Turning 'evidence for development' on its head: A view from Africa

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Abstract

The 'evidence for development' community aims to produce research that is useful and used to address issues of poverty and inequality, largely in low- and middle-income countries (often referred to as the 'global South'). The unspoken norm, however, is that much of the engagement, funding and attention is focused on organizations and individuals in the global North, with the assumption that they are effective in supporting the needs of the global South. In this research paper, I explore the initiatives and the individuals and organizations that are working within the 'evidence for development' community in Africa, using the lens of the African philosophy of ubuntu. I present findings from a programme of work undertaken across Africa to identify and better understand the innovation in evidence-informed decision-making taking place across the continent. I demonstrate that, while resource-poor and not well publicized, the evidence community in Africa is world leading in a number of respects. These include the interconnections within its continent-wide network, and the engagement of some governments within its ecosystem. Reflecting on these findings, I discuss and critique the underlying foundations of patriarchy, development and coloniality that shape the field of 'evidence for development'. I highlight how, in an era of decoloniality, post-'development' and antipatriarchy, the 'evidence for development' community risks becoming outdated and being ineffective if it does not engage with the challenges inherent within these concepts. I argue that using the alternative lens of ubuntu enables us to celebrate the successes of Southern evidence communities, and to work together on a level footing with the North to tackle the challenges of poverty and inequality through better use of evidence.

Keywords: evidence-informed, evidence-based, global South, inclusion, decoloniality

Key messages

- There are more individuals, organizations and initiatives with significant capacity supporting the generation and use of research evidence in decision-making across Africa than is commonly portrayed.

- There are a growing number of instances of innovation in the generation and use of research evidence in Africa from which the global community has much to learn.

- We need to move away from outdated ideas of patriarchy, development and coloniality when considering the global South and its role within the field that people in the North often describe as 'evidence for development'.

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Background

Evidence-informed decision-making and research for all

Evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) positions the use of research as a public good, as my colleagues and I have argued previously (Stewart et al., 2017a). It is based on the premise that the function of research is to serve to improve the lives of citizens in general, and of service users specifically, to inform the decisions that affect us all. EIDM is defined as 'a process whereby multiple sources of information, including the best available research evidence, are consulted before making a decision to plan, implement and (where relevant) revise policies, programmes and other services' (Stewart et al., 2017a: 253). It has an important track record of improving policies and practices ranging across different sectors, including within the international development arena (Oronje and Zulu, 2018).

EIDM requires connections between a wide range of actors, institutions and systems, giving rise to the terminology of 'evidence ecosystems'. The evidence ecosystem has been defined as: 'A system reflecting the formal and informal linkages and interactions between different actors (and their capacities and resources) involved in the production, translation, and use of evidence' (Stewart et al., 2019: 2).

International development and evidence for development

The development field is premised on the idea that different countries (and communities within countries) have differing levels of 'progress' on particular scales of health, economic and social indicators, and through investment in these (usually from the external 'international development' arena), countries can advance up the ladder to achieve a higher status.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the multibillion-pound annual investment in foreign aid (Glennie and Sumner, 2014), the field has lacked a strong evidence base (White, 2009), and it has been highly criticized for this: in 2006, the Centre for Global Development published a report, *When Will We Ever Learn?*, highlighting the gaping inconsistency between this considerable financial investment and the relatively small evidence base (Glennie and Sumner, 2014). In the last decade, partly in response to the scathing critiques of the field, we have seen growing investment both in the generation of evidence for the development field, and in mechanisms to support the use of this evidence (Jordaan et al., 2018; Stewart et al., 2018; Oronje and Zulu, 2018). The increased investment, driven by the economic pressure brought on by global recessions, has been accompanied by the emergence of a language of 'aid effectiveness' and 'development effectiveness' (Stewart, 2019b), and an accompanying body of research to assess these 'effects'.

The North–South divide

As a researcher who is based in the global South (a term often used to describe countries in the Southern hemisphere, predominantly low- and middle-income countries), and who has worked both within the traditional 'donor' countries (the UK specifically), and the traditional 'recipient' countries (Malawi and South Africa in particular), I repeatedly find myself facing the contradictions and critiques inherent within the evidence for development field. Born and brought up in Malawi, I studied and lived in the UK for twenty years before moving to South Africa, where I am now based. I repeatedly experience initiatives to generate evidence for development being discussed in forums in the global North (a term used to describe countries in the Northern hemisphere

that are predominantly high income), without inclusion of Southern voices. I am aware that much of the investment in the evidence ecosystem in the South is still being administrated through offices in the North, with funding and staffing based in cities such as London and Washington. Development is a field for which capacity building in the South has been on the agenda for decades, and yet there is very little acknowledgement that capacities do now exist among the people on which this agenda has focused. Much of my personal experience, and many of the examples on which I draw in this paper, are from Africa specifically, although they have relevance across the global South. Africa is assumed to lack capacities, particularly in technical evidence-generation methodologies such as impact evaluations and evidence synthesis. Efforts are made by some funders and providers to include Southern partners, but this is often tokenistic, and there is little recognition that capacities already exist. Little seems to be known about the research or other expertise and innovation based in the South: this knowledge gap urgently needs redressing.

Reflected in the recent emergence of the language of an evidence ecosystem, there are attempts to start to consider all the actors involved in the generation and use of evidence as an interactive interrelated system – my colleagues and I have written about the South African evidence ecosystem already (Stewart et al., 2019). However, if you apply this concept of complexity, interaction and interrelationships to the evidence for development arena, a number of potential contradictions arise due to the outdated values on which the field is built: those of patriarchy, development and colonialism. In this paper, I set out to explore the evidence ecosystem in the global South, specifically in Africa. In doing so, I draw on a different lens, that of ubuntu. This is a Nguni term which loosely translates as 'I am what I am because of who we all are' – ideal for consideration of an ecosystem based on interrelationships and dependencies. The term itself differs slightly across the continent – *ubuntu* in South Africa, *obuntu* in Uganda and Tanzania, *hunhu* in Zimbabwe, and so on – but the principle remains the same.

It is through this lens of ubuntu, and these underlying principles, that my team and I set out to understand the evidence ecosystem in Africa better.

Methods

This paper draws on six research studies undertaken by my colleagues and me at the Africa Centre for Evidence over the period 2014–20. It also draws on ongoing work we undertake to understand and support the evidence ecosystem across Africa, including in our role as the Secretariat for the Africa Evidence Network. It draws on the findings of these studies and presents examples within the data collected. As such, it represents a structured overview of findings from these various initiatives. The paper draws on the following ecosystem research and capacities research.

Ecosystem research

The Africa Centre for Evidence, which I lead, is committed to understanding and strengthening the African ecosystem. To this end, we support a number of evidence communities, the largest being the Africa Evidence Network (AEN), a coalition of nearly three thousand people across 46 countries working to produce and use evidence for decision-making. We also play a role in methods-specific networks, for example advancing systematic review approaches, including the Global Evidence Synthesis Initiative and the informal network of South African synthesis organizations, and those focusing on specific topics such as environmental management, for example, the Collaboration for Environmental Evidence. This gives us access to a large body

of information on individuals and organizations supporting the evidence ecosystem across the continent, including an understanding of some of the localized ecosystems of some of our members. This paper draws on analysis of the individual data from members across the AEN (Africa Evidence Network, 2019), an online search for EIDM organizations operating in Africa (Langer, 2019), reports of 40 mini-ecosystems operating across the continent (Ravat and Ngcwabe, 2019; Atengble and Munatsi, 2018), and an interview study exploring the mechanisms used to support evidence use across the continent (Etale and Jessani, 2020). The analysis of organizations drew on the Science of Using Science framework of mechanisms for supporting evidence use (Langer et al., 2016).

Capacities research

In the last three years, we have conducted two studies on the capacity of African researchers in relation to specific evidence-generation methodologies: a study of capacity in Africa to produce systematic reviews, evidence maps and other forms of synthesis (Stewart et al., 2017b), and a study of capacity in sub-Saharan Africa to produce impact evaluations (Erasmus et al., 2020). These studies combined survey and document review approaches (on both synthesis capacities and impact evaluation capacities), and in-depth interviews on impact evaluation capacities specifically (ibid.). We have also conducted internal reflections on two AEN-led initiatives that focused on identifying and highlighting expertise and innovations in the continent: the Africa Evidence Leadership Award, which has operated since 2018 and aims to identify and showcase evidence leadership within the continent; and Africa Evidence Week, which ran for the first time in 2019 and set out to celebrate and publicize EIDM initiatives and organizations across Africa through an online programme of activities.

Findings

My analysis across these studies identified overwhelming evidence for expertise and innovation in the EIDM field across Africa.

The size and complexity of the ecosystem(s) across the continent

Our analysis of the Africa Evidence Network membership confirmed that, as of the end of January 2020, we had 2,288 African members based in Africa working to support evidence-informed decision-making. A further 412 are based outside Africa supporting evidence-informed decision-making on the continent. One-third of African members work within research and academia, and the remainder work across the public and private sectors in a range of evidence generation, evidence brokering and policymaking roles.

We identified 90 African organizations dedicated to supporting EIDM in Africa, none of which were satellites of international organizations but were 'home grown'. A significant number (22) of these operate within governments; 8 described themselves as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think-tanks or non-profit organizations; 13 were university-based departments or units; and 47 were research organizations based outside universities. We found a large concentration of EIDM organizations in South Africa (26 of the 90 identified), with a not insignificant presence in other countries across the continent, particularly in Kenya (14), Ghana (10) and Uganda (8). Of the 90 organizations, 35 focus on health and a further 55 organizations work to support the use of evidence in decision-making across a broad

range of social policy areas, including governance, education, the environment and social welfare.

Our in-depth interview study with 36 representatives from 31 of these organizations explored in more detail the nature of the activities that are taking place across Africa to support EIDM. This revealed the broad spread of expertise across the African ecosystem, with organizations using all of the six mechanisms to support evidence use laid out in the Science of Using Science framework (Langer et al., 2016). Prominent examples of each mechanism include: the Ethiopian Public Health Institute's initiatives to raise awareness for, and positive attitudes towards, EIDM; the Nigerian Academy of Science's work to build mutual understanding and agreement on policy-relevant questions and the kinds of evidence required to address them; the Cameroon Centre for Evidence-Based Health Care's activities to communicate evidence and ensure different audiences can have access to it; South Africa's Human Sciences Research Council's Policy Action Network, which brings decision-makers and researchers together to interact; Ghana's PACKS Africa that supports decision-makers to develop skills in accessing and making sense of evidence; and the Evaluation Society of Kenya that works to influence decision-making structures and processes.

In delving further into connections and relationships between organizations within the African ecosystem, we can zoom in on mini-ecosystems mapped out by our members, discussed across the Network and published online to capture the role-players with which they work and their interrelationships (Ravat and Ngcwabe, 2019). Analysis of these ecosystems has shown how each mini-ecosystem contains multiple actors and multiple interrelated connections. Many relationships are highlighted as important, but without any formality. In some cases, individuals also interconnect with multiple broader networks, whether professional bodies such as the national monitoring and evaluation associations, or role-based affiliations such as cross-parliamentary networks. In one example ecosystem in Cameroon (Kamga, 2018), these networks span international UN agencies, both local and global funders, health agencies and civil society organizations. Other landscape analyses show an interrelationship between formal partnerships and informal connections (for example, Hailemichael, 2018). This suggests that networks and relationships are a key ingredient to effective ecosystems, even when they are not formalized. Exploring the relationships across the different ecosystems as a whole, we see very few connections between the 40 mini-ecosystems, except at the donor level, suggesting a level of isolation. We also observe that capacity support, where indicated, is not routinely embedded in decision-making organizations but is provided by external partners. In some cases, these external partners are 'home-grown' African organizations within the country in question; in others, they are international institutions with donor 'development' funding. Influences external to Africa, in particular development agencies embedded within non-African governments (USAID, DFID (as was) and so on), are prominent in all the ecosystems described. When we focused in on the role of donors across the ecosystems, while the data are limited, there does seem to be a pattern emerging that in wealthier countries, such as South Africa, donors seem to play less of a role in the evidence ecosystem than in poorer countries, such as Malawi. We also observe some indication that institutionalization of evidence use in decision-making agencies (governmental in particular) is more advanced where there is a strong component of demand-led activities. Where the emphasis is on evidence production, and the drive for EIDM is external to decision-making agencies, institutionalization of evidence appears to be less likely. We also observe, across the 40 mini-ecosystems, that the role of governments across the continent in EIDM is significant (demand-led/demand-dominated), and includes both the legislature and

the executive. We believe this to be more significant than in other regions, although further cross-regional analysis is needed before we are able to confirm that.

Analysis of the membership of the AEN reveals significant overlap with other related networks in Africa. Our members report being part of 36 other related networks. These include the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA), the African Cabinet Government Network (ACGN), the International Network of Government Science Advice (INGSA), and the African Parliamentarians' Network on Development Evaluation (APNODE). This overlap has allowed interconnected relationships to evolve, where individuals who may belong to separate existing networks, based on sector, such as the health network Cochrane Africa, or on methodology, such as the African Evaluation Association, meet and share learning through the common ground of the AEN.

As a whole, our understanding of the African ecosystem, while still patchy, suggests a more complex and advanced ecosystem than previously recognized.

We acknowledge that there remain many gaps in our data. While it may be suggested that there are few evidence-related activities in some countries, it would be fairer to say that some systems in some countries are not yet well understood, and certainly not documented. We know that in many cases where we have mapped out both the macro- and micro-ecosystems, this is the first time that such an initiative has been undertaken. As such, we are confident that we have collated the largest and most up-to-date picture of Africa's evidence ecosystem. Nevertheless, understanding our evidence ecosystem is an ongoing task, and the findings here are almost certainly just the tip of the iceberg.

In summary, we have found that there are more individuals and EIDM organizations in Africa than previously recognized. We have also observed that the evidence ecosystems across Africa are complex but remain relatively fragmented regionally and continentally. Every time we convene a new meeting of the Africa Evidence Network, we learn about additional organizations working in this space and help to broker new relationships. We have also found that health-related initiatives continue to dominate, but that there is also considerable activity in other sectors. Over and over again, we have found that governments play a significant role in many evidence relationships on the continent, and that this role spans both the legislature and executive. To the best of our knowledge, this active involvement by government is exceptional.

What we have learned about capacities within the African evidence ecosystem

While we recognize that the evidence ecosystem requires numerous capacities relating to production, synthesis, interpretation and use of evidence, we have focused to date on understanding existing capacities in relation to: (1) evidence maps and evidence syntheses, including but not limited to systematic reviews; and (2) impact evaluations.

Our 2017 survey of evidence mapping and evidence synthesis capacity (Stewart et al., 2017b) represents the most comprehensive collection of information to date about capacity to produce evidence maps and evidence syntheses across Africa, updating and expanding on Oliver and colleagues' work (2015). It highlights the not-inconsiderable expertise and experience on the continent, and it suggests a marked increase in capacity in the region from what was previously understood.

We identified 100 individuals based in Africa who told us that they had participated in at least one evidence map, systematic review, review of systematic reviews, or other form of synthesis. These 100 respondents were based in 18 African countries, namely: Benin, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda,

Zambia, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Liberia. Of these, 80 respondents reported knowledge of one or more organizations within Africa that supported or conducted evidence maps or evidence syntheses. Analysis of these data also suggest that there are some emerging and established centres of excellence in evidence mapping and evidence synthesis within Africa, including those in South Africa and Uganda specifically.

We asked respondents to tell us what was most important in building their expertise and gaining experience in these methodologies. While they indicated that funding made a difference, they repeatedly emphasized capacity-development opportunities as being most important.

In 2019, our research into impact evaluation capacity on the continent (Erasmus et al., 2020) found high numbers of African researchers working at African organizations who have authored at least one impact evaluation: 1,520 people from 34 African countries. In 13 per cent of cases, Africans were first author of these research studies. Given that not all organizations incentivize publication, it is likely that the true levels of expertise are higher than this. We found over 30 different organizations across 17 countries that offer impact evaluation training. Combining these data with information on institutions that have conducted a number of impact evaluations, we can clearly identify a number of established centres with a critical mass of impact evaluation expertise, suggesting a maturity within the African capacity.

Our 2019 internal reflections on identified innovations across Africa support the survey findings summarized above. We know that Africa has the world's only continent-wide cross-sector evidence network: the Africa Evidence Network. This in itself is an innovation that has emerged from within the continent. As the Secretariat, my team and I regularly receive requests for support and advice from other parts of the world interested in building up similar communities. The Network itself is successfully providing platforms to elevate others – it has run cross-sectoral biennial evidence conferences since 2014 that attract a broad range of evidence producers, users and brokers (see evidenceconference.org.za). Evidence 2018 was, to our knowledge, the first evidence event anywhere in the world to use a fully hybrid design, with online and virtual events running in parallel and attracting over 500 participants across its platforms. In 2019, members of the African ecosystem took part in the first-ever virtual evidence week: Africa Evidence Week. Over nine hundred people attended in-person events across 14 African countries, with an additional 399 joining virtually, engaging in 64 events organized by 31 organizations. Our Twitter reach for the week was over a million, with nearly 5 million Twitter impressions.

Through a range of methodologies, the AEN has been collecting and sharing accounts of innovations and expertise within the ecosystem. The highlight has been the Africa Evidence Leadership Award, now in its third year, which has identified, and raised the profiles of, leaders in the field across the continent. The Network regularly puts a spotlight on individuals and organizations through its newsletter, website and talks. The lecture on which this paper is based is just one example, and included a number of profiles of innovative African organizations (Stewart, 2019a).

Taken together, the findings from these studies suggest that capacities in Africa far exceed previous understanding: this is true both when we focus on the most technical evidence-generation skills, and when we look across the ecosystem at emerging innovation and leadership. We found that there are established centres of excellence in specialist methods for evidence generation, and additional emerging centres. We also found that, while funding is important in fostering the existing expertise, ongoing capacity development may be more important, and furthermore that that capacity can largely be developed within the continent.

Discussion

These findings on the size and nature of the African evidence ecosystem, when viewed through the open, inclusive and relational lens of ubuntu, suggest that the more traditional values underlying evidence for development are limiting our scope to appreciate the experience and expertise within the global South. I recognize that there is further investigation to be done, incorporating issues of language, gender and power. Nevertheless, this is the most comprehensive overview of the size and complexity of the African evidence ecosystem reported to date.

Living and working in the global South, I experience a world in which innovation in evidence-informed decision-making and its related methodologies is necessary, routine and inspirational, and yet this is largely ignored by the global North. The findings presented in this paper suggest that my own experience is consistent with activity across the continent. Based on the principles of the pan-African communitarian and egalitarian philosophy of ubuntu, I have demonstrated that, while resource-poor and not well publicized, the evidence community across Africa is not inconsiderable. It is increasingly complex and world leading in a number of respects.

Reflecting on the findings leads me to question the premises underlying both 'evidence for development' and the 'evidence ecosystem(s)', and to reject the dominant framing of patriarchy, development and colonialism. I have shown how the picture changes when we change our framing, and I suggest that the traditional framings urgently need critique.

Mary Becker (1999: 23) writes about patriarchy as 'the belief that (only) white men are fully human; and because (only) white men are fully human, society is organized around their needs, reality is seen from their perspectives, their attributes are seen as most valuable and productive, and they (naturally) dominate politics and culture'. Despite waves of feminist movements since the nineteenth century, which have argued convincingly against these ideas, and campaigns to revise the structural inequalities, these beliefs still structure much of our own evidence communities. There have been various campaigns focusing on gender and science that attempt to rectify past imbalances. For example, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics has a dedicated Women in Science programme to try to understand why women are underrepresented in science subjects and to try to redress the balance (see http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/women-science). There are a number of women leaders within evidence specialisms and evidence-related institutions. Despite these small gains, even the most successful women in our field continue to have their successes associated closely with their male colleagues and relatives. When, in October 2019, Esther Duflo won the Nobel Prize in Economics with two colleagues, a prominent headline reported her success with the headline 'Indian-American MIT Prof Abhijit Bannerjee and wife wins Nobel Prize in Economics' (*Economic Times*, 2019; the headline was edited a few days later to remove the 'and wife' comment and replace this with the names of all three prize-winners).

This is just the tip of the iceberg of how patriarchy has shaped previous assumptions about our evidence ecosystems. This paper is just one contribution to a broader challenge to these assumptions. The book *Invisible Women* discussed the structural and persistent influence of patriarchy on the data we collect and the way in which it is integrated into research and decision-making (Criado Perez, 2020).

However, the findings that I have presented are not just a challenge to the outdated patriarchal framing of this field. The debates challenging patriarchy are only scratching the surface: the term 'development' itself falls within a deeply patriarchal

knowledge system, making it problematic for our field. It presupposes that certain people and places (and usually countries and regions) are more or less advanced than others. While the challenge of enabling flourishing economies, and understanding the rise and fall of states, dates back to Ibn Khaldun (Okene and Ahmad, 2011), and arguably even to Aristotle (2011), since its re-emergence in the nineteenth century, our understanding of 'development' has changed over time, moving from a basic understanding of the approach focused on improvements in traditional welfare economics, specifically incomes, to a broader understanding of welfare that embraces multidimensional understandings of poverty (Sen, 2001). More recently, movement out of poverty has included consideration of access not only to financial wealth and welfare, but also to choices, capabilities and freedoms (Sen, 2001; Barder, 2012). While our theoretical understanding of what constitutes development might be constantly evolving, the underlying deficit model based on superiority, hierarchy and status remains embedded within the dichotomy of provider and recipient. This is directly challenged by my findings on the capacity and capability across the African evidence ecosystem.

The concept of the development field has been critiqued over many decades and largely debunked (Escobar, 1995). However, despite strong critiques of the development field, those of us who work in the global South repeatedly experience significant and persistent exclusion and misunderstandings on the basis that we reside in countries designated by others as 'developing', and often labelled merely as 'the global South'. In 2019 alone, my colleagues and I experienced exclusion from gatherings about the methodologies in which we are global experts, and to which only Northern colleagues were invited. When we were given a stage at global meetings we were invited to 'speak for the South'. Our visas to attend international evidence conferences have been rejected on the basis of our nationalities, and when they were granted those of us with 'black' skin were detained on arrival by customs officers. I quote a Malawian academic who writes about these impacts of the North/South power dynamics 'that systematically keep African scholars in a position of submission' (Kalinga, 2019: 271). As the world faces the Covid-19 pandemic, and we see countries such as South Africa, Rwanda and Uganda taking the lead in proactive evidence-based transparent policies, the media continues to reiterate the outdated discourse that the North will save the South, with an unapologetic assertion in the *New York Times* in April 2020 that stated that 'the developed brain' (of the global North) must focus on a strategy for the South (*New York Times*, 2020). This is despite the support of Southern doctors for overwhelmed health systems in Europe and the USA in the same month (Pailey, 2020). The concept of 'development' in the context of our evidence ecosystem is deeply problematic, and it is only amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings of our research risk being buried under these old paradigms, if the field as a whole is not willing to change.

There is one other dominant frame underlying much of the 'evidence for development' paradigm that my findings challenge – colonialism. Colonialism, as 'the maintenance of political, social, economic, and cultural domination over people by a foreign power for an extended period' (Bell, 1991: 12), continues to define much of the discourse in our evidence ecosystem. While the political domination of the global North over much of the global South, most prominently within the British Empire, ceased in the 1960s and 1970s, the social, economic and cultural domination has continued to pervade almost all elements of life in the former colonies. Despite political colonialism largely ending fifty years ago, it is only really in the last ten to fifteen years that we have started to understand, reject and seek to adjust for the colonial legacy. In her recent presentation at the Africa Evidence Network's biennial event, Ethiopian

academic Maha Bali similarly challenged the frameworks with which we view the world, specifically in relation to capacity development. She drew on Desmond Tutu, using a quotation which summarizes much of my own critique of the colonial lens and its application to our field of evidence-informed decision-making: 'I am not interested in picking up crumbs of compassion thrown from the table of someone who considers himself my master. I want the full menu of rights' (Bali, 2020).

Decoloniality is a broad movement shaping learning and teaching across the global South, and increasingly impacting on research. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, a Mexican academic, describes decoloniality in this way:

> By decoloniality it is meant … the dismantling of relations to power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geo-political hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world. (Maldonado-Torres, 2006: 117)

It is a logical step for those of us who work in supporting the use of evidence in decision-making, that we need to question, first, whose evidence we are promoting, and, second, whether our own knowledge of the world is complete, or based on the racial, gender and geopolitical hierarchies that date back to the colonial world.

Maldonado-Torres goes on to remind us that decoloniality is more than just about knowledge (our knowledge, how we view others' knowledge, and, in our context, evidence, what it is, who it belongs to, whose priorities it reflects). He writes, 'The de-colonial turn involves interventions at the level of power, knowledge, and being through varied actions of decolonisation' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 262). Decoloniality is consciously acknowledging and acting aware of power dynamics. Colonial perspectives on development have arguably generated problematic power dynamics which have an impact on evidence-informed 'development'. It is the drive to change power relationships embedded within decoloniality which makes it different from social justice, which is focused on diversities and inclusions. As related to knowledge, 'Decolonial thinking aims to engage in "epistemic disobedience"' (Mignolo, 2011: 9). Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, so decoloniality demands a new theory of knowledge. It is about subverting what we currently know for a better world.

Decoloniality does not only relate to content (the what), but also to process (the how). In terms of being, we need to acknowledge privileges of race, gender, class, geopolitical position, religion, sexuality and more. 'The de-colonial turn involves interventions at the level of power, knowledge, and being through varied actions of decolonisation' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 262).

Achille Mbembe (2005), the Cameroonian philosopher, writes about the shift that is needed in 'being'. He highlights the two sides of decoloniality: the critique of colonial thinking, and the alternative world. He writes of 'a critique of … the endless production of theories that are based on European traditions [that] are produced nearly always by Europeans or Euro-American men', and the need to 'attempt at imagining what the alternative to this model could look like' (ibid.: 8).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is an award-winning Kenyan writer and academic who thinks and writes about decoloniality. He argues that decolonialization is not about rejecting Western ideas, but about moving the centre from its assumed location in the West to multiple world cultures (Ngugi, 2004). Mbembe (2005) stresses the importance of this de-centring and re-centring.

By using a new lens to frame our exploration of the evidence ecosystem in Africa – and contrasting this with ideas of patriarchy, development and colonialism – I have shifted the underlying principles guiding our field to the following:

- We depend on each other, and understanding the big picture of individuals, initiatives and activities and their interrelationships across the continent is beneficial for each of us working in this space.
- The local (in this case, African) capacity and innovation *within* the ecosystem has value for all of us, and it should be nurtured and shared.

I have used the lens of ubuntu, a concept arguably rooted in the communitarian and egalitarian humanism of Africa's revolutionary statesmen, including Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah and Kenneth Kaunda (Biney, 2014). As such, the replacement of Northern concepts rooted in colonialism with the African concept of ubuntu in application to a pan-African context is fitting. As Nkrumah (1963: 15) wrote: 'The forces that unite us are intrinsic and greater than the superimposed influences that keep us apart.' As a traditional concept underlying African understandings of community, ubuntu is highly relevant when considering the interconnected social and political systems which aim to facilitate the production and application of knowledge as a common good, which is arguably what the 'evidence for development' community seeks to achieve, despite the problematic conceptual underpinnings outlined above. While recognizing that the philosophical idea of ubuntu and its practical application to the structures of the modern state are not without critique (see Mogobe Ramose's (2018) critique of ubuntu and the South African constitution, for example), it provides a useful lens for understanding the African 'evidence for development' community. In particular, it underpins the importance of focusing on Africans, on African leaders, on African capacity, and on African networks and relationships.

I have tackled some of the macro ideas underpinning research evidence, its production and its use at a global level. In doing so, I have made some profound challenges to the idea that research, particularly that in the 'development' field, is for all. As such, my findings have particular relevance to those funding and producing research evidence 'for development'. There are a number of lessons for those in both the global North and the global South. I have unpacked the assumptions that underly those who aspire to produce and use research to help contribute solutions for the challenges of poverty and inequality. My key message is, broadly, that if we change the frame which we use to view the global research environment, we can learn from one another on a more equal footing.

The framing of ubuntu, while fundamentally African, is just as fundamentally inclusive: I am who I am because of who you are. As such, it has the potential to be considered, interrogated and adopted by others. There is research to be done as to whether equivalent philosophies exist in Asia and South America – my searches found nothing, but perhaps my own languages limited me from accessing such knowledge. The concept of ubuntu is not without critique, but is worthy of deeper exploration as it offers an alternative to the patriarchal, developmental and colonial discourses, with potential for better understanding and greater impact on the challenges we seek to address through the use of the best available evidence in decision-making. By changing our assumptions from those underlying 'evidence for development' to those embedded within ubuntu, the evidence ecosystem in Africa looks very different. As a global community, we need to continue this work to engage with critiques of patriarchy, colonialism and development, and to understand how they are negatively impacting on our evidence world. Further challenge and exploration are required to

address issues of power, gender and race within our field. This is only the start of a much-needed wider debate. We need to think differently about knowledge (evidence itself) and about what we know (and do not know) about each other and our work. We need to be different – to re-centre our community on our shared goals and values and break down outdated assumptions that we somehow have different levels of inherent value because of our economies, our history or the colour of our skin.

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Notes on the contributor

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