

**(Un)Subjugating Indigenous Knowledge for Sustainable Development: Considerations for
Community-Based Research in African Higher Education**

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ABSTRACT

The most recent incarnation of development goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), call for a more intentional integration of higher education in development. Research can provide an avenue by which this done, developing relevant solutions to social problems. But who benefits from research, and whose knowledge counts in this process? Formal engagement with Indigenous knowledge, honoring the voices, artifacts, histories, traditions, and *knowledges* of those Indigenous communities that buttress the university can potentially contribute to both the social and environmental justice at the heart of sustainable development. Our research was focused on how African academics at two public universities and community members in The Gambia and Zambia

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constructed the role of Indigenous knowledge within their community-based research activities. We highlight the specific epistemic strategies academic researchers used to engage Indigenous communities and knowledge, the dilemmas faced in the field, and the connections made through research relationships to sustainable development.

Keywords: Africa, community-based research, higher education, indigenous knowledge, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between development and higher education has evolved to become co-generative. The most recent incarnation of development goals, the sustainable development goals (SDG) call for a more intentional integration of higher education in development, particularly SDG 4, which highlights the promotion of inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning opportunities (Allias et al., 2020). And, in turn, when faced with the very real threat of climate change, universities across the globe have taken up the mantle of sustainable development in their policies, practices, and relationships with communities (Franco & Tracey, 2019). While the goals associated with sustainable development were conceived in and directed by high income countries (Unterhalter & Howell, 2021), majority world countries and their institutions are increasingly connecting to and innovating upon these conceptions (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021). Sustainable development is evidenced in changes in the curriculum, the reevaluation of campus operations, embodying associated principles in university policies, linking to community needs and services, and producing socially-relevant, applicable, and participatory research (McCowan, 2019).

In many African countries, however, the neoliberal regime has proliferated in higher education, forcing institutions, and subsequently faculty, into adopting poorly contextualized reforms that value productivity (Gyamera & Burke, 2018; Johnson & Hirt, 2012) over solving social problems, potentially confounding the university's role in sustainable development (Ulmer & Wydra, 2020). Chipinidi and Vavrus (2018, p. 146) asserted that faculty members' "professional lives as academics undergo re-constitution in a corporatized campus milieu;" as a result, research becomes a site of colonization for African faculty caught between institutional reforms, funding and productivity priorities, and their social and cultural values (Higgs, 2010). While university-generated research is seen as critical to development in Africa (Sawyerr, 2004), research is not value free and questions regarding *ends* are critical to the sustainable development enterprise (Leal Filho et al., 2015).

Who benefits from research, and, in light of the struggle described above, whose knowledge counts in the creation, development, and subsequent applications derived from these endeavors? These questions necessarily engage debates about types of knowledge and their place in the academy. Preece (2016) asserted that "dominant forms of knowledge are discursively protected through a complex system of techniques...Subjugated knowledges are localised knowledges that are often ignored by [educational] institutions" (p. 106). The conflict between knowledge systems is nowhere more evident than in African higher education (Mbah et al., 2021), where *epistemic justice* requires contestation of the relevance of knowledge to Africa within the African university (Ndofirepi & Gwaravanda, 2019).

Formal engagement with Indigenous knowledge, a cumulative body of knowledge, practices, and beliefs, and values accumulated overtime within a geographic context and the material and nonmaterial realms of existence (Emeagwali, 2014), is a mechanism by which to

problematize the lay/expert dichotomy inherent to the academy (Winberg, 2006); decolonize the neoliberal mechanisms that reinforce this dichotomy (Dei, 2014; Kidman, 2020); and further underscore a social view of knowledge and knowledge construction (Ibhakewanlan & McGrath, 2015) that may serve sustainable development best (Mbah et al., 2021). This article sought to explore research, particularly community-based research (CBR) as a form of partnership between academics and community members (Ibhakewanlan & McGrath, 2015), as an avenue by which to develop relevant solutions to social problems by honoring the voices, artifacts, histories, languages, traditions, and *knowledges* of those Indigenous communities that buttress the university, thereby potentially contributing to the epistemic justice at the heart of sustainable development.

**EXPLORING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH,
INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
AT AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES**

The research reported here employed a collective, exploratory case study design guided by the question: How do African academics and their community partners construct, manage, and act upon Indigenous knowledge to advance sustainable development? Specifically we were interested in how faculty members engaged in community-based research and their community partners envisaged the nature and place of Indigenous knowledge in the African university. The contexts for this exploration were two public universities, in total, in Zambia, a Southern African country of approximately 16 million, and The Gambia, a West African nation of 2 million. Both countries are linguistically, geographically, and ethnically diverse, laying claim to many Indigenous communities, cultures, and languages. Furthermore, each country references a connection to sustainable development and education in their national development plans (Mbah et al., 2021).

Our work was post-colonial and qualitative in that we acknowledged how traditional research approaches often suppress other ways of knowing and privilege elite and Eurocentric knowledge (Chilisa, 2012); consequently we attempted to disrupt this by focusing on the stories and experiences of African academics and community members (N=90). Specifically, our participants were faculty researchers at public universities in Zambia (n=34) and The Gambia (n=28) and community members who participated, to varying degrees, in university-community projects in both countries (Zambia, n=16; The Gambia, n=12). Faculty had on average 9.5 years of experience across the institutions and were representative of a variety of disciplines, subjects, and units. Community member participants were predominantly farmers, but also represented traditional healers, village administration, and business operations. We were responsive to the gender dynamics characteristic of both groups, intentionally oversampling women academics and using culturally appropriate, but gender sensitive data collection techniques with the community (i.e. gender segregated talking circles).

After receiving ethical clearance from the case universities, our data collection process entailed relational dialogues with faculty members who practiced CBR, as well as talking circles with community members in villages adjacent to the university. Relational dialogues and talking circles are Indigenous approaches to face to face research methods that honor life stories, connect to the environment, and privilege collectivist constructions of knowledge (Chilisa, 2012). Data analysis included using in vivo coding techniques initially, by case, to emphasize the expressions of our participants (Saldaña, 2016). Then, through categorical aggregation, we put the parts of the data corpus deconstructed during coding back together to create an overall interpretation of the cases (Stake, 1995). Here we highlight how faculty understood Indigenous knowledge, the specific epistemic strategies academic researchers used to engage Indigenous communities and knowledge,

the experiences of community members with university research, the dilemmas faced in the field, and the connections (both real and potential) made through research relationships to sustainable development.

What is Indigenous Knowledge?

“So, it is not true that indigenous is static, a lot of things keep changing and that what we research here and that’s what we as academia do to marry this Indigenous knowledge with research to improve it.” (Faculty, Languages, Zambia)

There are a plethora of definitions for the concept of Indigenous knowledge as it is unbound by disciplinarity (Mawere, 2015) and “as diverse as there are voices that utter the term” (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019, p. 6). Dei (2011) emphatically discouraged the universalizing of Indigenous knowledge through definitions and asked us to consider, instead, issues of politics, identity, language, culture, and history. Due to the contestations and complexity of this concept, we spoke with faculty researchers’ engaged in CBR to share their understanding of and experiences with Indigenous knowledge as a starting point for conversations about research, community relationships, and sustainable development at African universities.

Several characteristics emerged from this questioning: that Indigenous knowledge provides solutions to communities’ problems; that it contrasts with so-called “Western” knowledge; and that finally, it complements academic knowledge. Overwhelmingly our academic participants from both countries focused their descriptions on the use of local knowledge to solve local problems.

Indigenous knowledge is knowledge that is locally produced, of course, that is not externally imposed. That is for example, if people have a solution [to] a problem, if you have a problem in their communities, and what knowledge is used to solve that problem,

for example. It's not externally produced; it is internally produced. (Faculty, Political Science, The Gambia)

Participants often defined Indigenous knowledge in contrast to other types of knowledge, specifically that of traditional, disciplinary, empirical knowledge.

My understanding of Indigenous knowledge is that it is a very complex set of knowledge, skills and technology... And this knowledge has been transmitted from one generation to the other, and it has helped them a lot to adapt to their various specific cultural environments over time. This knowledge is dynamic; it changes and this knowledge continues to evolve over time. So, it is specific to the people and it contrasts with what I call an experimental knowledge that is a Western-based investigative, and empirical knowledge. (Faculty, Social Work, The Gambia)

While others saw disciplinary knowledge as complementary or inherent to Indigenous knowledge, seeing a hybridity that benefits the society.

Indigenous knowledge, from my own perspective, is knowledge with the people down in the community...They must have some knowledge, and you the health worker too has knowledge, you are just trying to complement what they've already known. And in complementing what they've already known, it will yield better efforts in trying to bring in quality care, and quality life, lifestyle. (Nursing, The Gambia)

I think Indigenous knowledge is knowledge that is usually community based; it could be contextual in a certain locality...and *some of it is so scientific based that when you are doing research you may find that they have this knowledge* [emphasis added] but they have no scientific explanation for it...and sometimes in communities they will say, 'Well but

what you are doing is nothing new because our forefathers, our grandfathers, this is what we used to do.’ (Faculty, Veterinary Science, Zambia)

Cumulatively, participants from Zambia and the Gambia captured the complexity of Indigenous knowledge as a dynamic, distinct, localized knowledge central to community survival.

Participants often saw Indigenous knowledge in contrast to other types of knowledge, underscoring the “politics of knowledge” inherent to African institutions where “the university is alienated from the society in which it is found” due to (neo)colonialism (Ndofirepi & Gwaravanda, 2019, p. 583). Notions of complementarity, however, capture an increasing movement in African academic circles toward the decolonization of the university knowledge systems and the re-centering of an African, Indigenous epistemology (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017), thus appreciating that both knowledges do not exist in isolation to one another (Shizha, 2013). As that last quote evidences, Indigenous knowledge *is* scientific knowledge, which troubles the notion of dichotomy. This perspective is consistent with “African Science” theorizing (Mawere, 2014), which sees “science as residing in social and cultural bodies of knowledges” (Asabere-Ameyaw et al., 2012, p. 217), and serves as a pivot point for considering the role of Indigenous knowledge in sustainable development.

Indigenous Knowledge and Community-Based Research Methods

“It’s a form of empowerment; actually people own that knowledge because they are locally generated ideas and they actually have that ownership instead of someone coming to impose things on you.” (Faculty, Social Work, Zambia)

Community-based research contends best with the complementarity of knowledge systems, placing academic researchers on the ground with Indigenous communities and their ways of knowing while seeking solutions to context-specific problems. In order to understand how these

partnerships worked, we asked faculty researchers to describe the *research methods* that work best when undertaking CBR in communities and engaging Indigenous knowledge. While participants often recounted the use of conventional research methods, they also relied on culturally appropriate paradigms to engage the community more meaningfully in the process: “African community based research is more process oriented, in that it does not necessarily aim at a certain ‘product,’ but rather at strengthening the knowledge that already resides in the community” (Higgs, 2010, p. 2419). Below we highlight context-specific, complementary, and epistemic CBR practices used by our participants in their research projects; specifically we focus on their cultural engagement practices.

Epistemic Authorities

Faculty participants often underscored the critical importance of connecting to epistemic authorities in communities prior to beginning their CBR engagement process. Kaphagawani & Malherbe (2003) identified epistemic authorities in Africa as “people whose wisdom and knowledge of the traditions, the folklore, the values, customs, history, habits, likes and dislikes, character and thought, of their people is very great” (pp. 268-269). Participants describe how these individuals were essential to access community knowledge.

We interact with, for instance the chiefs, headmen and other leaders within the community – could be the church leaders or sometimes the civic leaders, but those who have the influence over the wider community...You are always interacting with them, you engage them, you always find out from them what should be done, what are they facing, and what do they think could be the best solution. (Faculty, Social Work, Zambia)

I think yes, you should be engaging them, and I think the best way to access them is like creating awareness. Maybe using the locally available, if it is radio in their region, or their

alkalos [village chief or leader] or their way of drumming; using drums to announce to them, to the local people... (Faculty, Nursing, The Gambia)

Epistemic authorities in these contexts were gatekeepers of knowledge. The focus of our participants was on using context-dependent strategies to engage and access truth-telling, underscoring both the cultural know-how of the academic researchers and their belief in community knowledge as a *truth*. “Methods based on philosophic sagacity enable researchers to consult a larger body of knowledge from the sages that is not available in written literature” (Chilisa, 2012, p. 211). Across disciplinary backgrounds, faculty researchers saw themselves relying on sagacity that assisted in developing locally-bound solutions, requiring culturally-appropriate engagement plans that engendered trust and awareness in the community. These research practices were essential to engaging Indigenous knowledge for sustainable development, according to participants.

Language

In both contexts, knowledge of the local language emerged as an important factor in faculty community-based research projects at the case universities. Language policy in Africa is highly controversial, due to the history of colonialism and ensuing “linguicide” that resulted in the destruction of Indigenous ways of knowing and local cultural traditions and identity (Babaci-Wilhite, 2015). There are 53 languages spoken in Zambia and 10 in The Gambia; these languages are essential to Indigenous group identity salience, maintenance, and survival (Ward & Braudt, 2015). Our participants captured the relationship between knowledge and language when they spoke about the use of local languages in their CBR work.

In the local language, they call it the ‘Bantaba.’ It’s a kind of community centre possibly under some trees with spread mats and chairs and whatever. So, we talk to them and then

we get interpreters, you know. Mostly we have our students as facilitators, because they're Indigenous, and they speak the language. (Faculty, Development Studies, The Gambia)

So, using more local languages, embed local languages into more...into research and make them informal. Because here we are very informal, as a culture. We like informal conversations; you meet people, start informal conversations...even though you have to be aware of your ethical responsibilities as a researcher. (Faculty, Political Science, The Gambia)

Several elements emerged from participant descriptions of the role of language in their CBR: the need to communicate with participants in a culturally appropriate way (e.g., gathering under the bantaba tree), engaging Indigenous students in the research process, and combining cultural norms with ethical research practice.

By including Indigenous students in the research process, faculty researchers demonstrated, implicitly, the significance of student culture, identity, and language. Indigenous language is often not valued by education systems in Africa (Shizha, 2015), thereby contesting the identities many students come to the educational process with (Dei, 2014). Increasingly, at the postsecondary level, African scholars suggest that student involvement in the community may play a decolonizing role within the university, exposing students to and engaging their *own* forms of knowledge (Preece, 2016). By capitalizing on student's own Indigenous knowledge, faculty increase the relevance of education to Indigenous students and to sustainable development, as students explore their environment, understand more fully its challenges, and participate in knowledge creation (Yared et al., 2020).

Indigenous identity was valued by the faculty participants and had a valued role in their CBR practices in terms of generating awareness, communicating effectively with participants, and

engaging cultural norms in order to develop locally relevant solutions in partnership with Indigenous communities. As a community member in The Gambia stated,

We can work with the university. Because we will know something that the university don't know, and university will know something that we don't know. Then there it's just about sharing knowledge. I take yours; you also take mine. I think that is the best for partnership.
(Farmer, The Gambia)

All community-based work in Indigenous communities must take into consideration the relationship between Indigenous language, knowledge, culture, and identity in the research process in order to include development as a goal (Boadu et al., 2020), thereby producing partnerships where communities (academic and Indigenous) learn from each other to develop solutions to pervasive community development challenges.

Dilemmas for Institutional(ized) Researchers in Indigenous Communities

“Is it wise for [Indigenous communities] to create their own knowledge through some efforts, and, now you just come and grab it and go with it and then it becomes your knowledge?” (Faculty, Social Work, The Gambia).

Sometimes, however, the quest for knowledge and development through research can disenfranchise the community. Participants, both faculty and community members, noted academic practices that interfered with productive community-researcher relationships and authentic engagement with Indigenous knowledge. The university has structures that inform academic behavior to which faculty researchers are institutionalized (Chipindi & Vavrus, 2018) and that may infringe upon the developmental potential of research (Nakweye, 2020). Expectations enforced by the neoliberal university ideal replicated in Africa are often at the root of this infringement, creating dilemmas for researchers and community members.

Parachuting

The first of these dilemmas was the practice of “parachuting”: “you don’t know anything and then you get out of there” (Faculty, Languages & Literature, Zambia). Essentially, this was described as a researcher dropping into a community, with little preparation, collecting data, taking advantage of community resources, and then never returning to share the findings. So while community members expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for connections to the university, they opined that they didn’t tangibly benefit from this engagement due to parachuting practices:

The information usually does not trickle back...you know we are facing this type of problem but when they go back when they go to their centers after doing the research usually they don’t come back and report to say you can solve these problems by these and these, they don’t come back. (Farmer, Zambia)

Mosavel et al. (2005) explained this disconnect as the tension between research and service delivery in CBR. Here the authors note in particular the dependence on funding and its impact on ethical obligations of the researcher, highlighting the differences between the expectations of the academy and that of the community and unequal power in the research process (Chilisa, 2017).

Participants from both countries noted this dependence on funding and its impact on the size of their projects, the inclusion of additional personnel, and the actual benefit of the project to the community. Indeed a lack of external funding to undertake research that would impact sustainable development goals has been cited as a major barrier to sustainability in African universities (Ulmer & Wydra, 2020). Further, the tension between research and community commitments underscores research as a site of struggle for African researchers, where funding and publications are preeminent in the neoliberal university (Mamdami, 2007; Mbembe, 2016), potentially contravening their ability to realize the ethical obligations inherent to CBR.

Dissemination Practices

A related dilemma is that of knowledge dissemination. Faculty researchers were also institutionalized to focus their research output on traditional dissemination practices over continued engagement. Many faculty participants, when asked about how they disseminated the work produced from engaging with Indigenous communities and their knowledge, listed traditional *academic* routes...ways inaccessible to the community from which the knowledge originated. As a community member in The Gambia succinctly stated,

In my view, the difference [in knowledge], the main, main difference is [the] university's knowledge is based on paper. Our knowledge is based on trees, based on the Qur'an, and based on science...in my opinion, that is the main difference. (Farmer, The Gambia)

The focus on traditional dissemination was further challenged by a seeming lack of respect for African research and receptivity to Indigenous knowledge among academic knowledge gatekeepers: journal editors.

First of all for an African researcher or the research within the Third World, when you look at most of the editors that sit on these popular journals, they are not Africans for example, and also from the worldview, very few have got an open worldview in terms of appreciating the way things are done elsewhere...I wouldn't say that it is easier for an African researcher to know, publish, or document because of what I have explained. These international publishers are controlled by very powerful people. (Faculty, Psychology, Zambia)

Holscher (2018) suggested that knowledge gatekeeping is immoral, rendering university relationships vulnerable to the replication of context-based injustices. The dilemma described above captures the pervasive control of knowledge, knowledge dissemination, and the privileging of knowledge by Minority world, “Western” journals and editors.

The focus on dissemination through traditional academic routes fosters the epistemic injustices already present within the African university. The result? A loss of Indigenous knowledge.

I'm the alkalo. There are, some knowledge... the sad thing is that, some of us, our knowledge we will live with it until we die, then we are buried with it. That's gonna be the end of it. (Community member, Farmer, The Gambia)

The “market debasement” of higher education in Africa, evident in the focus on external funding and productivity, contrasts with the social responsibility of the university (Baatjes, Spreen, Valley, 2011) to preserve knowledge for development.

The Unsubjugating of Knowledge: Higher Education for Sustainable Development

“Without research there will be no sustainability, and then nothing will work. So research is the most powerful tool in any development, any sustainable development. So, without that then there is nothing because you will never know what is going on.” (Faculty, Math, The Gambia)

Universities must leverage their capabilities to overcome dilemmas that may contribute to the loss of Indigenous knowledge. “The appreciation, documentation, inculcation and eventual implementation of [I]ndigenous practices and adaptations toward sustainable development are contingent on the curation of different knowledge systems by the university” (Mbah & Fonchingong, 2019, p. 4244). The use of culturally appropriate and contextually relevant CBR by faculty researchers is one way to both appreciate and document Indigenous knowledge for sustainable development, as CBR inherently focuses on developing collaborative solutions through research. However, as described above, the current model of higher education is

“contextually impoverished” (Mbah et al., 2021, p. 2), potentially challenging the role of CBR and its liberatory possibilities.

Barnett (2011) suggested that an ecologically driven university, unlike the current neoliberally-influenced model, is characterized as one for others (p. 452), reflective of Ubuntu philosophies often associated with education in Africa and consistent with the African university’s *becoming* (Aina, 2010). In this version of the university, academic excellence would be context-specific, anti-colonial, decolonized, community-engaged, and orienting “the learner to history, culture, tradition, past, and identity as both contested, concrete, and meaningful” (Dei, 2014, p. 165). Moreover, from this perspective, sustainable development becomes a critical mission of the university as it orients *itself* toward a diverse network, that includes the local Indigenous communities whom it serves and in which it is founded, to ensure epistemic justice and a balanced and equitable approach to the development of itself, the local community, and the environment (Mbah, 2016; Mbah et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Academics at African universities as community-based researchers are potentially powerful actors within this context as they are often the closest to Indigenous communities and preserve a relational perspective of the individual, a social view of knowledge, and a “unity of relationship, between the divine and material/human world” (Ibhakewalan & McGrath, 2015, p. 5). This approach to CBR enables scholars to *unsubjugate* culture, identity, language, and Indigenous knowledge and grow the community's role in co-generating sustainable solutions to social, political, economic, and environmental problems. “A sustainable society depends upon a sustainable culture. If a society’s culture disintegrates, so will everything else” (Hawkes, 2001, p. 12). As members of the African university, faculty and their community partners are already doing

the work of sustainability, despite the many challenges; ours is the work of supporting, providing venues, funding, disseminating, and epistemically *privileging* the knowledge created in the face of such challenges.

AUTHOR NOTE

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