To Do Livelihoods Research Now Is to Recognize Coloniality and to Decolonize

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1. Introduction

During one of the workshops on decolonizing livelihoods research, one MA student in Development Studies at the University of Namibia aired her view:

> *I have used the sustainable livelihoods framework for my research. What I understand is that it seems that I am using the wrong framework. Now, should I leave it? I do not understand anything anymore.*

She was not the only participant who felt lost and desperate after the introductory lecture and having read seminal texts on decoloniality. Despite the mixed feelings among these students, we will argue in favor of decolonializing livelihoods research, encouraged by our Ugandan case on the Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA), as a decolonized alternative financial space of livelihoods support. One villager in the Nebbi district explained:

> *Banks are for literate people who can read and write. Once you walk into them, there are so many papers that you are presented with to sign here and sign there, even when you hardly understand what they want you to sign. Nevertheless, in our VSLA, even members who do not know how to read and write cannot be cheated because all transactions are conducted in public and under the eyes of every member…*

To show the need for decolonized livelihoods research, this paper begins by examining the progression of livelihoods research *from* its introduction into Nijmegen

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development studies around 2000 (section 2) *into* a critical perspective on how marginalized people organize their livelihoods in order to understand their social exclusion (section 3), *to* the current debate on decoloniality and decolonizing methodologies (section 4). The paper explores further the outlines of decolonized methodologies and practices for livelihoods research *now* through the analysis of two cases briefly mentioned above (section 5).

2. From

Livelihoods research was introduced in Development Studies at Radboud University around the turn of the millennium, coinciding with a change in leadership from Gerrit Huizer to Leo de Haan and the rebranding of the Third World Centre (DWC) into the Centre for International Development Issues Nijmegen (CIDIN).[1] Perceived by some as a clean break with the critical and neo-Marxist roots of DWC and the impasse that brought down on development studies since the 1980s (Booth 1985), it was instead an attempt to balance the structuralist perspective that dominated DWC from its establishment in 1973 with an actor-oriented perspective focusing on poor people's world of lived experience. Moreover, such an actor-oriented perspective would bring development studies in Nijmegen closer to anthropology, sharing with development studies the teaching program. Huizer (1979), himself an anthropologist by training, set the tone for that divide by chastising anthropologists for their blind spot regarding the oppressive effects of their work on indigenous peoples, arguing instead for a revolutionary view from below and pleading for liberation anthropology – pretentiously with hindsight – similar to Latin American liberation theology of the 1970s.

Livelihoods as research approach, then defined following Chambers (1995) as how people make themselves a living using their capabilities and their tangible and intangible assets, was also inspired by the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework developed by the Department for International Development (DFID), the British state development agency, as part of an attempt by the Blair administration to profile itself. "The pro-active, self-help image of the poor in livelihoods thinking fitted very well with the image the Blair administration wanted to demonstrate …. as builder of the 'Third Way' between the rusted labour ideology of the past

1 See De Haan (2000), the published version of the inaugural lecture in 1999. "Issues" in CIDIN was a deliberate choice instead of the customary "Studies", stressing the Centre's continued strive for societal relevance and public engagement.

and the neo-liberal ideology of the preceding conservative administration" (De Haan 2012: 346). The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework became the blueprint for DFID's poverty alleviation development projects. Indeed, poverty rather than marginalization was the focus of livelihoods research at that time.

First, the livelihoods perspective brought about heated debates, framed as *frambozen-bessen* discussions,[2] at CIDIN's research program seminars. Then gradually, livelihoods research seized its place in the Centre's research program, not in the least thanks to a new generation of PhD researchers – operating under the sobriquet Young CIDIN – enthusiastically exploring livelihoods and other actor-oriented research perspectives and looking for additional inspiration at anthropology, geography, sociology and gender studies.[3]

3. Into

Soon, livelihoods research became criticized for its carelessness towards power relations and for risking falling into the neo-liberal trap (Scoones 2009). But De Haan and Zoomers (2005) showed in detail how livelihoods research had been able to come to grips with power relations and institutions. As a result, the core of livelihoods research gradually shifted from poverty to marginalization and social exclusion and strategizing for social inclusion.

Inspiration came from different directions. To examine livelihoods strategies in situations of asymmetrical power relations, Kamanzi (2007) used Bierschenk's (1988) "political arenas" (concrete confrontation and interaction between social actors) and Long's (1989) "interface" (for negotiations or struggles over strategies) to understand the power dynamics of the development cooperation program between the Netherlands and Tanzania. Moreover, inspiration was drawn from the way gender studies conceptualized power relations. Lakwo (2006) used Rowland's (1997) operationalization of Foucault's theory of power into four interconnected power levels to analyze livelihoods strategies in micro-finance schemes in rural communities in Uganda. Still, social exclusion and its embeddedness in power and institutions only became fully apparent when Yuval-Davis (2006) introduced the

2 Raspberry-bilberry: different berries but a tasteful mix result and still red. After the amazing marketing success of the first mixed fruit juice in the Netherlands following years of marketing single-fruit juices only.

3 Particularly – in order of their PhD defence – Hein de Haas (2003), Alfred Lakwo (2007), Anouka van Eerdewijk (2007), Adalbertus Kamanzi (2007), Edwin de Jong (2008), Diana van Dijk (2008), Theophile Djedjebi (2009), Marisha Maas (2011) and Willem Elbers (2012).

concept of intersectionality, arguing that the practice of social exclusion depends on an individual's background in terms of class, age, gender, race, culture, disability, and other specific characteristics resulting in intersecting social divisions. In livelihoods research, intersectionality led to a layered analysis of social exclusion: examining in the first layer access to livelihood resources and opportunities, then in the second layer, scrutinizing power relations and power struggles, and ultimately, in the third layer unravelling impeding underlying and intersecting structures (De Haan 2016).

4. To

With decoloniality criticizing the universality of knowledge, livelihoods research also questions its foundations as it seeks for decoloniality, i.e., "a practice of resistance and intentional undoing – unlearning and dismantling unjust practices, assumptions, and institutions – as well as persistent positive action to create and build alternative spaces, networks, and ways of knowing" (Kessi et al. 2020: 271) as well as "returning agency in thinking and doing to indigenous peoples, local practices and contextual epistemologies" (Foley 2019: 6). Decoloniality comes to us through the Latin America-Africa-Asia axis, typically the regions that endured coloniality. While in Latin America, decoloniality aims at disposing of Eurocentric knowledge production, criticizing the supposed universality of those viewpoints and the knowledge it produces (Quijano 2007), in Africa it is framed as "deprovincializing Africa" and "provincializing Europe" to gain epistemic freedom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). In Asia, Said (1978) already contested "Othering" two decades earlier.

To decolonize livelihoods research means struggling to reach epistemic freedom, debunking the idea of Europe as the teacher of the world and the idea of Africa as a pupil, dismantling power hierarchies in knowledge production, unlearning the colonial designs and relearning by learning from those who have been excluded in education, the state, and in public policy, i.e., communities of excluded people: the very communities at the core of livelihoods research. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 33, 6; Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012: 16, 22–23).

"Rethink thinking" and "unlearn to learn" mean a metanoia for the livelihoods research community: researchers, students, and practitioners alike. Initiated into the cartesian *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), which in fact hides what could be regarded as coloniality (others do not think/know) and thus the foundation of distorted knowledges and methodologies (Maldonado-Torres 2007:

251–252), the livelihoods research community must try to break away from its initiation. Following Kessi et al. (2020), we argue that moving towards decoloniality in livelihoods research demands, first, a personal engagement to decolonize knowledge, i.e., to admit that others know (metanoia) and to encounter others' knowledge. After such admission, participatory engagement in the form of an interactive alliance between the researchers and the communities can happen, leading to decolonized knowledge. And thirdly, with the decolonized knowledge, actions of resistance, intentional undoing, and the building of alternative spaces are fueled. In the following section, two attempts in livelihoods research to break away from coloniality are discussed following these three steps.

5. Now

A short course entitled "Livelihoods and Development" was conducted with MA students in Development Studies at Oshakati Campus, University of Namibia, in May 2022. Towards the end, the course (taught by AK and LdH)[4] criticized livelihoods research as western-centric, calling for an ethos of deconstruction by unlearning what was learned by means of "provincializing Europe" and "deprovincializing Africa". One of the course lecturers, LdH, had spent much of his life as a professor promoting livelihood research in Africa. In the last lecture of the course, his personal engagement to decolonize knowledge became apparent when he admitted:

> *So here I am, an old white and European professor, having directed major centres in Europe of scholarly work on developing countries and Africa: influential centres, which in many instances have set the tone in development studies and African Studies and possibly – if not undoubtedly – impregnated with the colonial matrix.*

Having done livelihoods research on the conflicts over land between livestock keepers and farmers in Benin, the professor criticized himself for failing at the time to explore historical and colonial backgrounds, internal power relations, or the formation of ethnic identities. This was a moment of metanoia, a moment of admitting the pregnancy of the colonial gaze. Nevertheless, he did not stop on self-criti-

4 AK is Adalbertus Kamanzi, LdH is Leo de Haan, and in the VSLA case ahead, AL is Alfred Lakwo.

cism but moved ahead by inviting students to participate in knowledge generation that would render each one free, i.e. searching for an interactive alliance between students and teachers aiming for decolonized knowledge:

> *Therefore, lecturing should stop here, and a searching conversation between us should take over in an attempt to unlearn and relearn and achieve epistemic freedom.*

In view of unlearning and relearning for epistemic freedom, the students were asked to go through their notes of the assignments of previous lectures and to reflect upon possible instances of coloniality in livelihoods research or practice. That was the moment the student quoted in the introduction sighed:

> *… What I understand is that it seems that I am using the wrong framework. Now, should I leave it? I do not understand anything anymore.*

As indicated, some students did not see the need to overhaul their development premises, and others kept silent in contrast to the usual animated discussions. Despite the confusion – or perhaps incited by it, two students set out on a mutual intuitive conversation about their moment of metanoia, trying to put into words their personal process of unlearning and relearning during their engagement as development practitioners (at different points in time) with communities of San people, one of the most excluded groups in Namibia. The students asked themselves how close they were to these San communities regarding personal engagement and unlearning to learn about the San's livelihoods aspirations. Learning about the San's livelihood aspirations involved little unlearning: the students felt a significant degree of epistemic common ground between the basic needs discourse (in terms of food, shelter, and human security) from their development studies training and the livelihoods aspirations of the San communities.

This first case only offers a glimpse of decoloniality in academic knowledge production on livelihoods. We only noticed some instances of personal engagement, while we have to acknowledge a broadly shared feeling of discomfort among students with the endeavor of decoloniality.

Youth participating in Village Savings and Loans Associations project (VSLA) in Uganda.
Photo: Alfred Lakwo, 2021.

In contrast, our second case from development practice of the Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs), starting in Nebbi district, Uganda, and soon spreading across the entire West Nile Region, offers wider insights into decolonized livelihoods research. During his doctoral research at Radboud University, one of us (AL) concluded that microfinance had no meaningful economic impact on the lives of rural women. Rural communities felt that the liberalized commercial financial sector would not support them in achieving their livelihoods needs. One farmer explained:

> *Banks are for town people. They are located in urban areas and prefer to work with urban elites. We, villagers who sometimes only go to the big towns once a year, are licensed to no access to their services. Just imagine that! ….*

Consequently, very few people in rural areas saved, accessed credit or accessed insurance from these banks. The development practitioner (AL) concluded that

microfinance institutions used formal financial practices that left borrowers poorer:

> *For instance, their outreach to rural areas was limited, interest rates were exorbitantly high, and the profits generated benefited shareholders only. From such learning, I embarked on promoting solidarity alternative financing mechanisms.*

Thus, as a first step, a deep personal engagement with rural communities gave way to a genuine lived-through understanding of their livelihoods' values. Then, as a second step, an interactive quest for alternative counter-initiatives took off, as illustrated by the villager quoted in the introduction. Another villager added:

> *While we are constantly persuaded to work with formal financial institutions, who owns them?…… In our VSLA, we are the owners. We share any accumulated profit earned at the end of the year. This eventually increases the saving we have made in the year and gives us a boost of lump sum income with which we can improve our livelihoods.*

So, demonstrating the third step, colonized knowledge gave way to decolonized knowledge starting from livelihood values of cooperation, mutual support, and autonomy. The interactive alliance of the second step resulted in the establishment of VSLAs in the third step as decolonized alternative financial spaces of livelihoods support. At first sight, terms such as interest rates and profits still being used do not suggest a profound decolonized imagining of the village economy. On second thought, however, rather than these financial labels, it is the underlying intrinsic values of the solidarity economy that matter from a perspective of decolonizing livelihoods research. Analogue to what Esteves (2014) found in Latin America, the solidarity-based financial economy of the West Nile Region deepens the Western Enlightenment notion of social justice and equity by adding solidarity and reciprocity based on a cosmic conception of community (Esteves 2014: 6). As a result, villagers are no longer passive recipients but become active agents of decolonized livelihoods through reciprocal solidarity-based practices of help.

6. Conclusion

The debate on decoloniality is as disruptive for social sciences as liberation theology,[5] *dependencia* and neo-Marxism were in the 1960s and 70s. Decoloniality raises fundamental questions about the foundations of scholarship in Development Studies and its socio-political engagement. We have demonstrated how livelihoods research matured from a practical actor-oriented approach to alleviating poverty to a layered analysis of social exclusion; a first layer of access to livelihood resources and opportunities, a second layer of scrutinizing power relations and power struggles and a third layer unravelling impeding underlying and intersecting structures. However, the decoloniality turn points at a prior layer or prerequisite exercise, i.e. identifying underlying premises grounded in coloniality. This prior layer signals a struggle to dismantle power hierarchies in knowledge production and learn from those excluded in knowledge production.

We have argued that dismantling coloniality means personally engaging as a researcher, honoring that "others know", embracing knowledge of the excluded, producing knowledge through participatory interactive alliances, fueling resistance actions, and building alternative spaces. From the discomfort among students with the search for decoloniality in our first case, we learned that "Othering Europe" because of countering "Othering Africa" is not an option. From our second case on VSLAs, we learned that alternative spaces of livelihoods support could indeed be built.

5 We purposefully include liberation theology because its popularity in some corners of the Radboud University community contributed to establishing DWC. However, unlike *dependencia* and neo-Marxist theories, liberation theology did not define scholarship at DWC. Exemplarily, in a debate on academic colonialism versus engaged scholarship, Huizer (1971) refers to Camillo Torres, pioneer of liberation theology who died as *guerrillero* in 1966, as a "sociologist" rather than a theologist or a priest. Alternatively, Willemsen (2022) offers a compelling explanation as to why neo-Marxism found fertile terrain at the still Catholic but secularizing 'Catholic University of Nijmegen' [KUN]: both are doctrines of salvation and share a sense of community and social justice. Only in the twilight of his academic career did Huizer turn to religion and spirituality in development (Van der Velden and Hoebink 1999). With hindsight, themes he raised, like folk spirituality as a primal force of resistance and survival strategies of the excluded, and complicity in fundamental inequalities, would fit very well into the contemporary decoloniality debate.

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