

On the Impossibility of Instrumentalising Indigenous Methodologies for the Sustainable Development Agenda



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Abstract In this chapter, we argue that instrumentalising indigenous methodologies for the Sustainable Development Agenda is strictly spoken impossible. We discuss the nature of indigenous ways of knowing and the encompassing worldview of Ubuntu which rests on the understanding of the interconnectedness of all life; that seeks harmony with nature and the well-being of community. Indigenous ways of knowing are ironically absent from the Sustainable Development Agenda, but have been recognised in the Human Development Report. We problematise these inclusions as tokenistic and contributing to an anthropocentric essentialist notion of development that has its roots in 19th and 20th European Enlightenment thinking. Indigenous methodologies are embedded in decolonial agendas and in Southern Africa often conceptualised within the paradigm of Ubuntu. If these methodologies are sought to be instrumentalised for an agenda that is devoid of the indigenous Ubuntu paradigm, they will lose one of their defining characteristics. We call for the integration of indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies in international agendas not at the instrumental, but at the conceptual level.

Keywords Decolonisation · Human development report (HDR) · Indigenous methodologies · Indigenous ways of knowing · Planetary survival · Sustainable development goals (SDGs) · Ubuntu

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1 Introduction

Amidst the global Covid 19 pandemic, the so-called international community finally starts acknowledging indigenous ways of knowing as necessary for the survival of our shared planet. The UNDP's, 2020 Human Development Report (HDR) explicitly problematises the advances of humans at the cost of other species and calls for '[b]ringing the planet back into development thinking (UNDP, 2020, p. 25). Noting that many of the world's healthiest ecosystems are areas involving 'a long-term relationship between indigenous peoples and their territories' (p. 33), the report recognises the role of indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems as well as the precarious status of indigenous knowledges and the peoples holding these knowledges. Accordingly, the report formulates a need for 'new collaborative ways of mobilizing knowledge and learning across diverse systems [that] can contribute to innovations and new solutions to sustainable human development' (p. 34).

Concurrently, the longstanding indigenous critiques of the coloniality of Western knowledge production (e.g. Kovach, 2011; Mignolo, 2007; Smith, 1999) have eventually gained momentum in mainstream intellectual discourses in the global North. These critiques unsettle the thinking in, and about, almost all traditional (Western) scientific disciplines. Decolonial projects such as provincialising Europe and deprovincialising Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), unsettling Eurocentrism in the Westernised university (Cupples & Grosfoguel, 2019) and movements such as the South African #RhodesMustFall or the resulting British #Why-is-my-curriculum-white (Peters, 2015) all speak about embracing epistemic diversity and diversifying knowledge production to include non-Western ways of knowing and coming to know into mainstream academia.

Considering both the HDR's appeal for weaving together knowledge systems and the decolonial strides on all continents, the mainstreaming and instrumentalising of indigenous research methodologies may appear as the obvious next step towards acknowledging, generating and revitalising indigenous ways of knowing in support of the UN's 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Such conclusions, however, must not be drawn hastily. They need careful examination regarding possible colonial pitfalls. The aim of this chapter is to unpack and discuss the danger—or rather the impossibility—of instrumentalising indigenous methodologies and indigenous ways of knowing for the SDG agenda. Thereby, our point is not that indigenous ways of knowing are unsustainable or that they should not be considered in local and international agendas. Quite the contrary, we align ourselves with the calls to draw on more than one knowledge archive to enable the survival of our shared planet. However, our focus here is to caution against uncritical attempts to incorporate indigenous knowledges into so-called universal agendas that promote modernist anthropocentric understandings of development which contribute to the perpetuated subjugation of indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world.

While there are commonalities between indigenous methodologies and epistemologies worldwide, the chapter is loosely situated in a Southern African context. We

apply the broad understanding of indigenous ways of knowing that includes knowledge systems of majority populations in Africa that would not necessarily identify as indigenous, but who still engage in indigenous ways of knowing. This understanding is common in South(ern) African academic discourse and policy practice. We draw on the Southern African lived philosophy of Ubuntu as a framework to situate African indigenous worldview and methodologies. We engage with Cameroonian thinker Mbembe's (2021) writing to connect Ubuntu with the struggles for decolonisation and sustainable development or rather, planetary survival.

In this conceptual chapter we discuss key theories of indigenous knowledges and, despite their decades of marginalisation, their importance for—not 'sustainable development' but the more frank and accurate term 'planetary survival'. We draw on debates on decolonisation and Ubuntu in relation to the espoused SDGs, which, as we argue, are in fact *unsustainable* in their continued foundation on the Enlightenment Project. We extend this argument claiming that 'how' and 'what' we research needs to be aligned; vision and strategy of SDGs need to align. Our central conclusion is a stated need for rethinking and reconceptualising development by integrating indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies not at the instrumental, but at the conceptual level of international agendas.

2 Concepts and Theoretical Perspectives

Indigenous ways of knowing and being

Indigenous ways of knowing constitute the totality of a community's way of life reflected in the factual and practical knowledge that a community continually constructs from their interactions within given natural, spiritual, and socio-cultural environments. Interacting with different environments results in a plurality of knowledges (Mbiti, 1969; Smith, 1999) that develop through peoples' longstanding relationships to, and acknowledgement of, place (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2006). Elders (both living and once living) are at the centre of the development, storage, and transmission of indigenous ways of knowing, which are therefore sometimes used synonymously with 'traditional knowledge'. Yet, indigenous ways of knowing are not static or 'pure' but refer to dynamic and open knowledge systems that have evolved through interaction with other ways of knowing. They are thus not to be relegated to the past, but have contributed, and continue to contribute, to community survival and flourishing. What people know is not only an oral expression or tangible product, but is actually lived. Knowledges are expressed as a way of life and reflected through language and culture; they are not culture-free (Khupe, 2020; Odora Hoppers, 2000). Indigenous ways of knowing and being are holistic in that they uphold the interconnectedness of life at the natural (physical), social and spiritual levels (Khupe, 2014, 2020). They are not developed for their own sake or for profit and have thus sustained ecological systems for centuries prior to the invasion

of Western knowledge and practices. Epistemic colonisation is not a defining characteristic of indigenous ways of knowing, but many indigenous peoples share the common experience of their ways of knowing being subjugated through colonial education (Breidlid, 2013; Molosi, 2019). For generations, indigenous peoples have suffered epistemic bias through systems that deliberately (and continually) invalidated, marginalised and eroded their knowledges, experiences and rights. As Bulhan (2015) puts it, the colonial project culminated in the capture of identity, which he aptly describes as occupation of being.

Indigenous and Western knowledge are not per definition opposing categories. Much rather, the respective underlying epistemological assumptions may lead both to *knowing the same thing in a different manner* as well as to conflicting conclusions of what constitutes valid knowledge and how such knowledge is generated (see Kovach, 2011 for a detailed discussion of the relationships between indigenous and Western ways of knowing and knowledge generation). As elaborated, holism is central in indigenous epistemologies, while this holism was undermined in Europe during the advent of modernity and the rise of modern science. Due to their place-based nature, indigenous ways of knowing have local relevance and do not claim universality, while universality claims—though not unchallenged—still stand strong within Western knowledge traditions.

Ubuntu

The indigenous understanding of humans as existing in relationship is at the core of the African Philosophy of Ubuntu. From an Ubuntu perspective, humans are in collective co-existence with, and dependent on, each other and the natural world. This interconnection is intended to occur ethically (Cornell & van Marle, 2015). There is a clear understanding that the wellbeing of all of humanity, indeed all beings, is intricately connected. At a social level, the co-existence and interdependence is aptly expressed by Mbiti (1969) as, ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am’ (p.141). In isiXhosa, one of the South African indigenous languages, Ubuntu is expressed in the proverb *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, literally translated into *a person is a person through other people*. Behind the literal is a depth of meaning that emphasises humanness, compassion, and social responsibility (Sambala et al., 2020). Thereby, in line with indigenous knowledges that are not static, but constantly developing according to the context, Ubuntu’s humanness is not to be understood as a static condition. Rather, as Ramose (2009) explains, humanness comprises ‘both a *condition of being* and the *state of becoming*, of openness or ceaseless unfolding’ (p. 308, emphases added). *We are* human through lived caring relationships and our humanness is constantly *evolving* through these relationships. Such relationships go beyond the anthropocentric, but, in recognition of the interdependence of humans (including the ancestral world) and nature, they also include ‘ecological togetherness’ (Murove, 2009).

During the past two decades, Ubuntu has enjoyed high popularity as an academic concept. At the same time, it has been subject to critique from different angles. Some African scholars such as Matolino and Kwindingwi (2013, p. 197) while acknowledging Ubuntu as a ‘definition of life itself’ go on to critique ‘ubuntu-isation’

of various aspects of society as a fatuous project of Black elitism. Zimbabwean womanist Manyonganise (2015) discusses partially oppressive structures within Ubuntu and ponders whether ‘the glorification of the concept without due analysis of its implications for gender is being done mostly by those who are enjoying the patriarchal dividend’ (p. 2, also see Seehawer, 2018). Ubuntu has sparked controversy between those who criticise it as an essentialist narrative of return to a pre-colonial past (e.g. Matolino, 2015; Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013) and those who examine and seek to actualise its meaning for contemporary African societies (e.g., Cornell & Van Marle, 2015; Mawere & van Stam, 2016; Metz, 2014) (for an overview over, and discussion of, different positions in this debate, see van Norren, 2014).

This chapter builds on the position that neither indigenous ways of knowing nor Ubuntu should be idealised, romanticised, or used uncritically. Knowledge in itself is not inherently good. Indigenous ways of knowing are not inherently good. And Ubuntu, though alive as a world view and rooted in the understanding of our interconnection, is an ideal that exists alongside *Un-Ubuntu* (Eliastam, 2015), which finds expression in corruption, violence and xenophobia. There is a need to heal from colonisation, marginalisation, and pandemics. We propose that the value of Ubuntu for such healing lies in its nature of constant actualisation and unfolding that occurs through caring relationships with others as outlined above. In the words of Cornell and van Marle (2015):

The community ... is not something abstract and outside. It is part of who and how we are with others. It is this intertwinement that makes ubuntu transformative as there is always more work to do together in shaping our future. The future in a deep sense is always a collective project (p. 5).

Ubuntu, indigenous ways of knowing, planetary survival and decolonisation

The characteristics of indigenous ways of knowing, that is, deep knowledges about specific territories as well as the worldview of the individual-in-community and the interdependence with nature that sustained subsistence cultures and their environments over the centuries is what is now recognised in the UNDP’s, 2020 HDR. This recognition is a late acknowledgement of what both environmental scientists, educationalists, social scientists and decolonial thinkers have long been calling for: a dialogical and complementary use of knowledge systems put into action for the well-being of planet earth and all that inhabit it (Seehawer & Breidlid, 2021). Because humanness in the sense of Ubuntu includes ecological togetherness, there seems to be scope for research on sustainable development within an Ubuntu paradigm (Seehawer, 2018). The definition of sustainable development that is commonly used by UN organisations and upon which the SDGs are built is ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’ (UNCED, 1987, n.p.). At a superficial glance, this definition does not seem to be at odds with Ubuntu as it considers the interconnectedness between past and future generations. We will, however, return to this issue, after discussing the concept of development in more detail in the next section.

In light of our planet's virulent ecological crises, the term sustainability runs the risk to be euphemistic of what is actually at stake. Sustainability suggests that by introducing certain measures and behaviours the earth will become a more sustainable—that is a better—place, while what these measures can do is reduce the degree of some of the pressures that humans currently put on the earth. Therefore, rather than speaking of sustainable development, we prefer the term *planetary survival*. We argue that the task of the Anthropocene is not to work for more sustainability, but—in line with Mbembe (2021)—for the survival of our shared planet:

To reopen the future of our planet to all who inhabit it, we will have to learn how to share it again among humans, but also between humans and nonhumans, between the multiple species that populate our planet. It is only under these conditions that, becoming aware of our precariousness as a species in the face of ecological threats, we will be able to overcome the possibility of outright human extinction opened up by this new epoch, the epoch of the Anthropocene. (Mbembe, 2021, p. 41)

In the thinking of Mbembe (2021) and others, the condition of coloniality and the current status of planet earth are closely connected. As Odora Hoppers (2000) stated more two decades ago: '...a major threat to the sustainability of natural resources is *the erosion of people's knowledge*, and the basic reason for this erosion is *the low value attached to it*' (p. 7, emphases in original). The idea of white superiority was at the heart of colonialism (Mbembe, 2021) and it included the superiority of the colonisers' knowledge that did not acknowledge other ways of knowing. In Mbembe's (2021) understanding, the philosophical meaning of decolonisation 'lies in an active will to community—as others used to speak of a will to power. This will to community is another name for what could be called the *will to life*' (pp. 2–3, emphasis in original). This understanding of decolonisation as *active will to community* links the project of re-learning how to share our planet between among humans, non-humans and nature directly to the humble togetherness and relationality that are at the core of Ubuntu. Thus, the struggle for decolonisation is not a precondition, but ultimately the same as the struggle for planetary survival (Seehawer, 2022).

3 An Unsustainable Continuation of a Modernist Enlightenment Project

In this section, we return to the context of the SDGs and elaborate on the introductory statement that the supposedly universal 2030 agenda is rather a continuation of the modernist Enlightenment project that led to the suppression of indigenous ways of knowing and being in the first place. We then discuss that this suppression is not repealed by the retrospective recognition of indigenous knowledges and indigenous methodologies as instruments to achieve the SDGs.

Indigenous ways of knowing are not mentioned in the SDG document. This omission suggests a non-prioritisation of epistemic issues in the 2030 Agenda (Breidlid, 2020). While the concepts of knowledge and knowledge society are generally

marginalised in the SDG document, the few cases in which knowledge is mentioned can mostly be situated within a *techno-scientific-economic knowledge discourse* (Cummings et al., 2018). This discourse acknowledges the primacy of scientific and technological knowledge and promotes a knowledge-based economy. During the SDG negotiations, some representatives of civil society and international organisations promoted a *pluralist-participatory knowledge discourse* that embraces indigenous ways of knowing as part of epistemic pluralism. However, in the final SDG document, appearances of this discourse are limited to the vision and strategy (Cummings, et al., 2018). Thus, Cummings et al. (2018) diagnose the SDGs a ‘mismatch between vision and strategy, and implementation and goals. The vision and strategy are, on the whole, transformational while the implementation and goals and targets appear to represent business as usual’ (p. 739).

Van Norren’s (2017) thorough analysis of the SDG negotiations and her interviews with representatives of main UN implementing organisations and other involved stakeholders, further confirms the marginalisation not only of non-Western epistemologies, but also of non-Western ontologies and axiologies. Rather, the SDGs constitute a step backwards in terms of recognising indigenous peoples’ knowledges and rights that had found acknowledgement in earlier UN conventions, such as the 1992 Convention on Biodiversity (van Norren, 2017). By some SDG-negotiators, van Norren was bluntly told that non-Western philosophies of well-being were ‘not relevant’ (p. 25), while others thought such philosophies could prove useful at the implementation level. None of the interviewees, however, regarded non-Western philosophies of well-being as relevant ‘at a conceptual level, thus before implementation takes place, and not merely as a cultural ‘aberration’ to the general rule’ (van Norren, 2017, p. 25). In the case of African ways of knowing and being, van Norren (2017) ponders whether these might have been advanced more strongly if more African states had participated in the negotiations. She poses the question whether Africa’s ‘low representation may signify lesser interest or trust in a new goal scheme’ (p. 135). Relatedly, Sayed and Ahmed (2015, drawing on King and Palmer, (2013) note a limited interest in the UNDP-led ‘global conversation’ on post-2015 educational and development goals among countries in the global south. Furthermore, they point out that ‘participation is not simply about greater involvement by the Global South, but also *which* Southern voices are heard’ (p. 332, emphasis added). They suggest that the global South voices that did participate in the conversations ‘probably represent[ed] a particular “privileged” constituency already well-resourced and connected to a global policy community’ (Sayed & Ahmed, 2015, p. 332, also see Seehawer & Breidlid, 2021).

Telleria (2021) explores the ontological assumptions of the 26 global HDRs that were published by the UNDP between 1990 and 2018. His interest is the ‘specific understanding of reality’ that is presented in the reports and that, in turn, informed both the Millennium Development Goals and the SDGs. Telleria deconstructs the UNDP’s human development framework as building on three essentialist assumptions: First, *freedom* is the ‘natural, universal and most basic essence of human beings’ (p. 28). Second, ‘[t]he proper unfolding of this essence produces rational, intelligent, skilful and healthy individuals’ (p. 28.), in short *ideal individuals* who, thirdly, are

capable of building *ideal societies* with stable institutions, peace, democracy and equally distributed wealth. Consequently, human development becomes ‘the process of unfolding the human essence to create ideal individuals and societies’ (Telleria, 2021, p. 29). The human development index (HDI) measures nations’ progress in this process. The HDI is constructed by ‘defin[ing] a measure of deprivation that a country suffers’ (UNDP, 1990, p. 109, quoted in Telleria, 2021, p. 31). This measure of deprivation, for example 0.394 for Niger at the bottom rank or 0.957 for Norway at the top (UNDP, 2020), is then contrasted with the ideal of 100% human development, that is, the three above named essentialist assumptions. These assumptions are at the core ‘of the highest Humanist and Enlightened ideals that have fed, at least at an ideological and political level, the Western civilizational project during the last few centuries’ (p. 29). Telleria demonstrates how the UNDP’s understanding of development prolongs the thinking of nineteenth and twentieth century British and US-American evolutionist sociologists such as Herbert Spencer and Talcott Parsons. Both Spencer and Parsons understood social change and evolution as processes of adaptation. In Telleria’s analysis, the UNDP conceptualises development as the adaptation of individuals to the economic system and social institutions as well as the adaptation of nations to global trends in economics, finance, and trade. As explained in the 1992 HDR:

A key challenge for Africa is to accelerate investment in people: in their nutrition and health (especially that of women and children) and in their education, particularly in science and technology. This could help African countries *adapt* to new technologies and become more productive, creative and enterprising – and start *catching up with the rest of the world*. (UNDP, 1992, p. 40, quoted in Telleria, 2021, p. 43, emphases added)

The SDGs have been hailed as revolutionary and radically different from the MDGs because of their transformative ambitions and because of the notion that all nations are now developing countries (Tikly, 2019). While this might indeed be a shift away from the MDGs’ focus on the so-called developing world, it is not a shift away, but much rather a celebration of, the UNDP’s development logic. Since 1990, the HDI establishes that no country, neither Norway nor Niger, is fully developed, but that all, through an evolutionary adaptation process, strive towards the same anthropocentric, individualist and essentialist ideal of development. According to Telleria’s (2021) analysis, the SDGs present a re-articulation of the MDGs in which the antagonistic divide of *developed* versus *underdeveloped* that underpinned development discourses from the 1990s to the 2010s has been replaced by the antagonistic divide of *humankind* versus *inhumanity*. The narrative of the SDGs embraces humanity as one worldwide community. A community that is threatened by external dangers such as climate change, terrorism, financial crises or pandemics, which were ‘presented as events that just happen, devoid of any agency or intention’ (p. 123).

The 2020 HDR that is devoted to the era of Anthropocene and explicitly articulates the Covid 19 pandemic ‘as a reflection of the pressures people put on planet Earth’ (UNDP, 2020, p. iii) is not included in Telleria’s analysis. Does this HDR mark a shift towards recognising that the ‘menace to humankind is not outside, but inside’ (Telleria, 2021, p. 126)? Even if it did, the narrative of development as the process towards an ideal future stands firm:

To survive and thrive in this new age, we must redesign a *path to progress* that respects the intertwined fate of people and planet ... Thirty years [after the publication of the first HDI] on, much has changed, but hope and possibility have not. If people have the power to create an entirely new geological epoch, then people also have the power to choose to change. We are not the last generation of the Anthropocene; we are the first to recognize it. ... Will we be remembered by the fossils we leave behind: swaths of species, long extinct, sunken, and fossilized in the mud alongside plastic toothbrushes and bottle caps, a legacy of loss and waste? *Or will we leave a much more valuable imprint: balance between people and planet, a future that is fair and just?* (UNDP, 2020, p. iii, emphases added)

The recognition of indigenous ways of knowing, does not challenge the essentialist anthropocentric underpinnings of development and the SDGs, but supports them. Indigenous ways of knowing are called upon as a way out of the planet's humanmade misery and towards 'new solutions to sustainable human development' (UNDP, 2021, p. 34), that is, new solutions to pursue the same modernist version of development. Likewise, the UNDP's acknowledgement of indigenous ways of knowing is not a retroactive redress of their omission in the SDGs. Rather, indigenous ways of knowing are an *instrument* to achieve the same SDGs that were ratified in 2015 and which present an agenda that ignores indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world.

Ironically, by ascribing indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies instrumental value only, the SDGs are undermining the "S" of the 2030 agenda. Rather, as Cummings et al. (2018) observe, 'the inspirational vision of the knowledge society and of the SDG agenda as a whole is being used to gain support for a strategy which will not be able to solve the complex problems facing the global community but will rather preserve the status quo' (p. 739).

4 Ubuntu Research Methodologies: *How We Research is Inseparable from What We Research*

In this section, we turn to indigenous research methodologies and ethics and discuss the chapter's central point: the impossibility of instrumentalising indigenous methodologies for the SDG agenda.

Indigenous research methodologies evolved as moves towards liberation from epistemic colonisation. Mohawk scholar Brant Castellano (2004), then co-director of research in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, recalls the protest she encountered in 1992 when introducing the Commission's research agenda to a group of aboriginal people:

'We've been researched to death!' they protested. The workshop was not off to a promising start, until an Elder who had opened the meeting spoke quietly from a corner of the room. 'If we have been researched to death,' he said, 'maybe it's time we started researching ourselves back to life.' (Brant Castellano, 2004, p. 98)

The protest as well as the notion of *researching back* are reactions to the inseparable links between research and colonialism. Colonial needs for knowledge to improve governance of the colonised went hand in hand with economic benefit from

the export of expert knowledge about the colonies. This kind of extractive research has been famously criticised by Maori scholar Smith (1999) as stealing knowledge from indigenous peoples who served as voiceless research objects and who were defined through the colonisers' epistemological lenses and methodologies. 'Research acquired a bad name among Aboriginal Peoples', elaborates Brant Castellano (2004), 'because the purposes and meanings associated with its practice by academics and government agents were usually alien to the people themselves and the outcomes were, more often as not, misguided and harmful' (p. 98).

Thus, indigenous research is an explicit part of 'the decolonization politics of the indigenous peoples' movement' and aims at the 'self-determination of indigenous peoples' (Smith, 1999, pp. 115–116). Chilisa (2012) conceptualises indigenous research paradigms as challenging 'deficit thinking and pathological descriptions of the formerly colonized' and as aiming at the reconstruction of 'a body of knowledge that carries hope and promotes transformation and social change among the historically oppressed' (p. 40). Thereby, indigenous methodologies are not defined through their differentness to so-called Western methodologies. Based on their experience with research with communities in rural South Africa, Khupe and Keane (2017) suggest methodologies that comprise 'a mix of the more conventional qualitative methods and instruments (such as focus group discussions, interviews, open-ended writing tasks, worksheets)' as well as of those instruments 'that are more eccentric (such as playing games, hearing stories, audiences with traditional healers, home visits)' (p. 34). Decolonising methodologies does not imply a complete rejection of Western methodologies, theories, or knowledge (Kovach, 2011; Patel, 2016; Smith, 1999). As mentioned above concerning the relationship between indigenous and Western knowledges, also concerning methodology the central point is not the degree of difference on the level of concrete research methods or instruments. What is central is that indigenous methodologies are grounded in local indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies (Seehawer, 2018). Such grounding implies that methodologies cater to the above-discussed characteristics of indigenous ways of knowing and being. Thus, methodologies will embrace holistic indigenous worldviews that recognise the interconnectedness of humans with the spiritual world and nature. They will be relational and build on trusting relationships between those involved in the research. Rather than seeking to separate the knower from the known, subjectivity and emotions may be part of the inquiry (Khupe, 2014; Lavallée, 2009). Furthermore, methodologies will align with the place-based nature of indigenous ways of knowing not only by considering and appreciating the place/context within which the research is undertaken, but also in that methodologies will be localised, including following local ethics protocol (Brant Castellano, 2004; Keane, 2021; Khupe, 2020). As indigenous ways of knowing are lived experience, research as such is inseparable from life, and becomes lived inquiry. Therefore, Khupe and Keane (2017, referring to Law, 2003) are doubtful whether the term *research method* is suitable and suggest that *research process* would capture better the real-life messiness that such research implies. A key aspect of this is the giving up of the conventional power dynamic: who decides the research agenda? Who participates? Who benefits? (Smith, 1999).

In line with the broad understanding of indigenous ways of knowing that extends to the knowledges of Africans and African ethnic groups that do not self-identify as indigenous, Southern African indigenous research is not linked to the movement of specific indigenous peoples as it is the case in other geographical contexts, but to African decolonial projects more broadly. Calls to decolonise academic knowledge production draw on theoretical frameworks of Afrocentric perspectives (e.g. Asante, 1987), freedom movements such as the Négritude (Cesaire, 1955/2000; Fanon, 1961/2004), or the Black Consciousness movement (Biko, 1978/1987), the idea of an African Renaissance as well as contemporary thinkers such as Mbembe, whose recent (2021) work guides this chapter's understanding of decolonisation. In the African context, indigenous methodologies are often grounded in, or developed on the basis of, Ubuntu (see e.g. Keane, 2008; Keikelame et al., 2019; Khupe & Keane, 2017; Mucina, 2011; Swanson, 2007) and there is increasing recognition and exploration of Ubuntu as a research paradigm (Khupe, 2014; Mkabela, 2015; Oviawe, 2016; Seehawer, 2018, 2022). As a paradigm, Ubuntu caters for indigenous methodologies as outlined above. Ubuntu provides a relational ethics for before, during and after the research process, including processes of data analysis and all aspects of validating new knowledge (Keane, 2021; Seehawer, 2018). Ubuntu also speaks to the ceaseless unfolding of humanness through relationality, which Shutte (2001, p. 30, quoted in Molefe, 2019) describes as the 'moral obligation to become more fully human. And this means entering more and more deeply into community with others. So although the goal is personal fulfilment, selfishness is excluded.' (p. 102). Thus, Ubuntu as an indigenous research paradigm, does not only guide methodology, processes, and ethics, but also the aims and purposes of research, that is, the *research agenda*. In other words, indigenous methodologies cannot be detached from the research agenda, but *how* research is undertaken is linked to *what* is researched (Seehawer, 2022). Ubuntu research agendas aim at strengthening community and togetherness on the local, regional or on the planetary level. As such, there is scope within Ubuntu agendas for healing and transformation as outlined above as well as for striving for planetary survival by entering deeper into community not only with other humans, but also with other species and nature. This agenda, is—in the sense of Mbembe—inherently decolonial as it depends on an *active will to community*.

The UN's 2030 SDG agenda is misaligned with the more holistic aims, processes and understandings of indigenous research that aims at healing, (epistemic) decolonisation and self-determination. As discussed above, indigenous perspectives were marginally present during the negotiation process, but did not make it into the final product, the seventeen SDGs. Indigenous methodologies require researchers' authentic engagement not only with contextualised cultural protocols, but also with the decolonial and communal aims of indigenous research. They cannot be used without the appropriate acknowledgement of social justice concerns that arose from the narrow definition of development stemming from a so-called Western perspective (see Molefe, 2019). If indigenous methodologies are sought to be instrumentalised to rescue an agenda that does not reflect indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies and worldviews at the *conceptual level*, to borrow Van Norren's (2017) term, they will lose a defining characteristic of indigenous methodologies, their decolonial

agenda. Therefore, we argue that the instrumentalization of indigenous methodologies for the SDG agenda is not only a prolongation of the condition of coloniality in knowledge production that current decolonial movements are seeking to overcome, but strictly spoken, impossible.

5 Approaching Agendas for Planetary Survival Through Integrating Indigenous Ways of Knowing at the Conceptual Level

Our critique of the—impossible—instrumentalization of indigenous methodologies for the SDG agenda is not an argument against the integration of indigenous ways of knowing into international agendas. Neither is it an argument against collaborative struggles for planetary survival. Rather, we argue for the integration of indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies at the *conceptual level* of such agendas. As noted, on a first glance, Ubuntu as humanness and humble togetherness seems to be a natural segue for the achievement of sustainable development. However, the critical issue here is the conceptualisation of development, which currently runs against the decolonial will to (ecological) community.

Positively interpreted, the UNDP's (2020) recent call to *interweave knowledge systems* for the pursuit of sustainable development could be understood as a promising first step. However, if the statement to *bring back the planet into development* were to be taken seriously, the second step needs to be rethinking and reconceptualising development as such. Rather than seeking to rescue the modernist anthropocentric project of development through instrumentalist uses of indigenous methodologies and ways of knowing, this project needs to be disrupted and reconceptualised through a dialogue of epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies. Recent publications have started foregrounding such dialogues on an intellectual level. Van Norren (2017) explores such a dialogical encounter between the UN's SDGs, Ubuntu, the Latin American concept of *Buen Vivir* and the Bhutanese concept of *Gross National Happiness*, while Molefe (2019) draws on Ubuntu to conceptualise development from an African perspective. Addressing Goal 4 (quality education) within the SDG agenda, Seehawer and Breidlid (2021) suggest *dialogue between epistemologies* as a critical and constructive approach to the interaction of knowledges that allows knowledges to co-exist, complement or contradict each other without one knowledge dominating over the other. Telleria (2021) emphasises a relational approach to social issues. Our hope is that the initially mentioned decolonial strides in academia as well as the new interest for indigenous ways of knowing in mainstream development will spark more such intellectual thought work. And that this thought work will play a role in actual dialogues and negotiations.

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