EDITORIAL

Uncomfortable truths in international development: approaches to the decolonization of knowledge in development practice

Sarah Cummings, Bruce Boyes, Jorge Chavez-Tafur, Peterson Dewah, Charles Dhewa, Srividya Harish, Ann Hendrix-Jenkins, Gladys Kemboi, David Ludwig, Rocio Sanz, Thomas Senaji, Denise Senmartin and Stacey Young

Building on the intellectual legacy of critics of colonialism (see, for example, Busia, 1960; Freire, 1996; Mafeje, 1978; Nkrumah, 1961; Okot p'Bitek, 1997; Said, 1979) and on a growing call from within the development sector for a shift in power toward local communities (see, for example, Hodgson, 2019), decolonization of knowledge focuses on dismantling the fundamental inequities of the knowledge system in which coloniality and colonization interact with neo-liberal economics to exclude knowledge and knowledge holders from specific ggeographical and social categories, such as the global South[1]; First Nations, Indigenous, 'racialized' and local communities; Eastern Europe (Demeter, 2020); women; and youth. In this discussion, coloniality refers to 'long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations' (Torres 2007: 243).

The term 'decolonization of knowledge' refers to a group of processes and actions that intentionally dismantle these entrenched, unequal patterns of knowledge creation and use (Cummings, *et al*., 2021) and is full of 'complexities, tensions, and paradoxes' (Oliveira Andreotti *et al*., 2015: 22). Many academics are engaging with emerging decolonial agendas (see, for example, Bumpus, 2020; Demeter, 2020; Doharty *et al*., 2020; Dussell, 2020; Hermida and Meschini, 2017, Istratii and Lewis, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019; Pailey, 2020; Patel, 2020; Rodriguez 2018; Vince, 2019), and there is a growing number of networks which are aiming to match actions to words, including the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev),[2] Convivial Thinking,[3] EU COST Action Decolonising Development: Research, Teaching and Practice,[4] Decolonising Research Development in Higher Education,[5] Decolonial Subversions,[6] Working Group Epistemologías del Sur of the Social Sciences Latin American Council (CLACSO),[7] The Decolonial Critique,[8] Decolonising Library and Information Services (LIS),[9] an initiative of one of the Special Interest Groups

(SIGs) of the UK-based Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). This perspective is also reflected in a number of publications, such as *RealKM Magazine* on decolonising knowledge and KM (Boyes, 2018, 2019) and this journal. This Special Issue aims to add to add to the work of these networks by showcasing how a range of development organizations and institutes are currently undertaking decolonization in development practice, dismantling entrenched, unequal patterns of knowledge creation and use.

The Special Issue

Embarking on a profound journey guided by the poems on the nature of knowledge and Indigenous wisdom, this Special Issue amalgamates theoretical insights with tangible actions, all in the spirit of decolonizing knowledge. Rooted in the foundation laid by KM4Dev's 'Uncomfortable truths in development' knowledge cafés[10] and blogs (Young, 2021; Pradhan, 2021; Hendrix-Jenkins, 2021; Cummings, 2020), and bolstered by contributions from diverse voices, this compilation unravels the complexities of decolonization of knowledge. Central to our exploration is an appraisal of power dynamics – a deep examination of how power operates in international development, what shifts in power entail and require, and how equitable knowledge disrupts longstanding patterns of unequal distribution of knowledge and power. At the heart of this Issue lies the exploration of decolonization's real-world applications, spotlighting ongoing initiatives within development organizations. Each paper delves into a distinct facet of the decolonization journey. At the core, this Issue is evidence of trajectories toward justice, equity and inclusivity in knowledge practices.

Poems

This journal has always been open for alternative types of contributions, such as thought pieces and personal stories. For the first time, we have featured two poems. The first, 'Our Knowledge' has been written by Keamogetsi Joseph Molapong, a Namibian poet, actor and scriptwriter. The poem highlights the stark contrast between the current knowledge and the ancestral Indigenous wisdom, emphasizing that the knowledge we possess today is not derived from the rich heritage of our ancestors but has been borrowed, reformed, and repackaged as new. It laments the loss of traditional Indigenous knowledge, which was once freely shared among all members of the society, unlike the current knowledge which is limited to a select few and presented as universal truth. The second poem, 'Here We are on Stolen Land, Your Homeland' has been written by Farah Mahrukh Coomi Shroff, a social justice scholar, educator, organizer and activist in public health. The poem reflects on the reality of being on stolen land, acknowledging the displacement and colonization of

Indigenous peoples. It expresses solidarity with the original stewards of the land and emphasizes the need for unity in protecting the Earth and seeking justice for all.

These two poems demonstrate that poetry and other forms of artistic expression can offer fresh perspectives on complex issues by distilling intricate and often subjective concepts into evocative and condensed expressions, allowing readers to explore profound themes from unconventional and challenging perspectives, and from often marginalized sources. Similar to stories and Indigenous knowledge, poems often employ symbolism, metaphor and cultural references, facilitating a deeper understanding of multifaceted topics and inviting readers to connect emotionally and intellectually with the subject matter in a transformative manner. Poems can connect more easily with our emotions and feelings than more traditional journal contributions and that is certainly the case with these two poems. Their inclusion enacts the boundary-spanning across various knowledge frameworks that reflects one of the key aims and themes of the collection, i.e., to challenge the exclusion of ways of knowing that lie outside the natural and social sciences from "rational discourse", and to present contributions from across knowledge frameworks in the same volume to suggest what a more inclusive approach to knowledge – in which different types and sources of evidence provoke different but mutually useful insights – might look like.

Decolonizing knowledge in practice: pathways to equity and inclusion

The majority of the journal contributions are concerned with decolonization of knowledge in practice. The first paper "We have a dream": proposing decolonization of knowledge as a sixth generation of knowledge management for sustainable development' (Bruce Boyes, Sarah Cummings, Fitsum Tesfaye Habtemariam and Gladys Kemboi) has been written by a team from the KM4Dev community. Grounded in knowledge management and KM4D theory and practice, this paper introduces a conceptual framework for a proposed new sixth generation of knowledge management practices for sustainable development (KM4SD) that emphasizes the importance of sustainable development in terms of people and the planet. The focus of this new generation is on the 'decolonization of knowledge' and the paper discusses the historical background of KM4SD and the collaborative social processes involved in its development, presenting the defining features of this sixth generation. These include: epistemic justice, anti-racism, a renewed recognition of the fundamental importance of Indigenous and local knowledge (ILK), as well as the need for diversity in KM approaches, new types of knowledge partnerships and new knowledge practices.

The second paper 'Toward decolonizing knowledge production in global public health: results of a multi-level intervention to improve equity of authorship at a global health journal'

(Jim Ricca, Sonia Abraham, Peter Waiswa, Natalie Culbertson and Steve Hodgins) has been written by a team of authors from the *Global Health: Science and Practice* (GHSP) journal, published by Johns Hopkins Centre for Communication Programmes, USA. This journal is a no-fee, open access, peer-reviewed online journal intended to be a resource for public health professionals who design, implement, manage and evaluate health programmes in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). In 2020-2021, the journal implemented a multi-level strategy to promote equity and inclusion of authors from LMICs in knowledge production. This strategy resulted in a significant increase in the percentage of LMIC authors, especially as first authors, although a gap in acceptance rate between LMIC first authors and high-income country first authors remained. Additional strategies to further improve acceptance rates for LMIC authors are being considered. This article demonstrates that concerted action can lead to change in patterns of knowledge production, even over fairly short periods of time, challenging all of us to do the same.

The third paper, 'Ensuring equal participation and inclusion in a knowledge exchange initiative: evaluation using an equity-integrated logic model and checklist' (Ruwaida Salem, Reana Thomas, Najmeh Modarres, Sophie Weiner, Michelle Yao, Grace Gayoso Pasion, Aïssatou Thioye, Irene Alenga and Tara Sullivan) has been written by another team of authors from the Johns Hopkins Centre for Communication Programmes. In this paper, the authors present an updated Knowledge Management for Global Health Logic Model and equity checklist, providing practical tools for the health workforce to plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate equity in their knowledge management initiatives. By applying these tools to evaluate the Learning Circles KM initiative, approaches were identified that improved accessibility, inclusivity and equity but also revealed areas for further improvement to make Learning Circles more widely available and accessible. The authors argue that the decolonization of knowledge requires a complex set of systems-level actions to dismantle entrenched power and privilege imbalances. This represents a new tool as a type of transformative 'niche innovation' to build more inclusive and useful knowledge management systems and processes that are representative of the diverse global health workforce.

In summary, these contributions collectively explore the practical dimensions of decolonizing knowledge, weaving a common thread of equity and inclusion throughout. They introduce innovative frameworks, successful strategies, and practical tools, underscoring the transformative potential of embracing diversity and reshaping traditional power dynamics.

Empowering communities: decolonizing knowledge and development through collaborative action and new toolkits

The fourth and fifth papers have been written by Pascal Djohossou, Sera Bulbul and Ann Hendrix-Jenkins of the Movement for Community-led Development (MCLD), a community of practice which collects and disseminates methodologies and best practices used by its members to empower communities to take charge of their own development. The MCLD was started 8 years ago to directly countering the prevalent neo-colonial model of top-down, outsider-imposed development aid and to showcase ways of working in a post-colonial world. In the first of the two papers, 'The community-led worldview of systems change: a framework centring local knowledge and aspirations in pursuit of transformational sustainability and resilience. Part 1', the authors work with the testimony of their members to demonstrate a shared understanding of how knowledge is collectively defined, developing a new framework and ten recommendations for taking action to decolonize knowledge and foster authentic community-led development. They argue that asset-based efforts to foster sustainable change, demonstrated in development projects, must begin with developing respectful relationships within and with communities. There are many productive resources, ideas, and connections that outsiders (both domestic and international) may offer, as 'humble accompaniers'. They recommend collaboratively developed research, advocacy efforts and innovative ideas to address the significant task of altering systems, whether they are substantial or minor, concrete or conceptual. These changes aim to create an environment where donors, governments, academics, and the private sector can effectively join forces, in service to and partnership with local communities and domestic civil societies.

In their second contribution, 'Creating spaces for knowledge decolonization: changing relationships and shifting power dynamics for co-creation across the Movement for Community-led Development. Part 2', the same authors present a set of ten actionable suggestions aimed at decolonizing knowledge and nurturing genuine community-led development. These recommendations illuminate the insights and knowledge derived from this movement's participants, while also delving into the fundamental principles of authentic community-led development. They offer specific insights for a variety of stakeholders. Ranging from prioritizing local wisdom and empowerment to emphasizing facilitation and collaborative creation, these recommendations articulate novel approaches stemming from the vantage point of community-led development. The substance of both articles within this series has been curated from the contributions of over 300 movement participants, compiled through thorough interviews, ongoing collective dialogues, feedback mechanisms, and an online survey. Both of these papers again demonstrate the power of communities of practice for bridging global divides, bringing together like-minded people for action towards decolonization across the globe.

In the paper 'Self-Applied Technique for Quality Health (SATH): an advocacy tool developed by CARE Nepal for improved maternal health services in Nepal' (Santa Kumar Dangol, Adweeti Nepal, Niva Shakya, Mona Sherpa, Bidur Bastola, Min Raj Gyawali, and Emily Janoch), the authors introduce the tool which has been used within health mothers' groups (HMGs) to enhance women's access to health services and information. The initiative, implemented in over 3100 groups across 42 districts since 2008, empowers women to utilize health services through informed actions. Through the analysis of evaluation reports, case studies, articles and policy documents, it becomes evident that SATH effectively strengthens the community health system, engages women in healthcare, and promotes demand generation for services. As a result, the Government of Nepal has embraced SATH as a successful approach within the Equity, Access, and Utilization Programme, subsequently expanding its implementation nationwide.

The two MCLD papers introduce transformative frameworks and recommendations for authentic community-led development, emphasizing local wisdom, collaborative creation, and the power of respectful relationships. They shed light on practical pathways to decolonizing knowledge, showcasing the MCLD's collective insights and experiences to empower communities and reshape global development paradigms. The CARE Nepal contribution serves as a compelling demonstration of the transformative potential inherent in tools and methodologies, effectively empowering local communities. It stands as a foundational example that is echoed by other contributions in this Special Issue.

Disrupting development discourse: narratives, values, and collaborative approaches

In the sixth paper, 'Centring women's voices and choices in COVID-19: learning from CARE's Women Respond initiative' (Kalkidan Lakew Yihun, Emily Janoch and Vidhya Sriram), a team of colleagues from the international non-governmental organization, CARE, shares the lesson from CARE's Women Respond initiative from Burundi, Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Uganda. On a global scale, the COVID-19 pandemic brought forth significant health, social and economic challenges. Within this crisis, individuals belonging to historically marginalized groups bore a disproportionately heavy burden as application of post-colonial methodologies to learning and problem-solving further exacerbated the pandemic's effects by disregarding their potential for leadership. This case study explores how CARE's Women Respond initiative embraced a research methodology centred on attentively listening to the experiences of women and girls during the pandemic. Additionally, it highlights the significance of sharing research findings with these women and ensuring their access to data to drive community-based actions.

In the seventh paper, 'Whose crisis? Development interventions and the politics of representation of masculinities and migration in Africa' (Linda Musariri), the author uses the example of Diepsloot, a community in Johannesburg, South Africa, to argue that development agencies have played a role in constructing and disseminating a narrative about migrants as needy, at risk and vulnerable, while also portraying certain forms of masculinity as problematic and in need of intervention. Development organizations' ability to effectively respond to these issues is closely linked to the continuous flow of funding they receive. They have employed images, research materials, statistics, policy documents and billboards to convey a specific narrative. Consequently, the prevailing narratives that dominate the realm of development often portray a too bleak a picture of crises, serving to rationalize their interventions as the necessary remedies for instigating change.

The eighth paper, 'Can African values like Ubuntu expand the meaning and understanding of communities of practice? Lessons from mass food markets in Zimbabwe' (Charles Dhewa and Sarah Cummings) argues that African mass food markets employ traditional wisdom to effectively cater to the preferences of the majority of farmers, traders, and consumers in terms of both food supplies and income generation in African cities. These markets embody the collective identity and values of local communities, which have evolved naturally through established trust and interpersonal connections. Drawing insights from interviews with key farmers and traders in three prominent markets in Zimbabwe, this study demonstrates the degree to which territorial markets leverage African principles like Ubuntu, relationality, trust, and the communal nature of knowledge to add depth and richness to the concept of communities of practice. These communities of practice are often employed to illustrate knowledge management in professional settings. Through this lens, the hidden role of African mass markets as knowledge brokers becomes evident, underscoring significant implications for policy-making and further research endeavours.

In the final paper in this issue, 'The Learning Partner: dialogic approaches to monitoring and evaluation in international development', Ross VeLure Roholt, Alex Fink and Maryam Mohiuddin Ahmed present the learning partner model, which seeks to create high-quality, contextually sensitive, and culturally responsive evaluations in the field of development. The model involves local practitioners in the monitoring and evaluation process, aligning their concerns with funders, and emphasizing responsibility, respect, reciprocity, and relationship building. The paper shares stories and perspectives from an eight-country initiative supporting youth entrepreneurship within higher education, highlighting the application of the learning partner framework and the principles of validating perspectives, situating learning within context, and mutually constructing meaning. The model fosters valid and reliable data

collection while supporting ongoing program innovation and adaptation tailored to specific countries and cultures.

In summary these three papers collectively underscore the importance of decentralizing narratives and approaches in development, valuing local wisdom, and embracing collaborative and contextual evaluation methods. Such shifts have the potential to foster more holistic, adaptable, and equitable development strategies, ultimately contributing to the broader goal of decolonization within the development discourse.

Case studies in research and development: addressing injustice and shaping change

In the first case study, 'The anti-racist narratives review of the International Institute for Environment and Development, UK', Natalie Lartey shares insights derived from an internal narratives review conducted by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), a UK based research institute. This review aimed to assess the extent to which IIED's research and communications products adequately acknowledge the colonial exploitation and systemic racism embedded within the topics addressed by the institute. The motivation behind this initiative stemmed from internal concerns expressed by Black and staff of colour, who noted that a significant portion of IIED's content lacked crucial historical and cultural context. The review process sparked important yet uncomfortable conversations, ultimately leading to the creation of a roadmap for change, guiding IIED in producing research and communications materials that address racism within their narratives. Authored by IIED's advocacy and engagement manager, who spearheaded the internal narratives analysis, this case study offers insights and lessons gleaned from the review process.

In the second case study, 'Epistemic injustice in international development: the case study of a research institute's knowledge strategy', Julia Glaser and Eunice Likoko show how the growing concern over epistemic injustice (see, for example, Cummings et al, 2023) – unfair treatment in knowledge and communication practices – has sparked discussions within the research and international development field, specifically at the Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation (WCDI), a research and development institute at Wageningen University and Research (WUR), Netherlands. As a case study, this article reveals how the concept of epistemic justice can be translated into practical actions. By evaluating WCDI's strategy through an epistemic justice lens, the study highlights the need to address practices and policies perpetuating this injustice. Ultimately, it suggests that strategy development processes can serve as vital tools to combat epistemic injustice in the realm of international development.

The two case studies in this Special issue represent bold and transparent initiatives undertaken by organizations to confront significant issues within their structures. The first delves into the internal review of an institute's narratives, aiming to address embedded racism and colonialism. The second explores the concept of epistemic injustice within the realm of international development, highlighting efforts to combat unfair knowledge and communication practices. Both studies exemplify courageous endeavours to tackle underlying challenges within their respective organizations.

Conclusions from the Special Issue: decolonizing knowledge and inclusion

The diverse range of contributions in this collection converge on a central theme: the imperative to decolonize knowledge and cultivate inclusivity within the realms of research, development, and community engagement. Common threads bind these explorations, yielding valuable insights and a shared vision for a more equitable future. Across the papers, the call to acknowledge historical injustices, systemic racism, and colonial exploitation emerges prominently. Authors assert that this acknowledgment is not only a moral obligation but also a foundational step toward dismantling deeply ingrained power imbalances. These acknowledgments, though uncomfortable, are crucial for driving meaningful change.

These contributions also introduce transformative frameworks and methodologies to reshape traditional development paradigms. From envisioning new generations of knowledge management to strategies aimed at promoting equity in global health knowledge production, innovative approaches are unveiled to create space for marginalized voices and experiences.

A vital theme resonates throughout: the power of community-led development and local wisdom. Authors highlight the necessity of shifting from top-down approaches to recognizing the vital role communities play in driving their own development agendas. Collaborative partnerships and respectful relationships stand as essential pillars in this paradigm shift. Moreover, practical tools emerge as agents of empowerment. The presented toolkits empower local communities to access essential services, amplifying the voices of those who were previously unheard. These tools showcase the transformational potential of methodologies designed to empower and uplift.

These contributions do not shy away from addressing internal challenges within organizations either. They spotlight instances where institutions bravely confront their own biases, fostering a transparent dialogue and sparking internal transformation. By embracing the diverse perspectives presented in these papers, the path forward becomes clear: collaborative action, diverse partnerships, ongoing monitoring, contextualized evaluations and grappling with biases are critical in forging a new development discourse. As these papers collectively

illuminate, decolonizing knowledge and nurturing inclusion are not just noble ideals; they are the cornerstones of a more just and prosperous world.

Acknowledgements

About the Authors

Sarah Cummings is a researcher and consultant on knowledge and global development. She is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at Knowledge, Technology and Innovation (KTI) Department at Wageningen University and Research, working on the NWO Research Project 'From philosophy to action and back again: addressing epistemic justice' (Project No: 406.XS.01.054). She is also the Editor-in-Chief for the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*. Email: *sarahcummingswork@gmail.com*

Bruce Boyes is editor, lead writer, and a director of the award-winning *RealKM Magazine*. He holds a Master of Environmental Management with Distinction, and his work in cross-domain knowledge integration and knowledge co-creation for sustainable development is highly regarded. His expertise and experience include knowledge management (KM), environmental management, project management, stakeholder engagement, teaching and training, communications, research, and writing and editing. Through RealKM Magazine, Bruce has been very active in advancing the decolonization of knowledge and KM. An impetus for this has been eight years of living and working in China, where he became acutely aware of the extent to which the global knowledge base is biased against the global South, including learning about Chinese KM approaches that offer advantages over dominant Euro-American approaches. He is a Senior Editor of the Knowledge Management for Development Journal. Email: bruce@bruceboyes.info

Jorge Chavez-Tafur PhD is an agronomist and rural development professional supporting the analysis and evaluation of projects and programmes; the exchange of information and the dissemination of the lessons learnt, and different capacity development initiatives. He serves as knowledge and learning specialist at Oxfam Novib and was previously Knowledge Management officer at CTA, coordinating the Experience Capitalization project implemented in collaboration with other agencies; editor of Farming Matters and of the international edition of the LEISA magazine. He is a guest lecturer at Universidad Agraria La Molina, Peru, and was previously a consultant with ETC Andes, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). He is a member of

the KM4Dev core group and Senior Editor of the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*. Email: j.chavez.tafur@gmail.com

Peterson Dewah PhD is a lecturer at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST), Zimbabwe, and an Honorary Lecturer at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, Information Studies Programme. Dr Dewah is a C2 NRF rated researcher and his research interests are in knowledge management, records and archives management, ethics in information management and Indigenous knowledge systems where he has taught and published peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. He has supervised BSc Honours and Masters' students and examined PhD and Masters' theses and dissertations in his years of university teaching and research career. Email: peterson.dewah@nust.ac.zw

Charles Dhewa is a proactive Knowledge Broker and Management Specialist committed to exceptional practical achievements in agriculture and rural development. Among other qualifications, he holds a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) degree in Information and Knowledge Management from Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Based in Zimbabwe, he is the Chief Executive Officer of Knowledge Transfer Africa (Pvt) Ltd which he founded in 2006 after realizing that agriculture value chain actors needed knowledge brokering services. He writes a lot of articles on thought leadership in agriculture and socio-economic development. Some of his ideas are shared through his blog. Working from more than 20 agricultural markets under a flagship known as eMKambo, his organisation gathers and processes data into market intelligence that is important for decision making and policy development. He is a member of the KM4Dev core group. Email: charles@knowledgetransafrica.com

Srividya Harish is a collaborative senior development professional with 15 years of multi-disciplinary research, evaluation, and training experience to support quality, impactful and meaningful programmes. A knowledge management and learning expert with a track record of developing organizations', individuals, and team's capacity in 45+ countries. She is a member of the KM4Dev core group. Email: chsrividya@gmail.com

Ann Hendrix-Jenkins is a jaded but nevertheless optimistic idealist about the potential of international partnerships. She has worked for 25+ years in organizational and social learning and change, as a Peace Corps Volunteer, writer, facilitator & convener, knowledge manager, and more. She believes that collective change and inclusive social cohesion are the ways forward. She loves the power of games and the social arts. Currently she works as a consultant, and as Chief Encourager to the National Chapters of the Movement for Community-led Development. Email: annhjenkins@gmail.com

Gladys Kemboi is a Knowledge Management Advisor with international development experience. Major strengths in knowledge management (KM) and global issues which include decolonisation of knowledge, social and gender advocacy, youth and women empowerment, climate change, and socio-economic projects, resulting in increased opportunities whilst fostering inclusivity and sustainability. Recognized and awarded for applying KM to address social and economic inequalities and the ability to develop and implement a highly successful knowledge management performance portfolio. Gladys holds a master's in information and Knowledge Management from Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, as well as Bachelor of Technology in Information Studies (Major Knowledge Management) from the Technical University of Kenya and a Certified Community Manager by the World Bank Group. She is a member of the KM4Dev core group. Email: kemboigladys23@gmail.com

David Ludwig PhD is an associate professor in the Knowledge, Technology, and Innovation (KTI) group of Wageningen University & Research, The Netherlands, and the principal investigator of the Global Epistemologies and Ontologies (GEOS) project. He works at the intersection of philosophy of science and development studies with a focus on knowledge diversity among heterogenous actors from Indigenous communities to academically trained scientists. David is passionate about critical thinking about development and about turning philosophical reflection into meaningful and collaborative action.
Email: david.ludwig@wur.nl

Rocio Sanz is a Senior Knowledge Broker and Consultant with a robust communication and learning background. For over 20 years, she has worked with UN agencies, namely UNICEF and IOM, non-governmental organizations, and governments, serving, mentoring, and coaching organizations, teams, and individuals. She specializes in elevating knowledge strategies, intelligence, and frameworks for development, bolstered by her expertise in knowledge retention. Rocio excels in building capacity building and crafting customized innovative tools for effective knowledge sharing and generation. Her proficiency extends to working with communities and networks, facilitating seamless exchange, collaboration and learning benefiting from the tacit knowledge available in the groups. As a core member of KM4Dev, she also serves as a Senior Editor for the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*. Email: sanz_rocio@hotmail.com.

Thomas Senaji PhD is Professor of strategy and knowledge management and Deputy Vice Chancellor at the East African University (TEAU), Kenya. He extensively provides consultancy services to governments and private organisations on information and communication technology focusing Broadband strategy in Africa and organisational strategy

and knowledge management. He is the founding President of the International Society for Leadership and Management currently in formative stages. Email: tsenaji@gmail.com

Denise Senmartin is passionate about facilitating learning processes and multicultural conversations. She has over fifteen years of on-the-ground experience designing and implementing participatory processes with diverse local and government partners, donors, and other stakeholders. She is currently working as responsible for projects with international financial institutions at the National Registry of Persons, Argentina. Senior Editor with the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* and point of contact for the Latin-American community of practice. She is based in Córdoba, Argentina's second-largest city. Email: dsenmartin@gmail.com

Stacey Young PhD is the Agency Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning Officer at the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Stacey also co-chairs the Multi-Donor Learning Partnership of eleven major donor organizations working to advance organizational learning and knowledge management in international development. From 2011-2019, she served as a Senior Learning Advisor for USAID's Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning. Through her vision and leadership, USAID developed a holistic approach to Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) that is integrated across USAID's country programs and influential within the development sector. During this time, she also served as the Senior Technical Advisor for USAID's first Agency-wide learning agenda. Stacey joined USAID in 2003 as the Senior Knowledge Management Advisor for USAID's Microenterprise Development office, where she led an award-winning knowledge management program to facilitate learning in microfinance, market development and poverty reduction. Stacey has published several books and articles on development and knowledge management, and has taught political science, women's studies and writing at Skidmore College and at Cornell University, where she earned a PhD in Government. Email: styoung@usaid.gov

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[1] The term global South, while contested, is still useful to refer to 'structurally determined inequalities' (Prys-Hansen, 2023). For more on the debate about this concept check: The global South: A Problematic Term

[2] www.KM4Dev.org and https://dgroups.io/g/km4dev/

[3] https://convivialthinking.org/

[4] https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA19129/

[5] DECOLONIALHE@jiscmail.ac.uk

[6] http://decolonialsubversions.org/

[7] https://www.clacso.org/categoria/grupos-de-trabajo/grupos-de-trabajo-2019-2022/grupo-de-trabajo-epistemologias-del-sur/

[8] https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=THE-DECOLONIAL-CRITIQUE

[9] https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=LIS-DECOLONISE

[10] Please see the paper by Bruce Boyes and colleagues in this Special Issue which provides details of these cafes.