

Amplifying voices of professionals and researchers from the Global South in knowledge production – Sharing experiences of co-creating guidance for development institutions

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Abstract

This paper outlines challenges hindering the recognition of development professionals and researchers from the Global South in knowledge production and ways to address these challenges. Applying a lens of decolonising knowledge makes visible ways of thinking and knowing, cultures, and ethical systems that have been suppressed in the interests of rationality and modernity (Mignolo 2007). By challenging dominant narratives and practices of international development, we can unmake these norms and remake alternatives to ensure social justice, equity and inclusion of diverse voices. Strengthened representation and the voices of researchers and professionals from the Global South must be accompanied by corresponding shifts in the research ecosystem. Systemic changes are required to decolonise the social and economic systems of international development, which requires both radical change and incremental change.

This paper draws on a Guidance Note on authorship and recognition in knowledge production in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) that was developed as part of a research grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF). This Guidance Note was intended to raise awareness of the power imbalances between funders, grantees, and the wider partners associated with BMGF and address associated issues, as part of their Equity, Diversity and Inclusion strategy. This Guidance can be relevant to a broad range of researchers working across different disciplines of international development and sustainability sciences intended to have a positive impact. In this paper we offer seven broad principles of decolonisation and explanatory notes to prompt researchers and other sector actors to consider when funding, designing, and implementing research and knowledge production. This paper aims to link theory and practice - it is an invitation to reflect on access points within our system of knowledge production to dismantle privileges and inequalities in the international development sector instituted by the legacy of colonialism.

Introduction

Practitioners, professionals, and researchers from the Global South make important contributions to critical discussions about international development, as they are closest to the local issues and have a crucial role in setting the agenda. All too often, however, international donors, non-governmental organisations and researchers from the Global North have a stronger voice and influence in setting the agenda. Some of the mindsets and practices in the international development system are derived from the legacy of colonial relationships, with decision-making power concentrated in the Global North (Peace Direct, 2022). Many development professionals and researchers recognise the sector needs to change, and in recent years, there have been advances in diversity, equity, and inclusion practises.

The disruption of COVID-19 in 2020–2021 has catalysed reflection and change in the international development sector. The hiatus in domestic and international travel, ‘social distancing’, and other measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have challenged international organisations to reconsider their role and to strengthen the localisation agenda. This increased focus on localisation has called for staff from international organisations to listen more to the voices of actors central to local economic and social development, working in new ways so ensure that partners in the Global South have greater leadership and autonomy (Winterford et al., 2021).

This paper shares experiences of co-creating guidance for development institutions to improve awareness of and promote practices that support the representation and amplify voices of researchers and professionals from the Global South in knowledge production. The development of this guidance was led by the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Sydney (UTS-ISF) based in Australia, who coordinated structured co-creation processes with professionals and researchers from the Global South to ensure it reflected their perspectives. All contributors to the guidance had an interest in decolonising development and challenging inequitable power relations. While recognising and acknowledging contributors in written materials is the core focus, this guidance also highlights broader system issues that surround knowledge production.

Context

‘Decolonisation’ refers to the process whereby a colonial state withdraws from a former colony, which in the mid-twentieth century has been associated with the self-determination of indigenous nations. The current meaning of ‘decolonising development’ is contested. Decolonisation of development can be meant as a revolutionary concept and approach to reject any form of dependence on Northern countries. However, calls for the decolonisation of development are regarded as controversial by some policy-makers and international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) because the concept implies that development is a form of colonisation, whereas nations are sovereign and should themselves decide to accept or reject developmental assistance (Peace Direct, 2021). From a different framing of humanitarianism, development assistance is a form of reparation for historical colonial exploitation and its present-day impacts. To others, decolonisation refers to the process of “deconstructing colonial ideologies regarding the superiority and privilege of Western thought

and approaches” (Peace Direct, 2021, p. 13). It is the critical scrutiny of current international development practices, rather than a complete rejection of the concept itself.

Decolonising knowledge involves the recognition of a plurality of values, practices, and knowledge, especially Indigenous knowledge. The decolonisation of knowledge makes visible subaltern ways of thinking and knowing, cultures, and ethical systems that have been suppressed in the interests of defending rationality and modernity (Mignolo, 2007). In the 1970s–1980s, Latin American scholars analysed the link between the concentration of power in politics and economics in Europe and North America with the ‘coloniality’ of knowledge. Coloniality enforces Eurocentric worldviews and value systems that devalue other ways of knowing, living, and being (in terms of gender, sexuality, and subjectivity) (Quijano, 1992). ‘Decoloniality’ is a way to deconstruct colonial ideologies and the privileging of Western thought, and to address the legacy of colonialism in contemporary culture and politics. Decolonising knowledge is recognition of the need to break down inequalities between South and North and address development challenges as global issues while valuing local people and networks.

Methodology

This conference paper draws on research intended to support decolonisation in a key area of practice within international development practice, namely authorship of written outputs. We developed a guidance note on recognition and representation in authorship, funded by the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) team from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), and intended to support their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion framework by outlining principles and practices that elevate the voices of partners (grantees) and community members. Conversations with BMGF that informed the guidance were constructive and also illustrated tensions for international development institutions working across different regions, with headquarters situated in the Global North.¹

A literature review, focus group discussions (FGD), and qualitative interviews, together with consultations with BMGF staff, informed the Guidance Note. The purpose of the literature review was to identify the diversity of thinking about the decolonisation of research and practices that supports the representation of Southern professionals and researchers in the production of written output in the WASH sector. Key documents were selected based on the geographic spread of the authors and included mainly recent sources (2015–2021). The types of documents included reports, strategic plans, blogs from practitioners and researchers, academic articles, discussion pieces, and books.

UTS-ISF identified sector professionals and researchers who had demonstrated interest in and a critical perspective on decolonising knowledge in WASH or international development. A mix of genders, junior and senior career levels, lower-, middle-, and higher- income country backgrounds, and a variety of relevant disciplines were represented. This group was identified by asking contacts in the WASH sector (Rural Water Supply Network, FSMA, and SuSanA) for recommendations, and through UTS-ISF’s existing networks. Two FGDs, with

¹ The authors thank staff working at BMGF for their insights that contributed to this paper, particularly Jan Willem Rosenboom and Alyse Schrecongost who initiated and provided advice on the production and revisions of the guidance note.

participants in Asia and Africa, and four individual interviews, with participants in Europe and the USA, were conducted remotely in January 2022. BMGF staff who had focused on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and gender in the Foundation's work in Africa were interviewed over the same period. These activities were carried out with the approval of the UTS Ethics Review Committee and in accordance with the ISF Code of Ethical Research Conduct.

The documents and notes from FGDs and interviews were analysed thematically and the results formed the basis of the Guidance Note. Participants in the FGDs and interviews were invited to review the draft Guidance Note and a workshop was held with participants from Asia and Africa to validate the findings and gather feedback to improve the draft. Other colleagues from UTS-ISF contributed to the development of the principles in the guidance through a workshop.² The last stage of the review of the Guidance Note involved input from BMGF and collaborative discussion.

The research that informed the conference paper had several limitations. The UTS-ISF researchers only read documents and conducted interviews in English, and note this may have limited the diversity of input into the Guidance Note. Surveying governments about their opinions on knowledge production in development was beyond the scope of this project. In this paper, we did not specifically focus on the recognition and representation of Indigenous knowledge, and further work is required in this area led by researchers with the appropriate expertise. An Indigenous point of view might challenge the focus on written texts and emphasise other forms of knowledge production such as oral histories and dance. In addition, the authors suggest that future work such as the guidance upon which this conference paper is based be jointly developed by authors in the Global South and Global North, with Southern authors in a leadership role. This would require greater resources than were available to produce the initial guidance note but would provide alignment and 'walk the talk' of decolonising knowledge in international development.

Reflexivity statement³

The author's voice, "we", is from the position of UTS-ISF researchers, situated within a higher-income country university, who feel implicated in issues of authorship and recognition in international development and wish to identify ways to improve the practices of the sector.

The first author, Tamara, specialises in gender equality and social inclusion issues in her research on international development. The second author, Juliet, works across a breadth of WASH issues, taking an applied, transdisciplinary research approach that values diverse knowledge and multiple disciplines, and embeds partnership practice. Tamara is a white, middle-class, nondisabled female, who recognises the racial and class privileges she holds. Tamara grew up in Australia, worked for five years as a development practitioner in Indonesia, and graduated from the International Institute for Social Studies (ISS) with a MA in Social Policy for Development in 2015, studying with diverse students from the Global

² We especially acknowledge the contribution of Dr Ian Cunningham in revision of the principles.

³ As one means of verifying contributions to knowledge artifacts, authors of a written work can submit a structured reflexivity statement that reflects on identity and power dynamics within knowledge production.

South. Tamara has been based in Sydney, Australia, for the past four years, with frequent engagements with civil society organisations and research partners in Asia and the Pacific. She is currently undertaking a PhD at University of Sydney. Juliet is also a white, middle-class, nondisabled female, who grew up in the UK and Australia and has spent significant periods in different countries in Asia and the Pacific. She is dedicated to using her privilege to shift unjust dynamics.⁴

Issues and challenges in authorship and recognition of professionals and researchers

Professionals and researchers from the Global South are underrepresented in leading written work in international development and receiving recognition as authors. This is more prevalent in some fields than others, for example a recent analysis of the nine highest-impact global health journals found that almost 30% of publications of primary research conducted in lower- and middle-income countries did not involve any authors from these countries (Morton & Abimbola, 2021, p. 3). This underrepresentation also occurs in global conferences on international development issues held in the Global North, where practitioners and researchers from the Global South may be excluded and so miss the opportunity to contribute their perspectives informed by the local contexts as authors and presenters. It is especially important there is inclusive representation from Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific in activities that mobilise key global knowledge and decision-making.

The lack of recognition of research produced in the Global South is underpinned by the reinforcement of knowledge systems and norms of publishing from the Global North in international development research. For example, Southern actors may feel that participatory methods that are relevant in non-Western contexts are often not valued nor taught in traditional universities (FGD, January 2022). Colonial languages, such as English and French, are reinforced as the primary languages for research and international publications, to the detriment of local and Indigenous languages. Universities are ranked against each other according to criteria set in the global North, such as number of citations of journal systems, pushing researchers in the Global South to conform to that system set up by their colonisers (Nobes, 2017). Open access provides benefits in terms of removing the pay wall for select journals and enabling broader readership of articles, yet article processing and publishing charges can be a barrier to Southern researchers and professionals that do not have adequate funds. The academic system preferences authors in journals with high impact scores which are usually based in the Global North. This may dissuade Southern researchers from publishing in national journals in their own language, that are more relevant and accessible to a local readership.

⁴ Tamara and Juliet jointly prepared an abstract and outline for this conference paper. Tamara led the literature review and drafting of the conference paper. Juliet provided input in reviewing and revising the draft. Tamara approached some other researchers from the Global South involved in the Guidance Note to contribute to the conference paper, but unfortunately due to time constraints they were not able to on this occasion. The authors acknowledge the work previously contributed to the Guidance Note that informed this paper and warmly thank: Mr Ben Tidwell, Dr Carmen Leon Himmelstine, Prof. Christine Moe, Dr Daniela Bemfica, Ms Emma Gulseven, Ms Euphresia Luseka, Mr Mostafiz Ahmed, Ms Priliantina Bebasari, Mr Stephen Ucembe, and Ms Tshering Choden.

Inequality manifests in various ways within research partnerships with flow-on impacts on both roles and content of written outputs. Related to the systems of donor funding, researchers and institutions from the Global North often control the research agenda and budget, meaning that local partners have less negotiating power. These inequalities often influence who leads authorship and is recognised for the research output. Inequalities related to race and geography connect with other intersectional issues such as age and gender. For example, there can be perception that the number of senior white men leading research collaborations is disproportionately high (interview with HIC participant, January 2022). Although guidelines on conducting equitable partnerships do exist, there are no standardised mechanisms of accountability or methodology to interrogate the equity of research collaborations (Megaw & Willetts, 2022).

Neither academic nor grey literature provides clear recommended practice concerning acknowledgement of contributions of different people to a given written output. In academic publishing there can be inequities regarding who within research teams is given the opportunity to contribute as authors. For example, those who are relationship brokers in data collection or field assistants are not always considered as authors. Development practitioners make significant contributions to knowledge production but may not have time in their work roles or the skills to produce written work of the high standard expected by the global sector. In our analysis of reports that are published by INGOs: some list organisation names as author rather than crediting individuals; some amplify the editors on the title page and then list other contributors who shared their stories in the acknowledgements; while others credit all contributors as authors. This lack of clarity on best practice for acknowledgement has led some contributors to feel exploited.

Ethical concerns in research related to accountability and beneficence also pervade the sector, including unethical extractive research processes and a dominance of external actors in published outputs. Researchers from the Global North will use local infrastructure and knowledge to support their research in the Global South, but sometimes publish results with no strong involvement of local knowledge owners in the interpretation of the results (van Groenigen & Stoof, 2020). Development professionals have objected to their contribution of knowledge to a research project being used, without appropriate recognition and the opportunity to check how they were interpreted by the researchers (Megaw & Willetts, 2022). Similarly, Maori communities indigenous to New Zealand participated in research for years without reciprocity in terms of material benefit (Smith, 2021). Extractivist approaches to research, where research publications benefit the authors without structural improvement of local communities where the research took place, are still all too common. These unethical approaches are termed “helicopter research”, “parachute research” and “safari research” (Iyer, 2018).

Principles for decolonising knowledge production

As described above, there are issues in the international development sector relating to knowledge production that can perpetuate colonial dynamics. In response, we offer seven broad principles of decolonisation and explanatory notes to prompt researchers and other development actors to consider when funding, designing, and implementing research and knowledge production. The principles are drawn from the guidance we developed (Megaw &

Willetts, 2022) and are intended to inspire transformative practices, to collectively make progress towards a different and decolonised system of international development.

“Decolonising development requires practitioners and researchers to unmake and remake development. It is important to understand that we are ‘rebuilding the plane while flying it’. The norms of the development system we are working within must be deconstructed. This will include transforming the power imbalances of the development sector through radical action and by challenging the status quo. Remaking development will also include incremental changes, for example, by integrating DEI into development organizations and increasing LMIC representation in publishing and knowledge forums.” (Megaw & Willetts, 2022, p. 27)

Decolonialisation approaches involve challenging narratives about international development and global economics, which assume universality or linearity. Sultana states that decolonizing development means “disrupting the deeply-rooted hierarchies, asymmetric power structures, the universalization of Western knowledge, the privileging of whiteness, and the taken-for-granted Othering of the majority world” (Sultana, 2019). For example, this may mean challenging the jobs of INGO board chairpersons and university professors in the Global North and shifting these opportunities to lead knowledge production to the Global South. It may involve diversifying university curricula to include more Southern authors in the canon and amplifying the different types of knowledges held by development practitioners who are close to the local context. Such actions as these can support us to unmake and remake development.

Equitable partnerships underpin actions to amplify the voices of professionals and researchers from the Global South in knowledge production. We recognise that development partnerships are inherently political - “there are multiple interests and agendas inherent in development initiatives including knowledge production. Partnerships are further complicated by the diverse cultural contexts involved. Awareness of the political nature of partnerships, the close engagement between funders and their partners, the embrace of the multiple perspectives of these partners, and agreed approaches to operationalising guidance can support equitable partnerships and the co-creation of knowledge.” (Megaw & Willetts, 2022, p. 27)

There is a need to create meaningful and strategic partnerships between INGOs, researchers and local CSOs, sharing knowledge, skills, and other opportunities beyond short-term project grants. Principles of effective partnerships might be a good place to start: including equity, transparency and mutual benefit, as these respectively support respect, trust and engagement (Winterford, 2017). Co-authorship within these partnerships can be supported with equitable budget allocations and sharing leadership for different outputs.

“Lower- and middle- income country practitioners are experts in their own contexts. LMIC practitioners are well placed to articulate their own priorities and to produce culturally-relevant knowledge artifacts. There may be gaps in the knowledge of higher-income country (HIC) actors about the local (LMIC) political economy. In many cases, HIC actors are better placed to support the efforts of local partners, rather than to lead research. The support of LMIC partners by HIC actors may include support for demand-based capacity bridging.” (Megaw & Willetts, 2022, p. 27)

Capacity bridging is an approach that connects partners across the North-South divide with the resources and power they need to implement successful projects (Peace Direct, 2021). It promotes mutuality of support between development professionals and researchers of different backgrounds. Such support can include mentoring by development experts who are experienced in publishing and willing to provide content expertise to collaborators from the Global South through analytical and writing processes. Mentors should be careful to avoid condescension or the reinforcement of colonial practices (Megaw & Willetts, 2022, p. 20) such as reifying some cultures and languages about others.

“The contributions of knowledge producers (especially those from LMICs) should be proactively acknowledged and amplified. The insights of knowledge contributors must be acknowledged, attributed, and celebrated. Appropriate recognition is consistent with ethical research practice, and encourages diverse ‘voices’”. (Megaw & Willetts, 2022, p. 28)

To operationalise this principle, people involved in collaborative research and writing projects should come together to sensitively discuss what type of contribution constitutes authorship and acknowledgement. Team decisions must be made to ensure that this process feels transparent and fair. Contributors should have the chance to shape their involvement at the start of the project and to be aware of the associated time required, so that they can make an informed decision about their level of participation. Author statements in the published work are a useful practice to recognise the particulars of each author’s contribution and if relevant, determine author order in the citation.

People involved in knowledge production need to stay cognisant of power dynamics and this may require proactive efforts to facilitate safer spaces for contribution. As Adali noted: “Weaving nets of safety, support and care makes individuals and communities open up and express themselves authentically as active change-makers”(2020). Leaders providing support and care is important within teams, organisations, and communities of practice so that members feel comfortable they will be accepted in all their diversity. Decolonising is a relational process that requires solidarity networks to be established (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). These solidarity networks can create safer spaces for internal critique, particularly for marginalised groups to voice their concerns over current systems and practices, and to jointly develop approaches with members that improve diversity, equity and inclusion. Creating equity involves amplifying the voices of marginalised groups, supporting their involvement in leadership and decision-making, and contributing to the redistribution of power.

A transdisciplinary approach can support the International Development sector to value and integrate different knowledge systems. “Transdisciplinary approaches value a plurality of perspectives, methodologies and world views, and can integrate this diversity into the knowledge production process (Bhambra, Gebrial & Nişancioğlu 2018). For example, practitioners may consider the diverse perspectives of people of different genders, ages, ethnicity, abilities, education, and disciplines. This approach is consistent with a decolonised mindset.” (Megaw & Willetts, 2022, p. 28)

Most of the traditional academic disciplines are grounded in cultural world views that have foundations in various classical (Western) and Enlightenment philosophies. These disciplines are either antagonistic to other belief systems or have no methodology for dealing with other knowledge systems (Smith 1999). A transdisciplinary approach instead brings

together stakeholders from different perspectives to collaborate in creating new knowledge and theory and achieve a common research goal (Tress et al., 2005). One potential model is participatory research which seeks meaningful involvement of individuals, groups and organisations with whom we would be producing knowledge, while also activity rejecting extractive epistemic practices and stimulating co-production (Icaza & Vázquez, 2018). In doing transdisciplinary research, we need to explicitly acknowledge discursive practices within decision-making processes and try to address power asymmetries.

“Barriers to accessing knowledge must be removed. The publishing system presents multiple barriers to people from LMICs and requires many structural reforms. The removal of such barriers may include the increased use of diverse case studies and sources relevant to LMIC contexts; the translation of documents into different languages; access to documents and digital content for people living with disabilities; and availability of open-access documents to LMIC authors and waiving the article-processing charges for those authors.” (Megaw & Willetts, 2022, p. 28)

Social exclusion from knowledge production can be reduced by removing attitudinal, environmental, and institutional barriers to the participation of any disadvantaged individual or group, supporting involvement on an equal basis with others. Inclusive approaches support the skill development and opportunities for authors from the Global South. The perception needs to be challenged that individuals from the Global North are considered credible experts in global content or technology, while individuals from the Global South are recognised for their knowledge of the local context, which may conceal their globally relevant knowledge. The assumption that a lack of expertise underlies the low representation of Southern authors must also be discredited. Capacitating universities in the Global South with better resources and strengthening the digital skills of researchers and librarians (Nobes, 2017), would address some environmental barriers. Using inclusive vocabulary, simple terminology and avoiding jargon rooted in colonial histories of international development can help in bridging differences in language and academic disciplines.

“Reflexive practice, dialogue, and openness to feeling uncomfortable are positive signs of deepening self-consciousness. Reflexive practice on identity and power dynamics and acknowledging the colonial legacy of people and places can mitigate the hierarchy in knowledge creation. ‘Reflexivity’ means deep reflection on our identity, privileges, personal histories, values, and world views, and how these influence our approach to knowledge creation and our ability to contribute to knowledge creation. As stated by Sultana, the alliances and solidarities we form are influenced by our own identities, abilities, ethics, and the issues upon which we focus (2019, p. 40). Reflexivity can also be applied to power dynamics and their implications for knowledge creation, so we can demonstrate accountability by challenging the position from which we speak.” (Megaw & Willetts, 2022, p. 28)

Creating an enabling environment for the inclusion and empowerment of diverse individuals from the Global South requires a culture that is reflexive, flexible and open to change. Feminist perspectives highlight the importance of situating ourselves historically and geographically, so that we are critically aware of the location from where we are sharing and co-generating knowledge. We only have a partial perspective of the world, and this partial perspective affects our worldviews, values and what we know as ‘truth’ (Haraway, 1988).

The process of rebalancing power and privilege involves *conscientisation* which centres on individuals developing their ability to examine their subjective experience, and perceive discriminatory norms and practices in their social and political environment that motivates them to action (Friere, 1970). Both these practices of reflexivity and conscientisation can be used to mobilise change in development practice and research.

Discussion on “doing development differently”

In the discussion below, we reflect on the above principles to support decolonising knowledge production in the wider context of ‘doing development differently’. In particular we reflect on transformation of power structures, the need for development professionals and researchers, and the ‘remaking’ of development beyond altruistic aims. We also consider how international development knowledge can be the product of wider voices than just professionals and researchers, who are the key actors in the principles and guidance that we produced to date.

Decolonising development not only involves engaging with critical scholarship on development and producing alternative ideas, but it also includes actions that transform power structures. This is particularly important for the dynamics around authorship and recognition. There is a risk decolonisation becomes only a metaphor, as this term is appropriated by fragments of the pre-existing development sector and researchers within it. Decolonising development involves an affirmative practice (Tuck & Yang, 2012). For Worsham, decolonising development implies a collective responsibility for those working in the development sector, especially for those in positions of power and privilege, to dismantle the inequalities imposed by structural racism and sexism (2021).

The types of practices and access points available to initiate change depend on how each person is positioned in identity and role. For example, the role of institutions in the Global South might be to lead the work on access and equality in the publishing system, while donors ensure funding for Southern researchers to present their work internationally reward grants to partners who prioritise publishing in local languages and journals (Edle Ali et al., 2022). Donors could also provide training to strengthen Southern organisation’s capacity to write project proposals and set up equitable research partnerships with organisations in the Global North, such that organisations from the Global South could then choose institutions in the Global North or South to partner with. Actions towards both incremental and more radical changes to development are needed.

The focus on amplifying the voices of development professionals and researchers from the Global South calls for some critical reflection on the need for development experts. While we take the decolonial critique of international development seriously, we believe that development professionals can play an important role to facilitate transformative development with communities which is emancipatory and empowering for local actors. Often this social justice-oriented focus on transformative development is expressed through a pro-local disposition and a participatory development approach (McKinnon, 2006). It does not mean we should unquestioningly place community knowledge at the centre of all decision-making, as local participation is not a silver bullet. Decolonising development recognises that individuals, governments, service providers and other stakeholders from all

countries may all have knowledge and relationships that can support in identifying and addressing development issues.

Some development issues can only be tackled beyond local scales and need specialist expertise and greater resources that is unavailable locally (Kohlitz et al., 2021). Researchers can contribute in positive ways through generating understanding and contributing to evidence-based policy for the betterment of society and ecological sustainability. Implementation of a reflexive and partnership approach to research is one way to partially address the ethical dilemmas of outsiders doing research in the Global South. A remaking of development needs to recognise the long lineage of altruistic aims and emancipatory ideals that have shaped development practices, while also integrating decolonial critiques (McKinnon, 2006).

The principles for decolonising knowledge production outlined in this paper can be relevant beyond development professionals and researchers and can also include other societal actors. A relational approach to knowledge production helps to create democratic spaces for learning where people with diverse identities are included and empowered. “The notion of relationality brings into focus the practices of knowledge that contribute to the fostering of diversity by enabling open and dynamic forms of interaction in which the diverse backgrounds (of people) are recognised as valuable” (Icaza & Vázquez, 2018). An inspiring example of decolonising practice is the *Asylum University* on the Netherlands-German border, an initiative that has transformed university into a space of solidarity for knowledge exchange of all kinds between academics, students, activists, volunteers, citizens, undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees (Aparna & Kramsch, 2018). Initiatives such as these show us possibilities for knowledge production and exchange through relationships that are both respectful of diversity and sensitive to issues of privilege and inequality.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted issues that hinder the representation and recognition of professionals and researchers from the Global South in knowledge production. Underrepresentation is concerning for the development sector because voices from the Global North are represented more strongly than others, drawing attention to the likelihood of limitations and possible distortions in the understanding communicated in research. This paper has put forward principles that support efforts to strengthen the production and dissemination of knowledge by the Global South. We are certain that development initiatives and research will be strengthened in effectiveness and impact, by hearing more from those who better understand the contexts and people whom are intended to benefit.

The thinking presented in this paper is necessarily incomplete. Decolonising knowledge is an ongoing collective project and does not have a prefigured set of goals. The paper is an invitation to hold a mirror up to current practices, to begin conversations, and to make necessary changes. Transformation of the development sector will take some time, as there are skeptics and those resisting change, as well as enthusiastic advocates of decolonising development. Decolonisation requires difficult questions to be asked and various possibilities to be envisioned collectively, to foster hope of a better future (Sultana 2019).

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