



Decolonizing Knowledge Production in Forced Displacement: Challenging Colonial Narratives and Amplifying Displaced Voices



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Introduction

During a recent brainstorming session, I had the privilege to collaborate with colleagues from the Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA), the University of Dar es Salaam, and Maseno University in Kenya. Our primary focus was exploring the idea of knowledge decolonization and its relevance to research on forced displacement. We discussed various themes such as power dynamics, positionality, research methods, and the development of research frameworks and instruments. Our aim was to highlight how decolonizing research can help mitigate power imbalances and inequalities in forced displacement research. In this blog post, I will share some of the significant insights and key takeaways from our discussion.

Coloniality has played a significant role in knowledge production related to forced displacement. The history of forced displacement can be traced back to the colonial era, during which European powers established colonies in various parts of the world, displacing and often subjugating indigenous populations. The displacement of indigenous peoples often involved the forced removal from their ancestral lands and the disruption of their social and cultural systems.

In this context, knowledge production was used to justify and legitimize the displacement of indigenous populations. European colonizers created and disseminated knowledge that portrayed indigenous peoples as "primitive" or "uncivilized," and therefore in need of "civilizing" through the imposition of European values and systems. This knowledge served to legitimize colonial policies of forced displacement and cultural assimilation.

As colonialism gave way to the postcolonial era, forced displacement continued to be a significant issue, often taking the form of forced migration due to conflict, environmental degradation, or economic factors. In these contexts, knowledge production has continued to play a role, with dominant narratives often portraying displaced people as passive victims in need of assistance rather than as active agents with their own knowledge and perspectives.

Today, there is growing recognition of the need to decolonize knowledge production related to forced displacement, by centering the perspectives and knowledge of displaced communities and challenging dominant narratives that perpetuate colonial attitudes and

power dynamics. This includes efforts to amplify the voices and knowledge of displaced people, support participatory research and knowledge co-production, and challenge dominant narratives through critical analysis and activism.



Removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes from the campus of the University of Cape Town on 9 April 2015. Rhodes Must Fall movement is said to have been motivated by a desire to decolonize knowledge and education in South Africa.

Impacts of Coloniality on Knowledge Production on Forced Displacement

The impacts of coloniality on knowledge production in forced displacement have been significant. Colonialism and its ongoing effects have created power imbalances and epistemic violence that continue to influence the production and dissemination of knowledge related to forced displacement. Some of the impacts of coloniality on knowledge production in forced displacement include:

1. **Marginalization of indigenous knowledge:** As discussed earlier, colonialism often suppressed or devalued the knowledge systems of indigenous peoples, leading to the loss of valuable knowledge about local environments, cultures, and social systems. This has had a lasting impact on the ability of displaced communities to draw on their own knowledge and experiences in addressing the challenges of forced displacement.
2. **Imposition of Western knowledge systems:** European knowledge systems were often imposed on colonized peoples, often at the expense of local knowledge. This homogenized knowledge systems and marginalized local knowledge, which has continued to have an impact on the way knowledge is produced and disseminated in relation to forced displacement.
3. **Creation of knowledge hierarchies:** The imposition of Western knowledge systems created a hierarchy of knowledge in which Western knowledge was often seen as superior to local knowledge. This has had long-lasting effects on the way knowledge is produced

and disseminated, with Western knowledge often given greater legitimacy and authority than local knowledge.

4. **Production of knowledge for colonial purposes:** Knowledge production related to forced displacement has often served colonial purposes, such as the exploitation of natural resources or the control of populations. This has led to biased and selective knowledge production that serves the interests of the powerful rather than the needs and perspectives of the displaced communities.
5. **Intellectual dependency:** Colonialism created intellectual dependency among colonized peoples, which perpetuated a cycle of subjugation and limited the ability of displaced communities to produce and disseminate their own knowledge.

Ontological, Epistemological, and Methodological Approaches and Knowledge Production

Ontological, epistemological, and methodological approaches have all had an impact on knowledge production related to forced displacement. Here are some ways in which each approach has played a role:

Ontological approaches: Ontological approaches have to do with how we understand and define the nature of reality. In the context of forced displacement, ontological approaches have often been shaped by colonialism and Eurocentric perspectives that see reality in a particular way. This has led to a marginalization of indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing, which can limit the types of questions that are asked and the types of knowledge that are valued.

The ontological approaches that have shaped knowledge production in forced displacement studies in Africa have been influenced by a range of factors, including colonialism, postcolonialism, and neoliberalism. Some of the key ontological approaches that have shaped knowledge production in this context include:

1. **Western-centric ontology:** The dominance of Western knowledge systems has often led to a Western-centric ontology, which sees reality in a particular way. This can limit the types of questions that are asked and the types of knowledge that are valued, and can lead to a marginalization of indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing.
2. **Universalistic ontology:** A universalistic ontology assumes that there is one universal truth that can be discovered through research. This approach can overlook the diversity of experiences and perspectives of displaced communities in Africa, and can lead to a homogenization of knowledge and a marginalization of local knowledge.

3. **Humanitarian ontology:** A humanitarian ontology emphasizes the need to provide aid and assistance to displaced communities, but may overlook the root causes of displacement, such as structural inequalities and political violence.
4. **Neoliberal ontology:** A neoliberal ontology emphasizes individualism, market-based solutions, and the private sector as drivers of development, often at the expense of social welfare and public services. This approach can overlook the systemic causes of displacement and may prioritize economic growth over addressing the needs of displaced communities.

In order to address these limitations and biases in knowledge production related to forced displacement in Africa, it is important to embrace more inclusive and decolonial ontological approaches. This can involve valuing and incorporating diverse worldviews and ways of knowing, recognizing the role of power dynamics and colonial histories in shaping knowledge production, and promoting the participation and agency of displaced communities in research.

Epistemological approaches: Epistemological approaches have to do with how we understand knowledge and how it is produced. In the context of forced displacement, epistemological approaches have been influenced by colonialism, which has often privileged Western knowledge systems and undervalued local knowledge. This has led to a narrow and limited understanding of the experiences and perspectives of displaced communities.

There is evidence to suggest that epistemological approaches to understanding forced displacement have been influenced by colonialism, leading to a narrow and limited understanding of the experiences and perspectives of displaced communities.

One example of this is the use of a "universal" or "objective" knowledge framework, which assumes that knowledge is universally applicable and objective, and that the researcher's perspective is neutral and unbiased. This approach has been criticized for neglecting the ways in which knowledge is constructed within particular social, cultural, and historical contexts, and for overlooking the perspectives of marginalized and subaltern groups, such as displaced communities (Spivak, 1988; Chakrabarty, 2000).

Moreover, the epistemological approaches used in forced displacement research have often been based on a positivist or empirical approach, which prioritizes measurable and quantifiable data. This approach can limit the types of knowledge that are considered valid, and can overlook the diverse and subjective experiences of displaced communities, as well as the ways in which power relations and historical legacies influence these experiences (Collins, 2016).

In addition, the use of Western theoretical frameworks and concepts in forced displacement research can also limit the understanding of the experiences and perspectives of displaced communities. For example, the use of concepts such as "trauma" or "resilience" may not capture the unique experiences of displaced communities, and may prioritize Western ideas of psychological distress and recovery over local understandings of suffering and coping (Morrissey et al., 2019).

Overall, the epistemological approaches used in forced displacement research have been influenced by colonialism, leading to a limited and narrow understanding of the experiences and perspectives of displaced communities. This highlights the need for alternative epistemological approaches that prioritize the voices and perspectives of displaced communities, and that are grounded in local and diverse understandings of knowledge.

Methodological approaches: Methodological approaches have to do with how we go about researching and producing knowledge. In the context of forced displacement, methodological approaches have often been shaped by colonialism and Eurocentric perspectives, which have led to research practices that marginalize or exploit displaced communities. For example, research has often been conducted without the meaningful participation of displaced communities, leading to a lack of understanding and empathy for their experiences.

There is evidence to suggest that methodological approaches in forced displacement research have been influenced by colonialism and eurocentric perspectives, leading to research practices that marginalize or exploit displaced communities.

One example of this is the use of extractive research methods, in which researchers enter a community, collect data, and leave without providing any benefits or engaging with community members beyond the research process. This approach can be exploitative, as it fails to engage with the needs and perspectives of displaced communities, and can reinforce power imbalances between researchers and the researched (Simpson, 2014).

Moreover, the use of standardized or pre-determined research methods can overlook the unique and diverse experiences of displaced communities, and may prioritize the needs and interests of researchers over those of the communities being studied. This can lead to a narrow understanding of the experiences and perspectives of displaced communities, and can perpetuate power imbalances between researchers and the researched (Collins, 2016).

Additionally, the use of language barriers and cultural differences as barriers to engagement with displaced communities can also reinforce colonial and eurocentric perspectives, as it fails to recognize the diversity and complexity of displaced communities, and can perpetuate the marginalization of non-Western perspectives and knowledge systems (Bhabha, 1994).

Overall, the methodological approaches used in forced displacement research have been influenced by colonialism and eurocentric perspectives, leading to research practices that can marginalize or exploit displaced communities. This highlights the need for alternative research methods that prioritize the voices and perspectives of displaced communities, and that engage with the unique and diverse experiences of these communities in a respectful and equitable manner.

Conclusion

These impacts of coloniality on knowledge production in forced displacement continue to shape the way knowledge is produced and disseminated today, creating ongoing challenges in efforts to address the needs and perspectives of displaced communities.

In order to address all these limitations and biases it is important to embrace more inclusive and decolonial approaches to ontology, epistemology, and methodology. This can involve valuing and incorporating diverse worldviews and ways of knowing, promoting the participation and agency of displaced communities in research, and recognizing the role of power dynamics and colonial histories in shaping knowledge production.

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