



Reflections on Decolonising
Knowledge for
Development:
An invitation to an EADI
conversation

By Peter Taylor, Laura Camfield, Alexandre Abreu,
Marcin Grabowski, Nita Mishra, and Crystal Tremblay*

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A moment to reflect

EADI's 50th anniversary creates a moment for reflection amidst what is increasingly viewed as a time of crisis in development and in Development Studies itself (see for example [this blog](#)¹). Many who believe Development Studies was born from a colonial mindset also perceive this mindset continuing to this day. Calls to decolonise not only Development Studies, but social sciences more broadly and beyond (including the natural and applied sciences), have grown louder in recent years. But it is also possible to see Development Studies as driven by an anti-colonial mindset from its emergence in the ferment of 1950s/1960s independence movements and orientation towards global solidarity. So, is Development Studies a neo-colonial endeavour, an anti-colonial endeavour, or a shifting, transforming and, sometimes, perplexing combination of both? How does this inform how, and under which contexts, development is pursued? And what are the implications for EADI's engagement in efforts to decolonise knowledge for development?

In a period of intense global turbulence, this seems an important time for EADI to reflect on such issues, given it is an Association which brings together a diverse array of organisations, people, histories and perspectives. Its members bring a wealth of different influences and experiences of coloniality, located within the context of Europe which, itself, continues to evolve and change. Indeed, it is important to learn from ways in which citizens in a range of different national contexts experience emergent forms of colonisation, as well as those with longer historical antecedents. There is a need to be conscious of the dangers of EADI's attention to these issues now as being perceived as yet another form of intellectual colonisation. EADI therefore represents an incredibly valuable resource of knowledge and experience to help inform and shape collective thinking around processes and approaches that can support decolonisation without reproducing it in yet new ways.

Ongoing debates

Debates within Development Studies have raged for decades, including the original post-development critique of [Escobar](#)² and others, which also generated significantly different perspectives on the merits of "development". More recently, the decoloniality critique has become very prominent, for example via the work of [Quijano](#)³, [Torres](#)⁴ and others, particularly in relation to racial hierarchies and geopolitics of knowledge production and use. In Development Studies, some efforts have been focused on intellectual 'decolonisation' or decolonising knowledge. This seeks to shift teaching and research in ways that ensure different knowledges and experiences from around the world are acknowledged and integrated, whilst also paying attention to addressing racial and social hierarchies.

'Decoloniality' lies more in the domain of scholarly theory, arguing that western knowledge about the global South (acknowledging the imperfection of that binary term and wider debates on terminology and labelling) is inherently racist and eurocentrically-driven, since it seeks to justify the imposition of modernity as development on the global South during and since colonisation. Others would say to deny

the global South modernity is to pull away the ladder. Even the term ‘decolonization’ is fraught with varying interpretations and perspectives depending on one’s own context, some arguing that it has been co-opted by non-Indigenous researchers in a way that continues to substantiate academic colonial structures. In some contexts where the terminology is viewed as relevant, suggestions are also emerging that “[re-Indigenizing” Development Studies](#)⁵ might help articulate and affirm a return to epistemologies, worldviews, and lifeways that were originally Indigenous, although some of those views may not be emancipatory or progressive.

It is also important to highlight that inequalities and asymmetries, including knowledge asymmetries, operate on a range of different levels that intersect with each other. This complex, interlinked chain of asymmetries implies that there is no such thing as a single homogenous voice which can represent ‘the local perspective’ or ‘the global South’. Individuals, groups, social classes, etc. in the global South have their own, often conflicting, aims and agendas which can contribute to new forms of decolonisation or hierarchy. Further asymmetries are seen in the global North, including within the context of “Europe”.

The normative agenda of Development Studies

It is widely accepted that Development Studies has a normative agenda. It is interested in the generation and use of knowledge not simply for its own sake but as a means of offering concrete approaches that can contribute to wider political change within a more equitable and sustainable world. Drawing on the notion of a “[Pluriverse](#)”⁶, the co-existence of these debates are important to acknowledge, and indeed to welcome. Each can inform the other as EADI works to identify potential areas for practical action on decolonising knowledge. These debates and discourses may offer ideas and insights to EADI members, who in turn will generate further valuable learning based on their own inquiries, analyses, practices and experience, providing lessons that can be shared more widely. EADI can also offer a supportive community and can establish a safe space to have these discussions.

Four guiding questions

To guide reflections in a thoughtful way, and to help avoid the temptation of technocratic “solutions”, the remainder of this paper draws on four guiding questions that were first suggested by Peter Taylor and Crystal Tremblay in an earlier [blog](#)⁷, to guide reflections.

ONE. *What, and whose, knowledge is valued, counted, and integrated into development processes?*

Knowledge systems are diverse, multi-faceted and bring locally contextualized ways of thinking and being in the world. Power is a critical element in the struggle for social justice to which Development Studies can make important contributions; and power is also helpful in understanding how and in which ways attention

is paid to epistemologies. As Taylor and Tremblay noted in their blog, “Researchers often fail to recognise or value the different knowledges needed to address some of the world’s greatest challenges, because of where knowledge resides and who has generated it. To decolonise knowledge, we need to recognise people as knowers of their experience and weave together knowledges from various sources, including from Indigenous and local knowledge systems. The most compelling narratives in an era of increasing uncertainty are shaped by multiple perspectives and different forms and expressions of knowledge, and by working in a spirit of inclusion and in participatory ways.”

“Researchers” form an eclectic group, potentially including actors as diverse as academics, hired consultants, NGO workers, diplomatic officers in the field, and an array of other possibilities. These are different people with different agendas and viewpoints. Within EADI, this suggests the need for careful attention to the kinds of knowledges that are shared, encouraged and promoted through EADI’s activities; in short by paying attention to “whose knowledge counts”. EADI may reflect on the sources of the knowledge it highlights, for example in publications including the diversity of authors in its newsletter or its journal, [EJDR](#)⁸, and in its communications with different stakeholders.

EADI Members may consider who writes reading lists, and which authors are included there, and why. As a European association, EADI may explore the extent to which its members engage actively with a diverse range of voices and those voices are represented with similar degrees of visibility. EADI could also be proactive in creating spaces – for example in its conferences and meetings - for multiple perspectives and values to co-exist and engage with each other in open, constructive, and supportive ways, in a spirit of “cognitive justice”. There are opportunities for EADI to reflect on whose interests are served by different schools of thought or disciplines within Development Studies, and which authors are perceived as ranking less highly in the echelons of academia because of their experiences of exclusion or relative marginalisation in the global knowledge ecosystem. This may involve EADI reviewing how it tackles and responds to the domination of English in global academia which currently limits access to publication opportunities by researchers writing in other languages; for example by encouraging non-English publications and conference presentations, including offering translation services in other languages.

TWO. *How do we go about decolonising knowledge asymmetries – learning through research and teaching, and as researchers and educators?*

EADI as an association views research, evidence, and knowledge as central to its mission, aims and interests. As researchers, “doing research” itself provides opportunities to learn about, and address, decolonisation of knowledge. EADI members are engaged in research globally, with partners in their own national contexts, across Europe and the “global North”, and frequently with partners in the “global South”. Of course, power manifests in different ways: as epistemic/discursive; within institutional contexts; and through hidden/visible/invisible forms of power as described in the “[power cube](#)”⁹ methodology. Although this represents a complex reality, another recent [EADI blog](#)¹⁰ highlights helpfully the need to reflect on diversity, equity and inclusion in the process of constructing and implementing research projects by asking: “How can research projects be strategically designed to challenge the North-South Divide, not least in terms of the generation and diffusion of knowledge itself?”

This question is important as part of a decolonising agenda, and similar questions need to be asked regarding research relationships and partnerships in general. For example, who has the agency to decide the nature of engagement within any research projects? Can EADI help to open spaces for a reimagination of agency and power in the conceptualisation and realisation of development and research? EADI, might for example call for funders to provide funding for initial preparatory work with Southern partners before

a grant is submitted to ensure they have equal intellectual input; or to provide or promote training on funder expectations around grant management and financial reporting. EADI may reflect on the extent to which it encourages transparency about how its members live and model diversity and inclusion in their activities, organisations, and communities; and how it promotes equitable research partnerships as an opportunity to reduce global disparities in knowledge production. Further issues EADI may consider are how it can help to reveal bias and blind-spots of its members, and its own biases and underlying assumptions about its role, positionality and the power it is able to exert; how it integrates learning processes within its own structure; and how intentional it is about promoting learning and self-reflection about power and knowledge, equity and inclusion across its wider membership.

EADI members can also engage in decolonising not only their teaching, but also every aspect of their practice. Co-option of concepts is an age-old practice, and is easily observed in policy papers and strategic plans where equality, diversity and inclusion are buzzwords in academia and development praxis. Indeed, teaching decoloniality and/or decolonising approaches does not necessarily lead to the same level of commitment in other spheres of university engagement. For instance, teachers may be actively engaged in shaping the decolonial agenda through critical reflection on colonial stereotypes in the global development discourse, but their actions in daily academic life may reflect the exact opposite. Such actions may include a biased treatment of non-white early career academics and development practitioners in interview settings in academia as well as development organisations. It could be a blindness reflected in the choice of photographs used in strategy reports of departments of International Development which show unconscious biases or ‘invisible whiteness’. Showcasing the opposite of verbal commitments to decolonial praxis may include using a lens of white versus black (‘what is not white is black’), which can lead to tokenistic representations of ‘black’ in various committees, boards and other public spaces. These binary representations of black versus white raise further questions, including ‘what about the brown?’. Binary representations of ‘white’ versus ‘people of colour’ raises interesting questions—is white not a colour? Or why do we not label ‘white’ people as colourless, or ‘people of no colour’? Who gets to decide to on the use of labels such as ‘people of colour’? Similar actions may also involve use of language of who is native, and the difference in who gets labelled migrant and who expatriate. Words can be cruel labels; can EADI help to free words from such labels and free these labels from associated images? EADI offers open safe spaces for such a debate on these, often uncomfortable, issues where members can reflect on their experiences as educators, learners, and facilitators of transformation in their own lives and in the lives of those they interact with through teaching and learning.

THREE. *What kinds of investment are needed to promote learning and change?*

There is a huge need for investment of patience, humility, and time for unlearning and relearning; courage to interrogate history and privilege and to work toward change; willingness to share power; and make available financial resources where possible. Decolonising knowledge inevitably requires decolonising wealth. Since its foundation, EADI has sought to work towards equitable and inclusive outcomes and has devoted resources for this purpose. For example, EADI had a long-running working group on gender which addressed critical Development Studies topics, and another group of engaged early career researchers who have been working on Post- and decolonial perspectives since 2016. A five year programme entitled [“IKM emergent”¹¹](#) (now continuing independently) undertook a critical analysis of current practice in the use of all forms of knowledge, including formal research, within the international development sector.

The [“Bridge 47”¹²](#) programme focused on regional knowledge exchange partnerships to discuss the concept of “global citizenship” among researchers and NGOs, using approaches that stemmed largely from

postcolonial thinking and critical self-reflection on current approaches to development education. This was primarily, but not exclusively oriented towards adult education and civil society. EADI has also made efforts to publish or encourage work which aims to help decolonise knowledge; several members contributed to the EADI book [“Development Studies for the New Millennium”](#)¹³ and its successor volume [Challenging Global Development towards Decoloniality](#)¹⁴.

EADI has clearly taken a proactive approach to investing resources in ways that support efforts to decolonise knowledge, but are there other areas where EADI’s efforts could help a decolonising agenda gain further traction, either as an Association in its own right, or via its membership? Can EADI facilitate a more joined-up approach to communication and sharing of evidence of change generated through the initiatives it has supported amongst its members and wider audiences? For example, EADI might ringfence funding to support Southern conveners for its working groups, and provide conference support, and online/hybrid options, where possible, to increase participation of Southern scholars. EADI could consider committing more resources to active learning about what works and what does not work in terms of decolonising knowledge, to support its future strategy and activities. EADI might also be able to help advocate for shifts in funding practices which perpetuate inequalities involving researchers from the global North and global South through its close relationships with national Research Councils. These inequalities manifest in many ways, including in researchers’ pay, status, access to key informants, relevant literature, resources such as research assistants and enumerators, administrative support, etc. They extend also to extractivist research partnerships and arrangements whereby partners in the global South are tasked with the less interesting, less prestigious and less rewarding aspects of the work, such as collecting and providing data as opposed to analysing it and disseminating it. EADI could for example help persuade funders to move beyond “projectized” approaches and associated prescriptive funding mechanisms which provide straitjackets for global South researchers and invest more in building Southern research institutions, especially outside the major centres.

FOUR. *What is ‘our’ role in needed transformations, as individuals, as organisations, as institutions?*

The blog by Taylor and Tremblay proposed some possible ways that researchers, and the organisations and institutions that offer a home to researchers, could take action in support of decolonising their work. It argued that such actions are necessary for each individual, as well as for others, and so it seems vital that individuals committed to decolonising knowledge should try to approach their work consciously, and as responsible members of organisations. Supportive ways to achieve this could include establishing reflective spaces for inclusive processes; checking and challenging policies and practices within our own institutions; finding points of connection and working collaboratively; grounding our efforts in trust; and being conscious of who is setting and controlling the research agenda, and what kinds of power dynamics are at play. In order to address the many concerns regarding decolonisation of knowledge, action is needed both at the level of the worldviews and mindsets of individuals sedimented over many decades, and at the level of organisations, policies and institutions, including the rules and constraints around research funding.

EADI is already a traveller on this road towards decolonising knowledge, although it will always be a journey in progress. EADI is, for example, developing a more global perspective by broadening its partnerships to include significant regional organisations such as CODESRIA and CLASCO, and by inviting and engaging with views from around the world. This includes expanding the lens to think about development in the global North for example looking at how this history shapes poverty, inequality and precarity in that context (as EADI’s first President, Dudley Seers, envisaged), whilst not forgetting the

history of colonialism and slavery and resulting structural inequalities that continue to shape the world. In looking at under-development in the countries where most EADI members are located, it would be genuinely exciting to “flip the telescope” by inviting colleagues from the global South to do this, thus helping to “reverse the gaze”.

EADI has also been thinking a lot about what equitable collaborations in research and teaching really mean, and what can be learned from actions in support of these, particularly by promoting, and wherever possible requiring, practical commitment to equitable and authentic partnership practices. It seeks to encourage a plurality of views, whilst recognising that finding inclusive ways to promote open dialogue may at times be challenging when differing strongly held beliefs are encountered. EADI is also navigating waters that often seem uncomfortable, for example exploring material aspects of history, imperialism, the role of the North in historical inequalities, and engaging with debates on reparations for slavery, colonialism and climate loss and damage. There is a need to combine individual agency with the power of the collective to bring about change.

EADI has also recognised the diversity of perspectives underpinning Development Studies, and committed itself to offering, through a co-creation process, a [definition of Development Studies](#)¹⁵. Its International Accreditation Council (IAC) undertook a self-evaluation, in order to identify where it could decolonise, including diversifying its Council membership, and thinking through the resources it would need to achieve this, given different levels of institutional support. EADI also actively facilitates conversations, debates and exchanges around postcolonialism and decolonisation, and is supporting initiatives to “demarginalize” voices of non-Western scholars, for example through journal open access and mentoring for global South authors via its journal, the European Journal of Development Research (EJDR), and through its Distinguished Lecture Series.

EADI could work proactively with a body such as [Reedes](#)¹⁶ (the Spanish Network of Development Studies) to look at the marginalisation of knowledge in languages other than English within the publication process. Several EADI members have also contributed to a new open access book, [“Global Development: Towards Decoloniality and Justice”](#)¹⁷ (Melber, Kothari, Camfield and Biekart, 2023). There may be further, innovative ways to extend and deepen these conversations, for example through a series of Podcasts that are inherently inclusive (e.g. setting a requirement of the percentage of presenters coming from the global South. EADI is clearly already demonstrating its ability to advocate for progressive change, whilst acknowledging there is still much more that can be done.

An invitation to engage and co-create

This reflection paper has raised many questions and issues, and also offered examples of work and engagement that EADI is already undertaking. It is important to question whether past and recent efforts and actions are sufficient, and if are they joined up enough. This is a moment of opportunity for EADI, and its members to undertake such measures in ways that promote trust, that question its own biases and assumptions, and inquire reflectively into their processes, policies, practices and forms of leadership. There is of course no “magic bullet” in the quest towards decolonisation, and indeed decolonising knowledge is an on-going, boundless, and likely perpetual process. So, what does EADI still need to do if serious about taking on the challenge of decolonising knowledge for development? Does EADI have an advocacy and mobilisation role in this regard, without feeding into yet another agenda being pushed by

the global North which forces global South partners to jump through yet more hoops and adjust their actions and language once again?

There is also the question of what “success” will look like, as EADI continues with efforts and commitments to decolonise knowledge. Bringing others on board to join this journey cannot be taken for granted. For that reason it is important not only to imagine a future where knowledge is actually being decolonised, but to identify the kinds of evidence that might be needed to demonstrate what is being achieved. Currently such evidence is in short supply, as is learning generated through the approaches that have already been applied or may be used in the future. A persuasive narrative, and associated resources and materials, will be needed to convince others that there is a problem which needs to be addressed, and which also offer a view of the benefits that will accrue to all involved as a result. If we do all this and make progress along the lines laid out in this short paper, what will our world look like as a result?

These are big challenges, and many ideas to explore. As mentioned at the start of this paper, the approach and intent here is to be invitational. Progress is being made with thanks due to all those within and outside EADI who are stimulating and calling for the journey to continue. EADI has an opportunity to do more, particularly with its 50th anniversary in 2024/25 presenting an opportunity for further shared reflection on these issues via EADI’s convening power to create spaces where reflection and debate can occur. As EADI approaches that significant moment, what do others feel about the ideas and potential actions shared above? What suggestions, evidence, insights, and concrete proposals would others like to bring to this conversation?

Links

- ¹ <https://www.devissues.nl/more-things-change-less-they-should-stay-same>
- ² <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691150451/encountering-development>
- ³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09502380601164353>
- ⁴ https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-981-287-588-4_506
- ⁵ https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-30308-1_6
- ⁶ <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/pluriverse/9788193732984>
- ⁷ <https://www.developmentresearch.eu/?p=1579>
- ⁸ <https://www.eadi.org/publications/european-journal-of-development-research>
- ⁹ <https://www.powercube.net/analyse-power/what-is-the-powercube/>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.developmentresearch.eu/?p=1629>
- ¹¹ <https://www.emergentworks.net/>
- ¹² <https://www.bridge47.org/about>
- ¹³ <https://www.eadi.org/development-studies/building-development-studies-for-the-new-millennium#:~:text=This%20book%20brings%20together%20multiple,perspectives%20from%20the%20Global%20South.>
- ¹⁴ <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-30308-1>
- ¹⁵ <https://www.eadi.org/development-studies/definition-of-development-studies#:~:text=It%20examines%20societal%20change%20using,%2C%20knowledge%2C%20technology%2C%20et>
- ¹⁶ https://reedes.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Manifesto-for-Development-Studies_ENGLISH.pdf
- ¹⁷ <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-30308-1>



EADI

European Association of Development
Research and Training Institutes

EADI e.V

**Kaiser-Friedrich-Straße 11
53113 Bonn, Germany**

Email: postmaster@eadi.org

Website: <https://www.eadi.org>