

# Decolonising Resilience: Rethinking 'Local Knowledge', Opacity and Coloniality

Written by David Chandler

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/06/05/decolonising-resilience-rethinking-local-knowledge-opacity-and-coloniality/>

DAVID CHANDLER, JUN 5 2024

Resilience is a key buzzword in international development programmes. Resilience is often seen as 'a new paradigm for development', one that follows a decolonial impulse pushing local knowledge to the fore to enable better solutions to environmental problems. International policy programmes increasingly believe that goals can be better achieved through integrating traditional, local or Indigenous knowledge practices. It is also often assumed that local community and traditional knowledge practices rely upon understandings that are more natural, more relational, grounded by cultures of harmony and co-existence. Indigenous approaches are held to be based upon deep reciprocal ecologies of care crucial for sustainability. In this way, the analysis of international development projects, in both the policy and the academic literature, often tends to set up a binary of the colonial and the decolonial; epistemes of acquisition and extraction and those of care and mutuality; understandings that are human-centred and those that are multi-species or more-than-human. This approach then risks interpreting policy failure in the language of colonial imposition and decolonial resistance that largely focuses upon a clash of cultures and epistemologies.

Attending a workshop on 'Decolonising Resilience' in Accra at the University of Ghana last week I was struck by how this binary, and potentially essentialising, framing was challenged by those in the room. It was clear that the turn to local knowledge could also involve a different type of knowledge, not dependent upon any epistemological break, alternative modes of knowing or upon cultural differences, but upon pragmatism and common sense. The attention to the limits of external development projects was often framed not in terms of different cultural understandings but rather the importance of context, that is, in terms of a material understanding of the difference that difference makes. Edouard Glissant, the Martinican poet and philosopher, calls this 'opacity' – the fact that reality cannot easily be grasped or captured in reductionist and abstract ways. This is particularly important in the Global South as society has not been quite so homogenised through the imposition of modern infrastructures and technologies – for example, roads, electricity, the internet etc can be much less reliable. This means that international policy interventions, designed to 'plus-up' capacities or to enable communities, can often backfire not because of any fixed or traditional cultural understandings but because of the material reality of differences.

For example, international advice on crop growing in terms of organisational frameworks, crop varieties and modes of fertilisation and harvesting can often make reductionist assumptions. Reductionist assumptions ignore differences. For example, if the soil is of variable quantity, vulnerable to flooding, uneven or has many stones then it makes more sense to plant different varieties in the same location. Assumptions of homogenous land quality are the problem rather than cultural differences. Another example might be the assumption that quicker growing or more productive varieties might be desirable when, in fact, problems of transportation and storage mean that length of shelf-life can often be more important. Sometimes differences can just be in terms of taste and preference, for example when the provision of a particular variety of chicken was unsuccessful, they were used for sacrifices rather than kept, because the taste was not so good.

The point being made is that the attention to a colonial/decolonial binary tends to reproduce Western approaches of cultural homogenisation and reduction. This means that deconstructing Western approaches and then bringing to the fore 'local' or 'Afro-centric' knowledge can risk merely replacing one form of reductionism for another. This is where Glissant's notion of 'opacity' may play an important role. His focus is upon relation but not in some metaphysical,

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abstract, romanticised and essentialist way, but rather in a materialist way, in that it is the relational context that makes all the difference rather than some essentialised understanding of culture. For example, if there were better storage and transportation facilities then the suggested varieties and forms of treatment of crops might well be favoured. If the soil was more uniform and stones were removed, then more uniform methods of crop planting might be accepted and so on. We can then see that opposition to external projects is not necessarily only opposition to coloniality but also a product of pragmatism. Local knowledge is not necessarily any less human- or subject-centred.

Up to this point it might seem that I'm suggesting coloniality is overstated as a limit factor in international development projects. Nothing could be further from my intention. My point is that the shift to understanding coloniality as largely problematic at the level of culture and epistemology can be problematic. Decolonising has become increasingly about 'colonial logics' and ways of thinking. The 'coloniality of knowledge' can be understood as just one way of grasping the contemporary importance of coloniality, often alongside two other aspects, the 'coloniality of power' and the 'coloniality of being'. Today, however, often the coloniality of power, let alone the coloniality of being, are increasingly left out of the equation. What happens when we bring them more into focus?

Colleagues in Accra stressed the importance of material relations rather than modes of thinking. There could be no doubt of the ongoing *coloniality of power*, a real power imbalance between international organisations and local communities. This is why projects often get delivered on the ground no matter how poorly conceived they are. Even when local people know that the results expected may not be achieved there is often little incentive to say no to international resources. The coloniality of power leads to project failure because the local communities affected cannot easily be integrated as equals – no matter how much 'voice' is given to local communities the relations of inequality can easily undermine any policy aspirations towards a shared approach to problem-solving.

However, perhaps, even more important was the *coloniality of being*, which can be understood as problematising the ontological assumptions of modernity, of a 'One World World' of universal laws, linear causality and entities with fixed essences in an empty grid of time and space. The coloniality of being is central to international governmental imaginaries based upon the assumptions that policy lessons can be learned and generalised across time and space. For this reason, questions of difference, relation and context necessarily undermine the legitimacy of external expertise, dependent upon representation, reduction and abstraction. The simple empirical examples provided above highlight that in the Global South the coloniality of being can be a particularly problematic ground for policy assumptions.

Raising the problem of 'opacity', the need to take differences seriously, can provide a non-essentialising ground for a decolonial approach capable of holding international agencies and external projects to account. The point being that the gap between international development project planning and the reality on the ground – the problem of 'opacity' – is not always necessarily a matter of cultural, epistemological or cosmological differences that may be addressed by adding some local representatives or advisors. It is often the materiality of irreducible difference that comes to the fore in discussions of external project limitations: the neglect of differences that make differences. It is 'opacity' itself that problematises the grounds of legitimisation for external development projects of capacity-building and enablement. Glissant's call for 'a right to opacity' thereby connects framings of the coloniality of power and the coloniality of being without essentialising different 'worlds' or cultures. Difference here is not a homogenising force, enabling new regimes of transparency, representation, and reduction. Placing 'opacity' at the centre of a decolonial agenda may enable the holding to account and problematisation of external projects of intervention, no matter how 'enabling' they set out to be.

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**David Chandler** is Professor of International Relations at the University of Westminster, London. He edits the open access journal *Anthropocenes: Human, Inhuman, Posthuman*. His recent monographs include *Race in the Anthropocene: Coloniality, Disavowal and the Black Horizon* (with Farai Chipato, 2024); *The World as Abyss: The*

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*Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (with Jonathan Pugh, 2023); *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds* (with Jonathan Pugh, 2021); *Becoming Indigenous: Governing Imaginaries in the Anthropocene* (with Julian Reid, 2019); and *Ontopolitics in the Anthropocene: An Introduction to Mapping, Sensing and Hacking* (2018).