhalalire: a poetic inquiry into the lived experience of M-PESA mobile money usages in rural Kenya*. Their study uses poetry by study participants to 'draw out affective and lived experiences' of M-Pesa, with findings that contrast with typical findings of M-Pesa that focused on connecting the unbanked. Other studies have taken to critical theory and critical realism to bring the local researcher and local participants to the fore in expressing findings in a reflective way (Krauss, 2022) – being open to external biases of the observer (researcher) through collaborative discovery with the observed (McBride, 2021), but also empowering the local researcher (global South researcher) to reflect on their own lived experiences as Africans.

Useful theories such as the Capability Approach, and even the popular Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), have driven many ICT4D studies (Andersson & Hatakka, 2013). However, those theories alone are not sufficient to describe dynamic (evolving and modern) global South phenomena – because we are still discovering without sufficiently addressing issues; we are still traveling the reinventive road. There are numerous factors to consider and observe in 'humans' as they engage with technology, ICT4D has to be transdisciplinary in nature to awaken a true understanding of what is happening in contexts – iterative contextual discovery (Avgerou, 2019; Hassan & Willcocks, 2021). The development of theory by global South researchers has been a challenge for so long – in what continues to be a guarded 'space' for research in ICT4D. The field continues to be dominated by global North research, and for that reason bringing in 'new ways of thought' at times are questioned as not being scientific enough. In an effort to accentuate the unique contribution of African

research in IS, some African scholars at the *African IS Workshop* at the European Conference of Information Systems in 2020 have repelled the labeling of ICT research in Africa as ICT4D, to create new spaces of discourse and thought. It is only from research discovery outside the boundaries of popular ICT4D discourse, that recognition is given to the contribution of African scholars. How and why has this emancipation emerged? This is not to say ICT4D research is no longer relevant – rather the aim is to bring to fore some of the challenges global South researchers experience by journeying towards other disciplines or more invited ‘spaces’ to exercise their discovered methods of inquiry.

Global South contexts need to shape methodologies, discourse, theory, and practice built from their own experiences – but also from hidden paradigms from other disciplines that better explain global South phenomena. There are hidden paradigms that define why South scholars observe their empirical settings the way they do, how they practice research – which cannot be described alone by predominantly western theory. *Hidden* – in the sense that they are yet to be discovered when global South researchers choose not to alienate their cultural/traditional philosophies from ICT4D ‘spaces’ of discourse. The consequence of this leads to a lack of confidence in global South scholars exercising fully their culturally embedded way of thinking, of unpacking, and theorizing – because the discourse is not there or insufficient. Key theory development authors like Hassan and Willcocks (2021) continue to hold workshops on theory development – unraveling the process of theory development, but also conducting research to unpack and guide the theorizing process (Hassan et al., 2019) for global South researchers. A paradigm shift in IS research in the global South is needed for metaphysical, sociological, and artefactual research, to understand South behavior and design based on contextual understanding and sensitivity.

### 3. Decolonizing ICT4D: core concepts applied

As illustrated in Smith (2012), there is no fixed set of principles for decolonial methodologies. Decolonization can take many routes, which have in common a philosophy that puts local value systems at the center of knowledge production.

A core concept in decolonial research is that of *epistemic violence*, which is a form of violence exerted both through knowledge and against it (Galvan-Alvarez, 2010). As remarked in Masiero (2022b), Mignolo (2011) notes that epistemic violence is integral to the process of colonial domination, as it purposefully erases the voices of the colonized. Outside IS and ICT4D, much research has engaged epistemic violence: Harrison (2011) recognizes that anthropology is a field built on the basis of a Western ideological project. Recognizing it, Harrison notes, is key to a project of liberation, which acknowledges the colonial basis of the field and is built in open opposition to them (Masiero, 2022b).

Decolonial concepts have been openly engaged in fields related to ICT4D. In critical data studies, Couldry and Mejias (2019) put forward the notion of *data colonialism*, which is a planned and systematic exploitation of human beings through data. Forms of data colonialism are traced in Taylor and Broeders (2015) who note how data extractivism often happens in the name of ‘development,’ which justifies private corporations appropriating data of millions of poorer masses beyond logics of service provision. Deepening the argument, Mann (2018) notes how the political economy of ‘data for development’ is founded on data extractivism, which reduces the individual to a silenced data source exploited for capitalistic purposes.

Taking stock of the same literature, Milan and Treré (2019) denounce epistemic violence in the context of the data revolution, noting that a Western perspective on the topic silences the voices of individuals and communities that the data revolution has marginalized. In opposition to the idea of a homogeneous ‘global South,’ they propose the pluralistic idea of many Souths of the world, each with its specific characteristics. It is the silenced stories of the data revolution that Milan and Treré (2019) are interested in, arguing that a decolonial project is fundamental to shift from a Western hegemonic perspective to the silenced ones of the marginalized (see also Milan

et al., 2021). Their project engages reparation of epistemic violence, where decolonial conceptualization allows voices from systematically silenced contexts to emerge.

In spite of such a rich interdisciplinary literature, only recently have decolonial methodologies, concepts and arguments featured prominently in ICT4D research. Key to their emergence is the field's explicit turn towards what Davison and Díaz Andrade (2018) refer to as *indigenous theory*: this is as 'a theory of human behaviour or mind that is specific to a context or culture, not imported from other contexts/cultures and purposely designed for the people who live in that context or culture' (2018, p. 760). Countering Western-centric perspectives, it explicitly engages the local context where it is generated and is therefore instrumental against the silencing of Indigenous voices. Featured in the most recent conferences of the IFIP 9.4 Working Group on the Implications of Information and Digital Technologies for Development with a dedicated track, indigenous theory has become integral to the making of ICT4D research.

Systematically silenced across centuries, a process resulting in violent outcomes against the colonized (Smith, 2012), indigenous theory is therefore finding increasing space in ICT4D. This allows, as powerfully illustrated by Jimenez et al. (2022a), the decolonial reconstruction and reimagination of core concepts of the ICT4D field. Taking core Western concepts of innovation and growth, Jimenez et al. (2022a) reconstruct them through the Andean philosophy of *Buen Vivir*: doing so they restore the value of such concepts for the Andean populations, making them emerge within the value systems shared by the engaged communities. In her work on using digital tools for defending indigenous cultures, Pérez-García (2021) conducts a similar reimagination, where *Buen Vivir* is fundamental in remaking the core concepts of research.

These works offer the basis for our core argument: decolonizing ICT4D is a practice of research, which deconstructs Western-based concepts and rebuilds them through Indigenous value systems. In this respect, decolonization is a *modus operandi* of ICT4D research, centered on the unmaking of Western hegemonic rationalities in favor of the reimagination of concepts through Indigenous views of the world.

#### 4. Papers in Issue 28.3: a decolonial read

As a regular issue of this journal, Issue 28.3 does not focus on a core theme of decoloniality, nor does it feature explicit Indigenous theorization. Colleagues interested in the topic will find multiple fora where it is dealt with: among these are the Television and New Media Special Issue on data decoloniality edited by Milan and Treré (2019), the Information Systems Journal Special Issue on Indigenous Theory edited by Davison (2021), and the proceedings of Track 9 on Digitalisation for Indigenous Emancipation in the IFIP 9.4 2021 Virtual Conference (Masiero & Nielsen, 2021). All these present a common theme of decoloniality, with the application of Indigenous perspectives to ICT4D research.

Nevertheless, it is possible to read published ICT4D research with a decolonial eye. This is the effort we engage here, reading papers published in Issue 28.3 through a perspective inspired by core concepts of decolonial research. By doing so, we hope to accomplish two simultaneous goals: illuminating the devoiced perspectives that the different papers refer to, and, by doing so, bringing to light the alternative narratives that a Western-centric perspective makes invisible.

In 'Examining the health impact of elderly ICT use in China,' Zhang et al. (2022) conduct a survey with 297 elderly individuals in China to explain the effects of ICT use on life satisfaction as well as health. The research innovates on previous work on the topic of distinguishing between active and passive ICT use, and showing how active ICT use affects both life satisfaction and health status. On the one hand, the reader could argue that there is little, if anything, decolonial in this research: the theory used in the study, self-determination theory, is Western both in origin and development, and the Chinese context does not come forth in interpretation.

At the same time, a decolonial read of the paper inspires questions whose response may further strengthen its contribution. Placed in the Chinese context, the paper invites further exploration of it:

how is ICT use shaped by the context of China, and by that of the particular region where the research takes place? ICT use is actively inspired by indigenous dynamics, something that Xiao et al. (2021) explore for the business context. Based on a solid quantitative study inspired by a behavioral theory, the paper invites reflection on how local context shaped data and what conclusions would be drawn if that context was brought to the fore through Indigenous theory.

In 'Institutional development in an information-driven economy: can ICTs enhance economic growth for low – and lower middle-income countries?', Pradhan et al. (2022) ask the question on links between ICT infrastructure, institutions of governance and economic growth, nothing that due to endogeneity, links among these variables have not been discernible in many low – and middle-income countries. Applying a vector error-correction model, the authors find strong inter-relationships between all the variables in the short run. The study acts as a powerful device to examine core variables on growth, ICT infrastructure and institutions in low- and middle-income countries, shedding lights on quantitative measurements that mainstream IS research, centered global Northern contexts, refrains from engaging.

A decolonial lens here invites, with Jimenez et al. (2022a), a reimagination of the concepts at the heart of the paper. What would 'growth,' 'ICT infrastructure,' 'institutional arrangements,' mean across the different contexts where data were collected? Jimenez et al. (2022a) reimagine a similar conceptual apparatus according to the Andean philosophy of *Buen Vivir*, and a similar problematization, according to the pan-African concept of *Ubuntu*, is made in Tsiolane (2016). Noting this does not devoid quantitative research of meaning, in fact it further highlights its value when illuminating variables that are less studied across the world's Souths (Milan & Treré, 2019). At the same time, Indigenous perspectives on the formation of such variables could usefully complement the research, telling the story of variable formation and the role of context in it.

In 'Diffusion and adoption of digital communications services in India,' Asrani and Kar (2022) focus on India, noting that while the country's ICT adoption has been growing over time, substantial disparities emerge across the country. The study identifies the diffusion pattern of digital communications services accounting for technological augmentation. It also surveys the factors influencing the variations in regional ICT adoption in India, investigating how the social systems impact technology adoption at different penetration levels. Doing so, the study draws conclusions that will be especially important for capacity planning.

Once again the study, a piece of quantitative research, invites questions inspired by indigenous theory. How has the Indian context influenced such results? Are they different across regions? Taking a decolonial lens, theories adopted in and for the Indian context can give an Indigenous interpretation of the data, telling the story behind the variables. It is also important to imagine the meaning of the concepts in point in the Indian landscape.

In 'Threshold effects of ICT access and usage in Burkina Faso and Ghanaian households,' Karakara & Osabuohien study the demand for ICT access by households, as well as ICT usage at the household level, in Ghana and Burkina Faso. The paper revisits the long-standing notion of the digital divide, to apply it at a within-country level for the two countries in object: findings reveal the presence of threshold effects that reinforce existing divides, making it more difficult for the have-nots to become users of ICTs. Applied to the study's country contexts, a decolonial lens can be instrumental to elicit the structural drivers of the divides that the study finds. In addition, Heeks' (2021) notion of *adverse digital incorporation*, centered on the detrimental consequences of inclusion, rather than exclusion, in access to digital technologies, can be a powerful completion to the study.

In 'Mobile phone use for social inclusion: the case of internally displaced people in Nigeria,' Dasuki and Effah point at the structural disadvantage lived by conflict-induced Internally Displaced People (IDP) in Nigeria. With a qualitative case study inspired by the capabilities approach, the paper notes the role of mobile phones in overcoming disconnection with the host context, but also in developing capabilities at individual and collective levels. A decolonial read of the paper is key in illuminating the structural disadvantage connected to internal displacement: it is this form of systemic subordination,

conceptualized as relegation at the *margins* by Rodriguez (2017), that mobile telephony proposes to tackle. Furthermore, a decolonial read of the paper can illuminate the issues of connectivity in the context of displacement, especially the increased risk of undue surveillance detailed by Newell et al. (2016).

In 'Factors affecting digital technology adoption by small-scale farmers in agriculture value chains in South Africa' Smidt and Jokonya use a systematic literature review to explore economic, political, and social factors affecting adoption, and the implications for governance and institutional challenges in policy considerations. The Choice Framework guides the analysis and theme development. A decolonial read of the paper highlights the value of nurturing, developing and sustaining choice by small-scale farmers in leveraging digital technology to support agricultural value chains. Influential stakeholders in the public and private sector need to create invited and emancipated spaces for small-scale farmers to proactively collaborate and participate in the design and integration of digital technologies for agriculture.

In 'Development of small- and medium-sized enterprises through information technology adoption persistence in Vietnam,' Vu and Nguyen use longitudinal data from SMEs and local business environments to understand how SMEs adopt information technologies in Vietnam. Their findings indicate that persistence of SMEs' information technology adoption is reduced in improved local business environments, a result that puts the environment in direct relation to the technology adoption patterns of the firms. These findings, which the article unpacks in relation to policymaking in the Vietnamese context, can be read in the light of the specificities of this context, ultimately delinking the concept of innovation from its Western meaning (Jimenez et al., 2022a).

In 'Eliciting design principles using a data justice framework for participatory urban water governance observatories,' Hoefsloot, Jimenez, Martinez, Miranda Sara and Pfeffer propose data justice principles to study a novel experience of participatory water governance. In a study of the Observatorio Metropolitano de Agua para Lima-Callao, a water observatory in Lima-Callao, Peru, they note how sharing data about water access relates to fairer distribution of resources. Focused on data justice as a route to counter structural inequalities in water access, the study makes a clear connection between ICT4D and a data justice lens, engaging decoloniality in both the formulation and the application of design principles.

Finally, Masiero reviews the book 'Patching Development: Information Politics and Social Change in India' by Rajesh Veeraraghavan. The book engages the notion of 'Patching Development,' a concept that illuminates a way of doing development at the last mile of social protection programs. Veeraraghavan's book is an ethnography of NREGA, India's largest social protection scheme: but it is, at the same time, a theory of development that challenges older paradigms of 'transparency' inspired by centralization. The review is first and foremost an invitation to read the book, experiencing worlds of social resistance at the last mile.

## 5. Conclusion

Theories of decoloniality and emancipation are fundamental to ICT4D research. They mark a shift with a history inspired by Western theorizations, which still mark widely the making of IS research worlds today. We hope, with this editorial, to foster further discussion on the practice of decolonial ICT4D, making it an everyday effort in our ways to do, read and experience ICT4D research.

## Note

1. An official language in South Africa originating from the Nguni language.

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