

Liberated or Recolonized: Making the Case for Embodied Evaluation in Peacebuilding

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Background: In their efforts to account for resources that have been transferred to places of need, funders and institutions have set up accountability systems that mimic historical colonial relationships between the Global North and South, and in some countries between settlers and Indigenous People. Control systems such as those promoted through traditional monitoring and evaluation not only deprive communities of sustainable resourcing for lasting solutions but also disrespect and de-emphasize the value of local and Indigenous knowledge systems in assessing success, change and impact. Sustainable peace thrives in everyday indicators and it is those living in the places of conflict who are best situated to determine what works. Yet, peace building actions developed within local communities are heavily impeded by the obstacles of colonized and racist structures for implementation and accountability, demonstrating continued disregard for everyday local knowledge.

Purpose: This paper posits, that unless evaluation of peacebuilding projects embraces an embodied approach that is based on lived experiences and practices of communities in conflict, efforts at decolonizing evaluation risk becoming another layer of participatory processes that tinker with colonized epistemologies and fail to address the structural imbalances and power dynamics that exclude noncolonized

forms and sources of knowledge. Rather than liberating the process and shifting the balance of power, the effort could create another level of colonization, which this paper terms a “recolonization of evaluation processes”.

Setting: Not applicable.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design, Data Collection and Analysis: This paper draws on methods of reflective practice and on the work of practitioners in the peace building and humanitarian sector. Like the embodied knowledge discussed here, the paper is based on an insider perspective and embodies practices and lived experiences in the places and contexts cited. These experiences are further situated within literature gathered through a number of search engines, including iDiscover (Cambridge LibGuides), ProQuest, WorldCat, and Google Scholar, through a search that prioritized writing on Indigenous methodologies, local peacebuilding, embodied processes, and deliberative decision-making processes, as well as research and practices on monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL).

Findings: Not applicable.

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Introduction

In the last few years, the development sector has engaged in deep conversations regarding decolonization in activities such as locally led initiatives and decolonizing development aid (Peace Direct, 2021). Events around the world, including the Black Lives Matter movement, created a greater global awareness about power imbalances that extended beyond international politics, resulting in calls for introspection in many organizations.

Such events and campaigns have exposed structural power imbalances that affect activities such as development aid and peacebuilding. Key among these power imbalances is the relationship between funders/donors and the so-called “recipients of aid,” many of whom are located in the Global South.¹ This relationship, often propelled by projects implemented in the recipient country, is characterized by the implementation of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as a compliance and accountability mechanism (Gasper, 1999). Driven by colonial power dynamics of inferior vs. superior and privileged vs. underprivileged, monitoring and evaluation in the Global South have been viewed with, and characterized by, distrust and suspicion. This is partly because M&E forms one of the central means by which institutions of power continue to maintain control by dictating, dominating, and directing the affairs of those deemed less privileged (Cohen et al., 2021). In particular, the recent addition of a learning component to monitoring and evaluation (MEL) has contributed to a deeper divide between the Global North and Global South as practitioners and researchers negotiate strategies to decolonize methodologies (Smith, 1999).

Undoing Colonizing Practices Through Decolonization

For purposes of this paper, “colonial relationships” and “colonizing practices” refer to patterns and behaviors that define interrelationships and interactions between the colonized and the colonizer and, more broadly, between often-

dominant developed countries and developing countries. Such factors continue to exist within humanitarian assistance, global political structures, and sociocultural impositions (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

The colonial paradigm in development and humanitarian assistance emphasized the standardization of methods, knowledge, and ideologies across colonies (Smith, 1999) with little recognition or acknowledgment of existing forms of knowledge within local populations or of peculiarities on the ground. Thus, the employment of colonization constructs in development activities was, and still is, often standardized with a “one-size-fits-all” approach, regardless of the locale or context in which development aid is being invested. It is no wonder that the assessment of success in development and aid intervention have been problematic and that the results of such interventions have been less than desired (Moyo & Ferguson, 2009).

In their efforts to account for resources that have been transferred to places of need, funders and institutions have set up accountability systems that mimic historical colonial relationships between the Global North and South. Such accountability relationships are also observed between settlers and Indigenous people within developed and developing countries. In their discussions on colonialism in community-based monitoring (CBM), Cohen et al. argue that dominant knowledge systems—specifically those that underpin Western, colonial governments and liberal, capitalist economies—shape the provision of funding for local programs and determine the significance of different types of community observations in shaping management decisions (Cohen et al., 2021).

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as a practice can be considered a primary component of colonial structures that have historically focused on compliance. As part of a colonial relationship that transferred resources to less privileged places, M&E has been used as a means to set up a “watchdog” role over local communities. A dominant justification in development aid has been the need to ensure that taxpayers’ money from the developed world used to fund such aid is used appropriately in recipient locations—a direct accountability

¹ “The phrase ‘Global South’ refers broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. It is one of a family of terms, including ‘Third World’ and ‘Periphery,’ that denote regions outside Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized. The use of the phrase Global South marks a shift from a central focus on development

or cultural difference toward an emphasis on geopolitical relations of power.” (Dados & Connell, 2012, p. 12). Many areas of the Global South can be considered newly industrialized or in the process of industrializing and frequently have experienced or are currently experiencing colonialism (Mimiko & Afolabi, 2012).

argument. However, as Cohen et al. (2021) suggest, underlying this argument is the notion of power through control. Control systems such as those promoted through M&E not only deprive communities of sustainable resourcing for lasting solutions but also disrespect local knowledge and epistemologies by de-emphasizing the value of traditional systems in the monitoring and evaluation of programs (Cohen et al., 2021) and research (Smith, 1999). Such control systems fragment the fabric of communities and burden people already in need.

Decolonization is the undoing of colonialism. It has often been marked by the quest for political independence from colonial empires (Betts & Betts, 2004; Memmi, 2006) and by releasing resources due to communities, returning stolen land and other assets in some locales. While decolonization has been defined variously in different contexts, for purposes of this paper, “decolonization” refers to a process in development and humanitarian work that seeks to undo the remnants and continuous manifestations of the pillars of colonization, including racism, power imbalance, inequality, and exploitation. It involves the deconstruction of colonial ideologies by challenging dominant Western paradigms and revisiting the wisdom, knowledge, and practices of local traditions, as well as the sociopolitical movements necessary for a shift in paradigm.

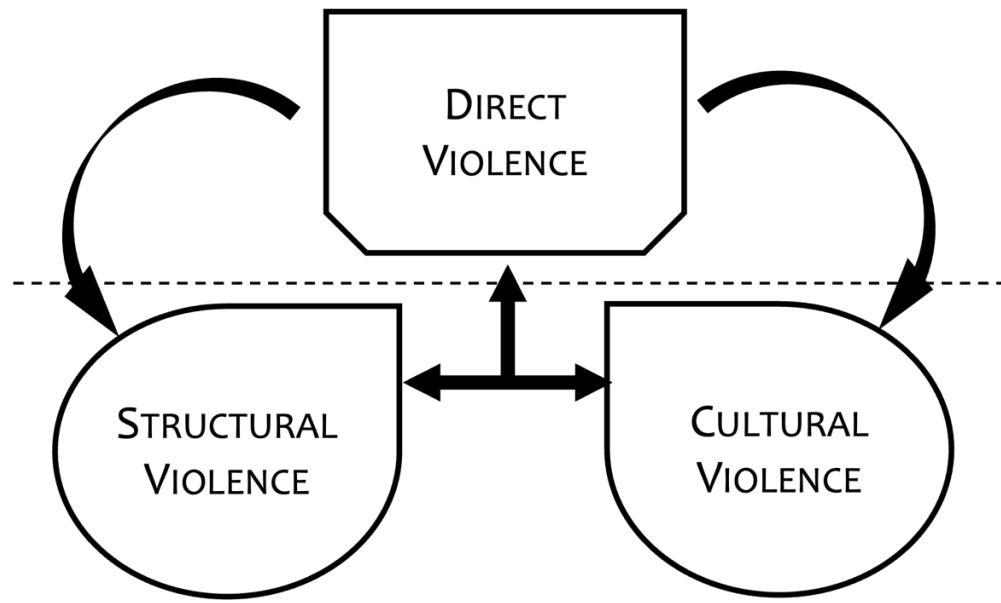
Peacebuilding and Decolonization

Peacebuilding is typically defined as an effort to promote peace or resolve conflict in nonviolent ways. To this extent, peacebuilding can be viewed as a preventative action or a conflict transformation effort (Autesserre & Gbowee, 2021). In the context of international relations, and particularly as

operationalized by the United Nations, peacebuilding is an effort to support countries in their transition from war to peace (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2023; United Nations, 2023a, 2023b). Such efforts can involve diplomatic actions undertaken by states or by non-state actors, such as civil society organizations (United Nations, 2023b). In this paper, “peacebuilding” refers to a range of conflict prevention and resolution processes that transform structural relationships, communities, states, and non-state actors. Such efforts are transdisciplinary (Galtung, 2010), multidimensional, and long-term. Their intent is to address the root causes of conflict, including injustice and inequality (O. P. Richmond, 2008, 2014).

Peacebuilding is intended as a response to violence, whether actual or potential. The persisting systems, relationships, and structures of colonialism have, to a large extent, defined conflict and violence in many ways and have also shaped peace interventions in several post-independence countries (Berwouts, 2017). Galtung’s typology of violence is instructive in understanding this nexus (Galtung, 1969). Galtung defines three types of violence: (1) direct violence, which is that which we see and experience; (2) structural violence, the existing structures of a society that interact to create relationships of power that can lead to injustice and conflict; and (3) cultural violence, meaning the prevailing attitudes or beliefs that legitimize direct or structural violence. The interconnected nature of direct, structural, and cultural violence has set foundations for marginalization, prejudice, and discrimination that have been reproduced uncritically across generations and have influenced development interventions, including peacebuilding (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Galtung's Typology of Violence



The work toward sustained peace requires embedding efforts in a context defined by local knowledge and systems (Mac Ginty, 2015). Sustainable peace thrives in everyday indicators (Mac Ginty, 2021) and it is those living in the places of conflict who are best situated to determine what works and how to bring their networks and relationships to bear on the work of peace (Autesserre & Gbowee, 2021). By its nature as an outcome of the interplay of structural and cultural violence, the features and context of conflict can change rather frequently. Predetermined solutions and indicators of success, such as logframes, often required to document the effectiveness and impact of development and humanitarian support from developed countries to developing countries, do not flex to differences in local context, knowledge, systems, and culture. As a result, colonized and traditional practices of accountability will always be problematic (Fujita, 2010).

The quest to decolonize is driven by a number of factors. Key among these is the need for self-determination as well as a just (re)distribution of resources (Smith, 1999). Advocates of local peacebuilding assert that, in order to achieve sustainable peace, those closest to a conflict must lead and actively contribute ideas and actions toward resolution (Autesserre & Gbowee, 2021; Lidén et al., 2009). For local peace builders to play their roles effectively, resources—often funds concentrated in the Global North—ought to be moved to places where they are most needed to enable rapid response to tensions and conflicts

before they escalate (IASC, 2023). Yet, peace building actions developed within local communities are heavily impeded by the obstacles of colonized and racist structures for implementation and accountability, demonstrating continued disregard for local knowledge.

Decolonizing Evaluation in Peacebuilding

Decolonizing evaluation in peacebuilding means recentring local knowledge, supporting practices that sustain communities, and challenging global structures and expectations for methodology that continue to dominate and disadvantage colonized communities. Decolonized evaluation practice must be rooted in a sustained commitment to address the structures, practices, and power dynamics that inhibit local communities from assessing and learning about their own work in their own contexts through ways of knowing that are beneficial to and derive from them. If local communities are given the right to determine their own ways of monitoring and evaluating peace work using assessments that are contextually meaningful, sponsors and communities are more likely to learn about conflict and peacebuilding in ways that will inform implementation of programs and sustain peace work. This requires a shift from dominance by colonial agents (intentional and unconscious)—particularly organizations and funders in the Global North—over externally

determined methods for assessment, evaluation, and reporting, to one that privileges methods and learning that arise from local residents and the local context in which programs are situated.

The experiences people will go through in a project cycle, or in any development intervention, including peacebuilding, are likely to encompass more than what project managers can conceptualize during the design stage of a project. The participation of local communities in peace processes involves a range of experiences, including sensory, semantic, visual, and linguistic insights and intuitions that are often unanticipated, unknown, and unnamed. Indigenous cultures, in particular, do not disintegrate the body, the mind, and relationship with the earth or the environment. For instance, the *vanua* (the land, the earth) among some Pacific Island countries of Oceania, is a source of identity, livelihood, and life. This forms part of policy conversations that take into account the relationship between the person and all of creation. Assessments relying on colonized methodologies often overlook such interconnectivity and relationship, disembodiment people, and fragment the outcomes of the work they do.

Unless evaluation of peacebuilding projects embraces an embodied approach that is based on lived experience and practice and that allows communities to show up with all of who and what they are, efforts at decolonizing evaluation risk becoming another layer of participatory processes that tinker with colonized epistemologies and fail to address the structural imbalances and power dynamics that exclude noncolonized forms and sources of knowledge. Rather than liberating the process and shifting the balance of power, there is risk of fragmenting processes for knowing and creating another level of colonization, which this paper terms a recolonization of evaluation processes. In peacebuilding, this fragmentation poses a risk. It undermines local knowledge systems and opportunities for local residents to learn and understand their own communities as they work to prevent or address conflict. Sustainable peace requires a return to local and Indigenous peacebuilding methods and practices (Autesserre, 2018), including evaluation practices driven by ordinary people doing everyday peace work to grow and strengthen their communities (Autesserre & Gbowee, 2021).

Thus, decolonizing evaluation, including peace interventions, must take questions of power, control, context, local knowledge, and cultural perspectives into account in the design and implementation of evaluation methodologies. We must ask ourselves:

- What might it take to decolonize evaluation of peace interventions in order to gain deeper insights into these interventions and understand what works for sustainable peace?
- How might such a process take an embodied approach that centers marginalized epistemologies?

Embodied Learning and Pedagogy as a Frame for Discussion

Embodied knowledge concerns a variety of bodily experiences (Tanaka, 2013) and comprises what can be seen, what is imagined, and what is invisible (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013; Dixon & Senior, 2011; Honan & Sellers, 2006). Embodied knowledge is not particularly conscious or explicit but is well known by the body through practice and experience. This may be described as tacit knowledge (Gascoigne & Thornton, 2014); it cannot always be explained or verbalized. It is not necessarily rational or logical thinking but, rather, what we learn through our lived experiences. While, theoretically, embodied knowledge can be attributed to the Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (Merleau-Ponty et al., 2011), embodied knowledge has for centuries characterized the ways in which Indigenous societies learned. Indigenous knowledge is not necessarily disaggregated into a dualism of mind and body as articulated by a Cartesian worldview. Furthermore, the relational worldviews of Indigenous societies do not necessarily draw clear lines between bodily and other experiences. Indigenous communities experience ways of knowing that are not necessarily "named." This paper borrows from embodied learning and pedagogy in discussing forms of knowledge.

Embodied knowledge is relevant to the discussion in this paper because it challenges Western notions of evidence, justification, and knowledge (Lemos, 2020), including the sources of evidence often justified in monitoring and evaluation of development work. This paper argues for embodied evaluation that represents a shift from dominant and linear ways of knowing and learning (Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015) to evaluation that allows varied knowledge forms and pedagogies to coexist. Embodied knowledge lends itself to the study of everyday experiences and observations that is needed when evaluating peace work. Given the changing nature of conflict and adaptive nature of peace interventions, evidence cannot be limited only to data that exists at a given time—typically the time covered by evaluation activities—but, rather,

must include what communities experience in the context and over the extended timeframes of their everyday lives.

Embodied knowledge makes a case for including multiple methodologies that enable local communities to engage in research processes that involve them in authentic and culturally appropriate ways (Chilisa & Tsheko, 2014). Embodied learning is more inclusive than traditional, colonized ways of learning. It recognizes marginalized and nondominant ways of knowing, and acknowledges varying epistemologies across the world, because it is not limited to linear and rational thinking, nor even to what can be verbalized. At its heart, embodied learning recognizes local knowledge (Berents, 2015).

This is critical because the acknowledgment and use of embodied epistemologies also reveals notions of power. Recognized and dominant epistemologies of the developed world have determined standards of learning and research and processes such as evaluation that neglect and disregard less-known epistemologies, including Indigenous ways of knowing. The latter are doubted and questioned concerning their rigor and objectivity, while the former are held up as the standard for measurement and knowledge. Given that these dominant epistemologies are also those developed and promoted by the Global North and widespread through educational systems, there continues to be exclusion of other forms of knowledge and learning as valid and important, including in the evaluation of peace interventions.

Embodied learning makes a case for everyday evaluation of projects and activities (Ware & Ware, 2021) and promises a more comprehensive understanding of iterative processes such as peacebuilding. Western practices are increasingly recognizing that there are more viable and context-appropriate ways to conduct evaluation. These practices are not new to Indigenous communities, but they have not enjoyed centrality in the literature, research, or teaching of processes for evaluation. It is also worth noting that, given that most practitioners are themselves products of the dominant colonial systems, which are expressed in both the Global South and North, it takes great effort (and humility) to admit that there are better ways to engage communities, work to unlearn the old, and relearn these new practices. In this “relearning” process, it is important, however, to recognize the root cause of the alienation of or disregard for this knowledge as a function of colonialism, in order to appreciate what needs to be decolonized, and how, in processes like evaluation of peacebuilding. This is particularly critical in places where conflicts trace their origins to colonial

rule, such as in Nigeria and in the Democratic Republic of Congo, among many others. This work draws out such historical connections to highlight the dangers of recolonizing evaluation.

The paper centers practice and, therefore, sees relevance in Bourdieu’s theory of practice and the notion of having a “feel of the game” (Bourdieu & Nice, 1977). As a reflective piece, this paper draws on methods of reflective practice (Forester, 2012; Schön, 1983) and on the work of practitioners in the peace building sector, in particular, and citizens’ engagement, deliberation, and consensus building (see Mathews, 2021, 2014; Autesserre, 2018). These methods enable people to own processes; to name their problems and weigh possible options for collective decisions, joint actions, and resource mobilization and distribution (Mathews, 2014). To this extent this work, like the embodied knowledge it advocates, comes from an insider perspective; it embodies practices and lived experiences in the places and contexts cited and specifically draws on the challenges of assessing the impact of peace building in diverse and ever-changing conflict contexts within a predominantly colonial evaluation system. These experiences are further situated within literature gathered through a number of search engines, including iDiscover (Cambridge LibGuides), ProQuest, WorldCat, and Google Scholar, through a search that prioritized writing on Indigenous methodologies, local peacebuilding, embodied processes, and deliberative decision-making processes, as well as research and practices on monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL).

Exploring Embodied Epistemologies in Evaluation

Embodied knowledge encompasses all experiences, including the uncertainties and ambiguities of everyday life (Ellingson, 2008). It makes room for what was not anticipated and for surprises. Embodied knowledge building does not just acknowledge different ways of knowing, but celebrates these as contributions to the richness of the insights that are generated. Because of the multidimensional nature of embodied knowledge building, the “I” is de-emphasized while the “we,” or any form denoting the collective, is stressed. To this end, an evaluator does not become the sole author or voice of the outcome of an evaluation. Neither should a single organization in a partnership dictate the sources of data, the means of analyses, and the products that are generated. The work and outcomes derive from the collective, a concept that is well exemplified in many cultures.

The Akan ² proverb “Ti koro nko agyina” is instructive. It suggests that one person does not make a decision. If data has to be processed or analyzed, it ought to be done with the affirmation and integration of the whole, including the actors in the project, the environment, and the totality of experiences in the project activities. Presenting material in their book *Mauri Ora, Wisdom from the Māori World*, Alsop and Kupenga (2016) explain that their trilogy was influenced by three *kete* (baskets) of knowledge: *te kete aronui*—the basket that contains the knowledge of what we see (the image); *te kete tuauri*—the basket containing the understanding of the physical world (what is or isn’t displayed by a person here and now); and *te kete tuatea*—the basket containing knowledge beyond space and time (drawing on timeless traditional knowledge for current and future use). This is an intricately rich and comprehensive source of knowledge. Such a range of knowledge production is relevant in assessing peace interventions in local communities. It is embodied and incorporates various ways of knowing. It allows a comprehensive observation and reflection on one’s experiences. Data gathered in an evaluation that ignored this knowledge would lack relevance to the context.

Decolonized evaluation, therefore, cannot be a mechanical process, but must be one in which the evaluator experiences the fullness of what the project or activity was about, perhaps what Jane Leach described as an “embodied sense of reality” (2020, p. 10). Embodied experiences provide a framework for a decolonized evaluation in the sense that such evaluation is not an imposed activity or a detached expert work, but one that involves those who embody the activity in their lived and felt experiences. Where there is external assistance (for instance, consultants), such “experts” ought to have a feel of such embodied experience in order to provide an informed assessment.

What is described here is distinct from participatory processes. The emphasis on “feel” prioritizes the one who lived the experience. It does not seek to “quantify” at all costs in order to show impact; it seeks to describe and share a deeper sense of an impactful experience. Prioritizing the person who goes through this is power shifting, decolonizing, and reclaiming, because it restores power and ownership to those who go through the experience rather than to those who simply observe from the outside.

The question asked often is how one proves “feeling” to a donor who wants to see “facts.” There

is nothing more factual than the embodiment of experiences local communities engage in. Yet, how does one analyze “feelings”? What about objectivity and rigor in findings? Such inquiries on the part of donors and aid agencies speak to the urgent need to decolonize evaluation to recognize diverse ways of showing outcomes and evidence. The point of decolonizing an evaluation is to release power over process, data analyses, and outcomes to those situated in the context of the program. The role of the evaluator and the evaluated is therefore critical in shifting power. This should cause a shift in the motivation behind evaluation from one aimed at serving donor needs to an effort that promotes learning for the community engaged in the intervention. In the end, the donor benefits from a more informed “data set.”

For a long time, the use of external evaluators has been defended as a way to promote so-called neutral, objective, and transparent assessment of projects—to have a third person with no vested interest in the program provide objective feedback. Behind this assertion is distrust and the suspicion that local communities will not “get it right.” Global consultations conducted by Peace Direct suggest that at the root of such suspicion are the colonial drivers of superior vs. inferior, better-than mentalities, and plain racism, reflecting a belief that what comes from the West in terms of ways of knowing is superior to and more justifiable than what comes from the Global South (Peace Direct, 2021, 2022), as well as a good dosage of what Edward Said in 1978 termed “positional superiority” (Smith, 1999, p. 58).

There is no doubt that documents and reports have on occasion been generated by groups and organizations in developing countries that “did not meet” donor project and “Western standards.” Indeed, some funders have suggested that documents had been falsified for reporting purposes. What is surprising is that, over the years, development agencies have failed to diagnose the real problem behind what they have termed nonobjective, non-rigorous, or unverifiable reporting. In my opinion, written documents are not and should not be the only means by which communities assess their work. It is not only counter-productive but also unjust if these methods possess control over communities. We learn from Indigenous research that there are many ways of telling one’s story, such as Māori narratives and Kaupapa research (Lee, 2009; Smith, 1999). In fact, a number of development agencies are reviewing

² Akan is the language of an ethnic group (the Akan) in Ghana and other parts of West Africa. “Ti koro nko

agyina” is similar to the English proverb “Two heads are better than one.”

their ways of assessing impact, recognizing that dominant practices have not adequately measured or documented program outcomes.

These methods of showing evidence serve those who are used to them in everyday life and parlance but oppresses those who aren't. The "templates" sent over to local actors—ostensibly to make their work easier and to communicate what the funder needs—also suggest that the outcome of data collection is simply to help the funder "understand" the work in the funder's terms, language, and format. In effect, they center the funder in terms of the learning that comes from evaluation. In peacebuilding, activities must center that person who may already be traumatized by conflict and seeking ways to survive; they must center the community that has suffered conflict and wishes to work toward peace. Interpreting externally framed colonial tools, such as data templates that don't recognize local context, thus becomes an additional burden in the lived experience of those experiencing conflict.

While there is nothing wrong with non-Western persons learning and applying tools of the West, there are many instances where such methods have consistently proven disruptive and have produced an incomplete understanding of peace interventions that are not comprehensive or are environmentally and contextually unjust. This is cause for alarm.

Some participatory efforts that involve local groups in the "development of tools and methods" have mainly translated into "teaching" them Western tools in order to be able to comply with externally imposed monitoring, evaluation, and reporting standards (Cohen et al., 2021). These "participatory" efforts have come at some cost. First, to maintain their funding sources, some local organizations have had to adopt Western monitoring and evaluation methods at the cost of attending to their own ways of knowing or, perhaps, such local organizations have become unsure about where local ways of knowing will fit in the evaluation. In my own experience, I have observed that, even where local partners have been encouraged to contribute their local knowledge as awareness of locally led processes has increased, some community organizations have still felt the need to apply Western methods of evaluating their work in order to prove their worth and secure their funding. Such is the extent of disruption to knowledge building in local communities when it is driven by externally designed MEL frameworks. This has resulted in the loss of contextual understanding for peace interventions, and, in the

process, local knowledge, whole cultures, and epistemologies have been sidelined.

Through several decades of epistemological research (Dewey & Bentley, 1949), and especially contributions by Indigenous scholars and communities in Canada, the United States, New Zealand, Ghana, Australia, and others, researchers and evaluators are beginning to consider including in their work varied and creative forms of data collection, interpretation, and reporting, including poetry, storytelling, testimonies, Indigenizing (Smith, 1999, pp. 143–161), and the inclusion of "thick description of bodily experience" (Ellingson, 2008, pp. 244–245). While this quest to explore various knowledge sources is useful in peacebuilding and in development generally, the challenge is that organizations and experts are struggling to capture the fullness of what local learning, sources of knowledge, and Indigenous wisdom entail, partly because this is a different worldview—one which many have admitted was not taught in the colonized educational systems of both the Global South and North.

It is also important to note that a shift from dominant Western methodologies indicates a shift in, and potential loss of, power. Valuing, accepting, and applying Indigenous knowledge in mainstream development work, including the noble work of peacebuilding, might make those with Indigenous knowledge more employable in the development sector, and, in a reversal of fortunes, more qualified than previously considered. Constrained by resources including time and the often-unadmitted lack of capacity (local knowledge) among evaluation experts, even where there are good intentions to capture what matters to local communities, practitioners often end up choosing what might be easier to analyze and communicate. In the end, one may ask, "Whose story is told?" What we now see in peacebuilding as a need to centralize local methods is also plagued by cosmetic changes that do not go deep enough. With a lack of understanding of the underlying causes and impact of skewed knowledge systems and inadequate commitment to changing colonial impediments, local communities become burdened by inconsistent, blended models. While it is appreciated that a deeply entrenched colonial system will not change overnight, this is also precisely why commitments to effect change have to be consistent and impactful. Otherwise, we risk disappointing local groups once again. After all, this is not the first time such campaigns have been waged to change the system. Indigenous scholars and Pan-Africanists, for instance, have for several decades strived to change systems of accountability

and evaluation in order to surface Indigenous practices.

Such an effort to decolonize our systems of accountability and evaluation involves redemarcating the boundaries of knowledge prescribed by colonialism. As Smith (1999) observes, part of the system of imperialism was to discover, extract, appropriate, and distribute knowledge from the Indigenous world to the West—a process that was “organized and systematic” (Smith, 1999, p. 58). The systemic nature of such boundaries of knowledge created the “experts” and the “nonexperts”; the researchers or “studiers” and the objects of research or the “studied.” Such powerful boundaries suppressed systems of knowledge that derived from colonized, oppressed, and marginalized groups. This suppression has fed into the system of knowledge that informs evaluation and evaluation methods, determining what is valuable and acceptable data from within a colonized context. The goal of decolonization of evaluation is to change the frame of the system to give validity and authority to diverse ways of knowing that derive from Indigeneity, oppression, or marginalization—validity and authority that equal or exceed what is awarded to traditional colonized ways of knowing. If these efforts fail in their attempts to implement ways of knowing that fully recognize, respect, and apply local epistemologies, programs in the Global South and developing world will continue to coexist unjustly with dominant systems that do not favor them.

What is Decolonized Evaluation?

To pursue a decolonized evaluation, it is important to first understand what colonized monitoring and evaluation looks like. It also helps to understand the broad scope of colonization and what it means to different groups of people across the world.

Essentially, a colonized system is one that has appropriated resources and controls the knowledge, beliefs, and actions of groups of people. The famous speech by Pan-Africanist Dr. Kwame Nkrumah who led the Gold Coast (now Ghana) to independence was instructive. He suggested that the independence of Ghana, the first in Sub Sahara Africa, was meaningless unless it was linked with the total liberation of Africa (Obeng & Nkrumah, 2009). This statement suggested not only a call to self-determination and independence but also a call for comprehensive change in the structures of colonization. It is not just a call for political independence or even the much-elusive economic

independence, but a recognition that land, identity, knowledge, and livelihood have been altered, appropriated, and distorted for resource control and dominion over people. This idea acknowledges that colonialism alters languages and cultures, imposing the colonizer’s ways of doing and knowing on a dependent population (Barker, 2012; Keane, 2012).

A colonized evaluation in peacebuilding implies processes, ideas, and practices of assessment that are foreign to those peoples living in places of peace interventions. These “tools,” therefore, fail to reveal deep understanding of causes of conflict or employ culturally appropriate interventions and practices that support sustainable peace in a given context. Colonized evaluation implies processes that are imposed externally because of the power wielded externally and that disrupt, alter, and diminish the local knowledge systems of populations.

Decolonizing peacebuilding evaluation is therefore an effort to address the factors that cause power imbalances in knowledge generation and impose knowledge systems that shape the outcomes of evaluation. While it is invigorating to see the development sector champion decolonization, without an understanding of what was colonized, and what is still being colonized, some of these campaigns will be building on weak foundations, with attendant challenges, including causing harm and retraumatizing communities.

The Risk of (Re)Colonizing the Decolonizing Agenda

Like any movement, efforts to decolonize peacebuilding, including processes for monitoring and evaluating peacebuilding projects, require support from a critical mass, and solidarity from both people in the field across regions and other development actors. In this process, there is the risk of enlisting groups and individuals who jump on the bandwagon—who genuinely want to see change but who do not take the time to understand what is at the root of the problem they are trying to solve. There are still others who engage in order to sound politically correct, but who do not truly believe in these change actions.

There are many who believe that people from the Global South should at least be a part of deciding their development agenda, including peace actions. Hence the calls for “local voices,” “community participation,” and, recently, utterances around “locals telling their stories” that have surfaced in the materials and descriptions of many programs. These terms have also become the

vehicles and actions for decolonization. However, without an understanding of context-specific colonial and racist structures and the way they still define most conflicts, peace interventions, and the relationship between local communities and donors, the urgent need for consistent and persistent change could end up being treated lackadaisically, employing options that ultimately continue to favor the dominant actors in humanitarian aid.

Indigenous groups have cautioned that decolonization sometimes becomes a synonym for every type of societal change (Tuck & Yang, 2012), often diminishing the urgency and seriousness of unjustly appropriated and misappropriated resources (including land, the knowledge base, and key elements of identity) of persons in the Global South and among First Nations. In the neocolonization literature, we understand the ways in which resources, politics, economics, cultures, education, and knowledge are still colonized by the more powerful, wealthy, and influential segments of society. This agenda appears intentional and strategic (Noxolo, 2017). The quest to decolonize must also be intentional, not haphazard, not accidental, and not simply when it appears convenient. Failing this, the risk of recolonizing the process of decolonization becomes higher. Recolonization in the peacebuilding sector can be unintentional, particularly when well-intentioned practitioners do not take the time to build their own knowledge base and capacities, or when we justify the status quo. Ultimately, however, such failures undermine a fragile decolonization process.

In humanitarian work, it is acknowledged that the terms for evaluation within global development have been decided by funders or donors in a typical “he who pays the piper calls the tune” fashion. In an attempt to center local peacebuilders and communities most affected by the issues addressed by these projects, there have been attempts to shift efforts away from traditional monitoring and evaluation. One way has been to add “learning” to monitoring and evaluation (MEL) to suggest a need to learn in order to inform programs through the insights gained, as well as the need for project holders to learn from local actors and enable the latter to lead processes. The field is seeing efforts to listen more to the stories of local activists while eliminating extractive story reporting approaches. In some places, this has been called “localizing MEL” as a means of decolonizing MEL.

However, localizing MEL continues to suggest that MEL is some established formula that ought to be adapted to local settings or “domesticated” rather than reframed. If approaches for MEL have to be localized, they may still not qualify as

decolonizing processes, because, at root, they are still methods defined elsewhere that will not embody the cultural sensitivities required in particular Indigenous settings (Bowman et al., 2015). It will appear to be just another imposition of colonized methods under the guise of decolonization—a recolonization of process, thought and knowledge.

It is important to weigh so-called new or “improved practices” of evaluation against what is colonial in order to be able to effectively determine what might qualify as decolonial. The quest to decolonize evaluation is marked by efforts to centralize local and Indigenous practices that are familiar to communities (not what is only taught to NGO staff or evaluation practitioners). For instance, community reflections and assessment of progress, “wisdom-seeking,” and connecting (similar to networking, but with the emphasis being on relationship-building) are natural practices of Indigenous communities and are key ways in which elders pass on their teaching and lessons, as well as important ways that communities learn.

Yet these are often ignored by MEL practitioners and not considered salient, credible, or legitimate knowledge by the wider humanitarian and development sector. Although an increasing number of organizations in the peacebuilding sector have come to appreciate the need for local groups to have the space to develop their own local interventions (an attempt to decolonize decisions and interventions), the irony is that such locally driven programs are then boxed, slotting their “knowledge” into defined templates for purposes of reporting, monitoring, and evaluation (an attempt to recolonize knowledge production). In the process, local groups respond to funders using the top-down templates to continue to receive funding for the survival of their organizations and, as a local peacebuilder intimated to the author, keep their deepest impact stories to themselves, as they do not fit into the forms of “Western objectivity.” In my own observations, local organizations sometimes cannot find space within project deadlines to reflect naturally for the purpose of their own learning. This is the bane of “useful” impact assessment.

The Case for Embodied Evaluation in Peacebuilding as a Decolonizing Agenda

Embodied evaluation values everyday experiences. In peacebuilding this means communities are able to identify and value everyday occurrences that enable them to address or prevent conflict (Mac Ginty, 2021). Embodied evaluation in

peacebuilding centers the local peacebuilder in evaluation conceptualization, design and implementation, interpretation, findings, and recommendations. In conflict contexts, events are fluid and unforeseen. For these reasons, the predetermined indicators used for traditional monitoring and evaluation may not make sense, especially when external evaluators attempt to apply them to the local context.

Persons living in places of conflict do not have the luxury of predetermined outcomes. They can only *hope* for best outcomes and useful lessons. The fact, though, is that “hope,” like “feelings,” is hardly an accepted sentiment in data analysis discourses. Cultures whose worldviews embrace such sentiments are forced to leave such embodied views at the door upon engaging with humanitarian aid efforts. Yet, generations of people have survived on hope. In the Pacific Island countries of Oceania, where climate change is threatening their very existence, islanders speak of a hope for better outcomes all the time, even as they call for greater global action. Their need for climate action is not divorced from their hope and faith in a greater power, expressed in prayers, artistic expression, and everyday relationality (see for example, Pacific Conference of Churches, n.d). This ought to be captured when projects are evaluated, because it impacts the work and experiences of communities.

There is often the challenge of how to sift through the bulky (and rich) information that is generated. The ethical locally led approach is that the community—those affected by and closest to the problem—should decide what is useful to them through their own interpretive lens. But who else should or can participate in such embodied evaluation? Organizations that champion decolonization certainly hold a powerful and public position in working to change their own practices and demonstrate a different kind of partnership with local groups while speaking up and contributing to the debates on the power imbalances in the development system. Leaders in this arena include Peace Direct, the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI), and the Reimagining International Non-Governmental Organizations (RINGO) and Shift the Power projects, all of which seek a systems change approach to tackling the colonized structures of development work. It is also encouraging to note that some funding organizations are willing and committed to supporting change processes within organizations and across projects. A sterling example is the Swiss Foundation PeaceNexus, which provides a co-learning space and sustained

funding to enable organizational shift from colonial-style evaluation to a more embodied MEL.

Across the peace and development sector, practitioners, consultants, experts, and academics are generating innovative ways to widen the scope of assessment, including approaches such as outcome harvesting and most significant outcomes. These offer a significant shift in traditional evaluation from reliance on collecting data to measure predetermined indicators to recognizing the importance of flexing to understand unforeseen outcomes. It is important to note that these efforts will have even greater impact if they recognize and address the power relations that determine who and what are credible knowledge systems and outcomes. This is why an embodied approach to decolonizing evaluation is critical.

For organizations like Peace Direct, the journey is as important as the destination. *How* they get to “the what” matters. Organizations that see evaluation as an opportunity to learn and reflect gain far more than data to produce a report. They strengthen their capacity and the knowledge base of their work. At Peace Direct, the organization is decolonizing itself while also championing the decolonization of the peace building sector and processes like MEL. This process impacts its relationship with funders and also redefines its partnerships with persons and organizations in the Global South. As Paul Lederach has repeatedly pointed out, peace building requires relationship, trust, and reconciliation (Lederach, 2005; Lederach & Lederach, 2011). These come with connections and networks that promote continuous learning. Such networking undergirds all aspects of the work, including evaluation. When evaluation is undertaken in a transactional, purely business manner, without the necessary relationship that enables stories to flow voluntarily rather than coercively, we should be suspicious of the outcomes. Relationship-driven processes build the needed trust that encourages mutual sharing and learning.

But this will only happen when multiple epistemologies are allowed to flourish. In its decolonized evaluation agenda, Peace Direct underscores the core principles of coproduction, equality, inclusion, and diversity as ways of creating a level playing field with local partners. It recognizes the need for local organizations and facilitators in the project countries to lead evaluation. Peace Direct’s institutional learning framework is informed by questions defined by local partners to strengthen their own community work. It emphasizes the need to learn from local peace builders in the quest for sustainable peace.

Another example is FRIDA (the Young Feminist Fund). FRIDA does not only disrupt traditional systems for funding by providing a participatory flexible funding to marginalized groups in the Global South; it also reports on its programs in nontraditional ways. Reporting is not understood to mean a text-based document alone (FRIDA, 2018). FRIDA's annual report is not the sole function of communications and MEL officers. It aims at a product that both the organization and its partners can digest. The process draws in various perspectives, including from FRIDA's own team members, recognizing that an evidence base that is only built around what comes from local communities can be extractive, even with the best intentions. This reporting process serves both power-shifting and power-leveling reasons as well as practical reasons. As a result, the annual report serves to tell the story of an organization over the space of a year.

A true reflection of an organization's journey goes beyond specific projects to describe the movement of the organization, what changed, what was initiated, what was advanced, and where the organization is headed in the coming year. The process requires intentional reflection on the part of collaborating organizations, including funders, to help triangulate an authentic body of evidence.

Organizations cannot give what they do not have. A decolonized process should refrain from imposing practices on partners that grant givers themselves are not practicing. Organizations that change their own practices internally are likely to be able to share their lived outcomes and collaborate well with their local partners. If international NGOs do not practice decolonized reporting styles, they cannot expect local partners to do so. Funding organizations, evaluators, and other power holders in the chain should have lived experiences of what they are asking their partners in the field to do.

Evaluation is a knowledge building process. Drawing an analogy from the web-making process of a spider, Lederach (2005) calls attention to the patience, curiosity, and humility required when engaging in peace work and allowing it to evolve. Embodied evaluation of peacebuilding projects requires these same traits. A reliance on measuring success and impact against predetermined outcomes creates a linear process of program logic that takes away curiosity and does not allow for emergence of unexpected events, outcomes, or learnings. The cultural practices we work with, particularly in the Global South, are not linear; neither are their ways of learning and knowing. Embodied evaluation of peacebuilding projects must respect and acknowledge this absence of linearity and integrate into an evaluation process

practices that allow for emergence and evolution of local learning. Evaluation in peacebuilding must first and foremost be a learning process that generates insights and stories. These insights can help assess the impact of funded projects. Outcomes are observed and used to further advance the work of local peace builders and to advocate for change in policies while canvassing for greater global support for local peacebuilding (Peace Direct, 2021).

Yet, it is also important to heed cautions from Indigenous communities that the quest to use embodied evaluation to generate knowledge for policy change and support of local peacebuilding must not fall into the trap of recolonizing the knowledge, its ownership, and its usage by overlaying colonized methods to interpret and report.

In all of this, it is important to be flexible, agile, and adaptive. Development work is not a static process. There is recognition that the work is ongoing and that lessons can be applied to improve the work and the community. FRIDA's annual report (2018) is called "Measuring the Sky"; in it, they refer to "a garden of change" (rather than a "theory" of change). As these names imply, the action of measuring the sky appears to be impossible, but it opens up many possibilities and expressions, and gardens can produce many solutions. This imagery is relatable and breaks down barriers of language and class. The report offers a wetland of various actors (species) and an ecology where different institutions and peoples can thrive (Mathews, 2014). This is what fields like peacebuilding are about. They are fluid in offering many approaches toward solutions. Rather than business as usual, FRIDA's report offers an evaluative process that is thoughtful and integrated and that embraces diverse ways of assessing success.

Context is a critical factor in decolonizing evaluation. One size does not fit all. Communities learn and measure success differently and understand the processes of learning and knowledge building will evolve. The evaluator, therefore, ought to be seen as an observer of a process that continues to develop. Many local peace builders shudder at the thought of producing an impact story because they know their work is still evolving. While peace building is fluid, even messy sometimes, what is fulfilling is being able to sit with the evolution, to learn and unlearn, to name and rename, as insights are gained from the learning process. Paul Lederach's advice, "Don't hold your theories too tight," (Lederach, 2022) is apt here, recognizing that knowledge building continues to evolve.

Evaluation and Power

There are more than a few ways in which power in evaluation manifests. While these may vary in different contexts, the underpinning themes are similar. They include control, role, data sifting, reframing, use of technology, and methodologies. External evaluators can heighten or help diminish power imbalances through their own actions with respect to these themes.

A key element of a colonized evaluation is one of control. What might it look like to shift from a quest to control a process to one of joint coordination? The latter, if applied with principles of diversity, inclusion, and appreciation of different sources of knowledge, can create an equal playing field. At the very least, partners, especially those in the Global South, can play roles beyond providing data and program statistics. Shared ownership creates a shared purpose. This is important in leveling power dynamics, particularly in a global aid architecture where the narrative is one of “helping” the poor. This savior mentality is pervasive and can create the impression that development aid is “doing the recipient a favor.” Thus, programs and their participants have to be monitored in order to be held accountable to taxpayers and givers of aid. This motivation creates power over ideas, processes, and actions. It also takes power from recipients of aid. It is colonizing. By structuring programs and evaluation to have equal capacity for joint coordination, shared goals, and respect for epistemologies, we can level some of the power dynamics.

The call to decolonize evaluation recognizes the power imbalance in the development sector. Evaluation in the peacebuilding sector and the humanitarian sector has been a process in which someone, often appointed by the fund giver, is sent to assess how well a project is doing or the extent to which a project has been successful (or not). This conceptualizing of evaluation wields power. It is not surprising that, like auditors visiting an organization, external evaluators coming to visit—or even the mention of evaluation—makes local NGOs jittery. It is unnerving, it feels like policing, and it triggers a feeling comparable to that of taking a school test. Local groups rarely see this exercise as one useful to their circumstances. It serves some other external purpose with little applicability to participants or the program.

It is also important to note that the role of evaluator has gone by different names, including consultant, technical support, program review team, and field visit team. All of these can imply “a

gaze” upon programs, most often in Global South communities and organizations. Indeed, the much-preferred term “learning exchange,” which situates coequality in the learning space and promotes reciprocity, is also under siege. This is because, like other participatory process, we call it by a more acceptable name, yet the structure, design, and content are still positioned to give one power over the other.

Sifting through collected data and information is another area where power can be exhibited. Evaluators have become the “sifters” of data and information as they determine what is useful, what supports the assumptions and theories of change of projects, and what is “throw-away” material. This is a place of power. The privilege of taking all of what communities embody in a project and determining what is useful is power, and it invites the question, “Who determines saliency?” On a practical basis, some level of data sifting is required, but doing this without the people who embody the experience takes away their power to determine what is useful.

So, is there a role for an external evaluator in an embodied, decolonized evaluation? What should this role look like if it is to effectively balance or shift the power that ownership for knowledge creation, interpretation, and analysis wield?

When such analyses and conclusions are developed, those who provided the stories ought to see and approve what has been documented in diverse ways and with adequate space and time to provide productive feedback and interpretation. Such reviews also help to fill gaps in stories reported by persons from different worldviews. This collaborative effort gives evaluators the opportunity to sit long enough with the problem and get a feel for it in the way that project implementers and their communities live and experience it. This collaborative process generates a collective empathy. This is important in addressing the removed nature in which evaluation is done and helps to create an embodied experience in evaluation.

Do Organizations Have Capacity for Embodied Evaluation?

Embodied methods like the one described above require significant investment, specifically of time dedicated to immersion and reflection in the generation of local knowledge given the depth and spread of colonial practices. In the absence of such investment, communities and local organizations too often find themselves filling in the templates with decontextualized and unembodied knowledge to make sure donors and funders are satisfied.

Interestingly such templates are identified within the sector as ways of bringing structure to evaluation processes and are interpreted as being easier for the organization and its participants to do. But, from whose perspective?

Colonization worldviews and ways of knowing are systemically embedded in the world of development work and evaluation. Any effort to decolonize and create embodied evaluation requires a systems change approach and, by extension, systemic program management approaches to knowledge generation (Fujita, 2010). Abercombie et al. (2015) describe systems change as

an intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system with purposeful interventions. It is a journey which can require a radical change in people's attitudes as well as in the ways people work. Systems change aims to bring about lasting change by altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms which make the system operate in a particular way. These can include policies, routines, relationships, resources, power structures and values. (Abercombie et al., 2015, p. 9)

Systems theories emphasize the exploration of interrelationships, recognition of diverse perspectives, and negotiation of boundaries (Arnold & Wade, 2015; B. Richmond, 1993). Systems thinking provides a paradigm for thinking about how things are connected and the dynamic nature of such relationships. It is a way of making sense of the world that acknowledges complexity and emphasizes a holistic viewpoint that focuses on how the parts of a system interconnect and work together rather than just on the individual parts themselves. Context matters—always. Hence, systems thinking has relevance for embodied evaluation, particularly in places where tangible evidence and rational thinking marked by linear logic are not the only ways of knowing.

To engage in a decolonized and an embodied evaluation requires a different mindset and a shift in the motivation for evaluation. It requires systems change to move from a paradigm based on colonized mental models for knowing and success to one based on decolonized assumptions and knowledge. It demands a different knowledge base and skill set and requires a set of intentional, consistent, and interlinked actions that embrace different conceptualizations of time and learning. To engage in an embodied evaluation requires a

willingness to deal with the unfamiliar. The fact is that most of us in the field trained under the familiar and dominant paradigms of evaluation, monitoring, and learning styles. Even with best intentions, we bring that lens to the work of communities. There is often talk about low or no capacity among local organizations in the Global South, with little said about similar limits to capacity among Global North and INGO/NGO experts. To engage in decolonized and embodied evaluation will require capacity development, paradigm change, and “unlearning” on the part of both experts and organizations in the sector.

A simple example of “unlearning” is what could be called the “agenda syndrome.” A Western expectation is to ask for or design agendas to structure conversations. In most Indigenous cultures, conversations are generative. So, what may be termed a tool for structuring conversation could well be viewed as an imposition of a Western form of conversation on everyone else. Take, for example, *talanoa*, a concept used in the small island countries of the South Pacific: it is the fact that people come together to talk that matters the most, not so much what was discussed or whether everything was discussed, as commonly structured by an agenda, the defined list of what should be discussed. What is made clear is the *purpose* of the gathering, and this is quite different from a list of agenda items. Most people from outside Pasifika culture would call the conversation unstructured, abstract, even time-wasting. And yet, that is where a decolonized evaluator can gather the most insightful thoughts about program activities. However, Pacific Islanders do not share their thoughts with just anybody. Relationship building that builds trust and that generates stories of impact is quite important. This is very different from an evaluation practice which seeks to collect stories from the field as rapidly as possible and in as condensed a manner as possible.

Decolonized systems factor in learning systems, epistemologies, and worldviews of the places we, supporters of peacebuilding, implement our programs. Decolonizing a process that has been colonized for centuries requires time and intentional, sometimes radical, efforts. Perceptions of rigor with respect to Indigenous and local processes of knowledge building will need to be challenged. Practitioners will need the wherewithal to come to terms with the notion of “everydayness” in embodied evaluation. Organizations will likely struggle to invest the needed time and money into embodied evaluation, given the multiple projects and timelines they grapple with, but such changes are essential to paradigm change in both attitude and practice. What matters to Indigenous

communities may not be viewed as valued by other worldviews, but embracing embodied decolonization requires that Western funders, organizations, and evaluators do just that. Learning and knowledge might involve the rain, the plants, the sea, and the land—hardly dominant development ideas—and accepting such knowledge will require intentionality of focus if evaluators are to embody decolonization in their practice. Such a focus is a choice. It is a choice of a liberated, decolonized, and embodied process over colonized methods. As Ware and Ware (2021) observed, everyday peace looks at alternative perspectives of peace, including the inherent dangers, and new ways of knowing. Unless the quest for stories and impact is done through the lens of those on the ground, we create a “cherry-picking” peace building narrative rather than an embodied one grounded in decolonized practices.

Implications and Challenges of an Embodied Decolonized Evaluation in a Context of Conflict

When evaluation is embodied and decolonized, it creates discomfort in several ways: (a) by disrupting the learning styles of dominant cultures and revealing capacity gaps in evaluation expertise; (b) by revealing a misalignment in worldviews, social orientation, and education and how this misalignment impacts external evaluation of local interventions; (c) by requiring reinstating, respecting, and recognizing the learning styles of Indigenous communities; (d) by requiring a different way of knowing and embracing multiple epistemologies; and (e) by raising the possibility that MEL experts and development consultants might work themselves out of their jobs unless they unlearn, relearn, and realign. Decolonizing evaluation, monitoring, and learning is a process of disentangling. That is where the greater work really lies. As mentioned earlier, when we understand the colonized process, we understand that numerous processes and structures were superimposed on local processes. The disentangling process enables us to see the urgent need to shift the power dynamics in the system, change ownership for program outcomes and learning, and learn how to tell a more authentic story of peacebuilding.

It is disheartening that, even where locally led processes are strong, practitioners continue to disregard principles of decolonization and embodiment and fall back on traditional MEL. To

promote an embodied experience in a sector that is so “projectized” is a challenge. The notion of an embodied process implies a continuous experience of different forms at different times. What might it take to shift from evaluation as an event to evaluation as a change process consisting of many phases? How can evaluation shift from a seasonal fruit-plucking activity to an ongoing process of observation and learning that respects an embodied process rather than a fragmented end-of-project impact assessment?

A key challenge to the deep evaluative processes that are part of an embodied, decolonized methodology is time and timing. Funders, projects, and consultants are time-bound. This is why a collaborative process is important. Local partners do what only they can do, especially when external evaluators do not have the time, money, skills, and local knowledge to create an embodied process. The COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted travel during 2020 and 2021, has also demonstrated that the work *can* be left for those on the ground of projects to implement successfully. It is yet another prompt to shift the power from a Western to an Indigenous, local perspective.

Conflict contexts change and are difficult to predict. In recent times, practitioners have come to value processes of conflict transformation rather than specific outcomes such as “peace agreements,” given how fragile such agreements have proven to be as well as their limited ability to transform communities. While it is useful to have frameworks to assess change, most places of conflict do not have the luxury of determining a linear logic and evaluation process, a clean start, and a dusted finish. Their processes and lives are in constant, circular, and multidimensional motion. While most of the conflict may be visible and known, the path to peace is a creative experiment. It is important to pay attention to what happens within and around MEL frameworks, what emerges, what loses significance at particular times, and what emerges unexpectedly. Deductive theories of change tend to have linear lenses, and they tend to miss so much of the richness that emerges on the journey to experiencing peace. Inductive approaches, on the other hand, are embodied and allow those affected to build an authentic learning process for themselves.

The popular quote attributed to French composer Claude Debussy³ is apt: “Music is what happens between the notes.” Such is conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The learning occurs in between the big actions. Theories of change and

³ <https://www.allgreatquotes.com/quote-71532/>

dominant evaluation approaches can obscure what matters rather than clarify what happened. In the attempt to follow laid-down structures, we lose the real processes involved in addressing conflict and creating actual impact. Mapped onto an embodied and decolonized process, evaluation ought to have enough space for immersion and a pause for deep reflections, observation, and analysis—a process that can create room to recognize what may not be visible or what cannot be expressed in words, yet allows one to see all the parts within the overall context of the whole.

Conclusion

Evaluation is an everyday process—a natural, even organic, activity we engage in without an elaborate plot (Ring, 2006). Colonized evaluation practices cause those who know their contexts the most to second-guess their knowledge base. If the quest to decolonize results in token processes that fail to appreciate all of what communities embody, we risk recolonizing a process seeking to do good, thereby further disrupting local epistemologies and reinforcing the power dynamics that give some groups power over others. Decolonized evaluation is driven by a quest for self-determination and authentic development. It is aimed at providing insights that can improve processes and change lives, and at enhancing the ecosystem of peacebuilding. A healthy ecosystem is one marked by interdependence rather than control. It ought to be decolonized and requires embodied evaluation and learning that feeds back into programs in ways that improve lives and make room for adaptation.

Embodied, decolonized evaluation is a change process that needs to be carefully protected and managed. Making the change to decolonized and embodied evaluation practice will place communities and ordinary citizens where they should be: at the center of development work. This can be a threatening proposal. Change processes can upset even some of the most sympathetic and empathetic persons and institutions in peacebuilding. Yet, if the goal is to provide resources and shift power in ways that empower local organizations to manage their own work, intermediary organizations, experts, and consultants must reflect on their role in accomplishing such work as co-producers of knowledge and co-learners rather than sole designers, owners, and controllers.

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