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Interrogating, Integrating, and Advancing Theory in Monitoring and Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

This paper questions the colonial and neoliberal underpinnings of mainstream Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) theory and proposes a radical decolonizing move to enhance the field, in terms of its relevance and ethical nature. It critically analyzes four key theoretical constructs of postcolonial theory, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), the transformative paradigm, and the political economy of evaluation. They are used to dismantle the ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions that sustain epistemic injustice in the practice of evaluation. By critically assessing the conflicts between these opposing views, especially when it comes to the structural power and cultural sovereignty and the scientific and indigenous evidence, the paper pinpoints the necessity of a more comprehensive theoretical approach. As a reaction to this, it develops the Critical Relational Evaluation (CRE) framework as its own original contribution. CRE suggests three pillars of a transformative ontology of epistemic justice, axiological commitment to relational responsibility, and methodological orientation to participatory sense-making. It is concluded in the paper that implementation of this framework requires fundamental redefining of terms such as ‘rigor’, the restructuring the role of the evaluator as a facilitator as opposed to expert, and a systematic change relating to funding and professional standards. This novel theoretical development offers a consistent route of changing M&E from an instrument of external accountability to the practice of solidarity which encourages community self-determination and equitable social change.

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is facing a serious crisis of legitimacy due to its deep-rooted colonial roots and lack of attention to politics of knowledge production (Chilisa, 2019). Western-centered paradigms that presuppose the generalization of a certain worldview have dominated the field over decades, pushing indigenous epistemology and community-based knowledge techniques to the periphery (Cram, 2019). Such orthodoxy serves as a sort of methodological imperialism, through which external parties establish the standards of success and valid evidence, thus continuing to create substantial power asymmetries between funders and recipients (Bédécarrats et al., 2019; Pritchett, 2002). This leads to a development of enduring epistemic injustice, in which the processes of evaluation often nullify local conditions in favor of extending dependence on specified external norms such as ‘rigor’ and ‘value’ (Smith, 2021). Such basic non-relation goes

beyond methods and demonstrates a core flaw of the ontological and axiological underpinnings of mainstream M&E theory that habitually has been functioning under an illusion of being objective and neutral and has always been directly connected in the historical and geopolitical power structures (Mertens, 2007; Mertens, 2008).

Underneath this analysis, it becomes apparent that the fundamental flaw of traditional M&E theory lies in its systematic omission of the issue of power, as well as its naivety about the epistemological universality. The most prevalent frameworks are based on the post-positivist tradition and tend to favor donor accountability and quantifiable outcomes instead of community-based learning and systemic social transformation (Acree & Chouinard, 2020; Kushnier et al., 2023). This creates what researchers deem an extractive "M&E gaze" of objectifying communities as data sources as opposed to as equal contributors of knowledge (Nshimirimana, 2023). Though there have risen transformative and indigenous paradigms to challenge this status quo, such as the attraction of promoting social justice and relational ontologies in philosophies such as Ubuntu yet these are still peripheral to mainstream theoretical discussion and practice (Chilisa, 2019; Mkhize, 2008; Ajitoni, 2024). The relative lack of alignment between conceptual discourses on decolonization and its practical real-world performance, particularly within African settings, points to a major gap between theory and practice which is fueling an institutionalizing darkness of systemic needs and limited evidence definitions (Madaus & Kellaghan, 2022).

Hence, this paper holds that a clear decolonizing shift in the theoretical underpinnings of M&E scholarship is required to move the discipline forward. It argues that to achieve significant improvement, we need to move past the critical and instead create and promote theoretical frameworks that are rooted in African and Indigenous experiences. This involves re-theorizing of foundational concepts including redefining terms like 'rigor' and incorporating relational accountability and situated knowledge, or re-conceptualizing the role of the evaluator as a modest facilitator instead of a remote expert (Cram, 2019; Bédécarrats et al., 2019; Pritchett, 2002). Competing theoretical viewpoints will be critically interrogated in the paper by examining their ontological commitment and epistemological stance in order to develop a synthesized contribution to the theoretical foundations. The goal is to develop a Critical Relational Theory of Evaluation

that puts power, epistemic justice, and pluriversality into the forefront as essential foundations of more relevant, equitable and legitimate practice of M&E in the world.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTION

This theoretical inquiry into power, politics and decolonization in Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) necessitates a foundation rooted on four critical and intersecting theories. The theories all challenge the assumed neutrality of the field and question the Western epistemological hegemony of the field. The main theoretical foundations are defined in this section, which encompasses postcolonial theory (Mongia, 2021), Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) theory (Khupe, 2020), transformative paradigm (Romm, 2015), and the political economy of evaluation theory (Bédécarrats et al., 2019). The different ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions made in each theory are different and also complementary. Collectively, it redraws our basic conceptualization of valid evidence, ethical practice, and the entire nature of evaluation, in the direction of a decolonized M&E praxis.

The Postcolonial theory serves as the much-needed critical dissection required to reveal how coloniality pervades the traditional M&E framework and practices (Mongia, 2021). On the ontological level, it assumes that social reality, especially under postcolonial settings, is inherently conditioned by long-term power relations and knowledge infrastructures that were determined throughout colonial rule (Smith, 2021). These regimes are sustained by the current global frameworks, such as the international development and evaluation agendas. On an epistemological level, postcolonial theory questions the universalist rationality of Western rationalist knowledge, insisting that the acceptability of evidence is often determined by a ‘colonial gaze’, which puts features of donor standards as preferred to those of local realities (Cram, 2019). Axiologically, it is dedicated to breaking down those hierarchies and setting free subordinated knowledges, and has suggested that former colonized people have the right to represent themselves and establish self-determination in epistemology (Chilisa, 2019). It is this theoretical position that directly informs the decolonization project in M&E that requires a radical reorganization of the way evaluation questions are constructed and by whom they are answered.

To counter this criticism, the theory of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), which is frequently

explained through the prism of Made-in-Africa Evaluation, provides the positive ontological and epistemological alternative based on African and local worldviews (Khupe, 2020). Its ontology is deeply relational, basing it on the philosophies like Ubuntu that posits that the conceptualization of existence is interdependent and community-oriented instead of individualistic (Wright Fields, 2020; Ntseane, 2011). The theory of epistemology IKS justifies local context, culture, and lived experience-based ways of knowing and brands both narrative, spiritual, and holistic knowledge systems as equal to Western scientific paradigms (Chilisa, 2019). Axiologically, it underlines such values as reciprocity, respect, and collective well-being. In turn, the IKS theory of evaluation aims to indigenize evaluation by putting African perspectives on the forefront and making sure that communities are not only observers but co-creators of the evaluation process (Cram, 2019). This is a direct challenge to the epistemic injustice in which local knowledge is deliberately moved to the periphery.

The transformative paradigm is a philosophy that expressly transitions from the critique of power to the explicit normative approach to social change, so it remains a hallmark of ethics-oriented evaluation theory (Romm, 2015). On the ontological level, it recognizes a reality where people experience unequal power dynamics and systematic social, political, and economic oppression (Mertens, 2007; Mertens, 2008). It has an epistemology of participation and inter-subjectivity, which holds that robust knowledge should be actively built with stakeholders, particularly the marginalized who cast light on the deeply rooted power relations (Mertens, 2007; Mertens, 2008). Its motivation is axiological. The paradigm is unapologetically value-committed to human rights, social justice and equity. Thus, the goal of transformative evaluation is not to quantify the program outcomes but to empower the communities and create structural change, making M&E an interactive tool of justice (Rowell et al., 2017). It insists on posing the most important, equity-oriented question of who exactly enjoys or suffers because of interventions.

Lastly, the political economy of evaluation offers an important structural analysis of the material and institutional interest that limit and define M&E practice in reality (Bédécarrats et al., 2019). Ontologically, it considers evaluation as a political process inherent to economic systems and regimes across the world (Walker, 2024; Rousseau, 2024). Epistemologically, it examines the politicization of evidence whereby methodological choices, success standards, and application of

results are all highly impacted by funders, governments, and other parties who influence resources (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Its axiological issues are rooted in exposing these frequently unseen interests and highlights that neglecting the political economy contributes to judgments that unconsciously perpetuate current power relations and North-South support (Bédécarrats et al., 2019; Pritchett, 2002). This theory describes the real world opposition to the decolonial strategies, emphasizing that the aspects of donor contracts, reporting schedule, and institutional policies may reproduce the very aspects of asymmetry that the previous theories are intended to eliminate.

These four theories and philosophical assumptions together, offer the much-needed multi-layered basis of promoting decolonial thought in M&E. Post-colonial theory and the political economy of evaluation offer the critiquing, deconstructing perspective that reveals power and coloniality. Meanwhile, IKS theory and transformative paradigm provide reconstructive alternatives, one of them being based on cultural epistemology and relationality, and the other being a values-based quest of justice. Integrating them shifts the discourse beyond critique to a consistent theoretical foundation of an M&E practice that resonates culturally and is epistemically just and focuses on equitable transformation. This is the direct theoretical convergence to the critical analysis and original synthesis that are pursued in the subsequent sections of this paper.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF COMPETING THEORIES

The analysis of competing theories in the decolonizing M&E discourse shows that it is a discipline characterized by deep philosophical contradictions that are both theoretical and highly practical. Although the postcolonial theory, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), transformative paradigm, and analysis of political economy critiquing of mainstream M&E are equally a formidable condemnation of the colonial and neoliberal roots of the mainstream M&E paradigm, they are not a unitary bloc. Internal struggles reveal crucial dilemmas that need to be strictly pursued to develop a logical, practical decolonial theory. The most fundamental of these tensions is the structural emphasis on the material power of the transformative paradigm as opposed to the cultural and epistemic sovereignty of the IKS approach. Through its obvious axiological allegiance to social justice, the transformative paradigm places evaluation as a tool to challenge systemic oppression and redistribute power (Mertens, 2007; Mertens, 2008). It sees the evaluator as an activist-facilitator who participates in assisted sense-making and is directly in opposition to unjust

social structures (Blake et al., 2024; Wilkinson et al., 2021). IKS theory, the cornerstone of framework as Made in Africa Evaluation, states, on the contrary, that without the initial attempt to reclaim the ontological and epistemological space lost to Western paradigms, justice cannot occur (Chilisa, 2019). It proposes the basis of all inquiry in relational worldviews such as Ubuntu, in which knowledge is co-generated within and to the community, rather than extracted to be subject to external evaluations (Mkabela, 2022). This lack of agreement is not just a methodological one but philosophical. The transformative critique would argue that this exclusively restorative orientation on the subject of cultural restoration runs the risk of underpinning the present-day, politically determined economies that encourage the perpetuation of material deprivation within post-colonial states, which can result in culturalism and insensitivity to cultural justice (Bonnell & Hunt, 2023). On the other hand, an IKS critique might also claim that the very language of social structures and marginalization used in the transformative paradigm is still a legacy of the Western understanding of sociology, and it might impose an external out of context model of analysis, which is not necessarily answered by the community via its own cosmological vision of well-being and order (Cram, 2019). This tension compels a challenging question namely, does decolonization entail the destruction of the Western forms of oppression or the affirmative construction and privileging of the indigenous form? Practically this may take the form of evaluative conflicts about whether the main purpose of an assessment should be to record systemic policy failure or rather to rejuvenate and implement community-determined measures of achievement and prosperity.

This theoretical argument is connected with a more debatable epistemological battle of the category of evidence and the ranking of knowledge. Advocates of IKS and allied decolonial positions call in favor of epistemic plurality, that holistic, spiritual, and relational knowledge ways should not be regarded as complementary but as valid and coherent knowledge systems equal to western scientific logic (Chilisa, 2019; Smith, 2021). This radical epistemic justice is regarded as the essence of decolonization disputing the very standards applied to define what is ‘true’ or ‘valid’ in an assessment. Nonetheless, this position faces stiff opposition by philosophers of science and proponents of evidence-based practice. They argue that although indigenous and local knowledge provides invaluable knowledge, rich in context, which manifests itself in traditional ecological management or healing practices, it functions at an alternate level of epistemology, one different to the systematic, falsifiable, and generalizable approach of modern science (Gillette & Singleton,

2022; Barber, 2021). The opponents suggest that giving automatic epistemic parity to indigenous knowledge may be epistemically thoughtless and the practical dangers of doing so can be seen in areas such as health or engineering (Mardikian & Galani, 2023). They insist that the scientific method, although historically and intimately connected with colonialism, still is a distinctive and compelling means of dependable explanation and prediction, and its methodological rigor cannot merely be relativized. This poses a perceived practical dilemma that is virtually unresolvable to the decolonizing evaluator. So, how does one truly center authenticate oral histories, spiritual understandings or communal tales into a final report that will be scrutinized by donor agencies, government ministers or journal peer-reviewers whose legitimacy in the institutions is constructed on positivist or post-positivist frameworks of evidence? The fight to ‘braid’ or ‘co-produce’ knowledge across these divisions is all too frequently crushed by the weight of unacknowledged power relations and disproportionate criteria of evidence, leaving indigenous partners once again being appropriated as instruments (David-Chavez, 2018). This stalemate implies that decolonized M&E theory should be keen at promoting pluralism. Rather, it should also create the advanced trans-disciplinary models of how knowledge is negotiated, translated, and governed that might provide the Western science with authority without giving it sovereignty.

The third important axis is the difference between the structural critique at the macro-level represented by political economy and the micro-level agent-like possibilities of evaluative practice. Political economy notion provides a grounding analysis of M&E as institutional practice that is highly embedded in the neoliberal governance audit culture wherein the main role of M&E is typically to sanction funding flows, and show compliance, in contrast to encouraging learning or change (Bosk, 2020; Griffith, 2022). The lens shows that the outcomes are determined by terms of reference, reporting formats and funding cycles in a structural manner, placing the evaluator in a technician role inside a bureaucratic iron cage. The danger of this cogent analysis is what could pass as critical paralysis is the concern that any practice in the system is but a co-optation. Here the practice-based idealism of participatory and transformative approaches gives an essential response. Other frameworks such as participatory systems mapping or feminist evaluation attempt to define a space of tactic within the projects, aiming to reposition M&E questions, visually map complex local realities, and redistribute power incrementally (Blake et al., 2024; Wilkinson et al., 2021). But such methods are subject to their own co-optation, which scholars call the ‘routinisation

of participation’, where radical methods of operation are deprioritized of their political will and turned into a box-tick exercise in stakeholder consultation (Cornish, 2023). It is a rivalry, therefore, between a skeptical yet true structural determinism on the one hand, and an optimistic yet fragile practice of resistance on the other. This gap has to be bridged by a more advanced decolonial theory. It needs to recognize the formidable limits of the political economy, the donor contracts, the log-frames, and the pure indicators, but it must also chart out, like institutional theorists, the areas of institutional work and change (Bosk, 2020). This implies strategic navigation. Arguing to use the language of ‘value of money’ to support longer-term, relationship-based methods of evaluation; applying ‘Indigenous Data Sovereignty’ concepts to gain control over the collection and interpretation of information in a funded project (Walter, 2019); or using transformative principles to negotiate a theory of change with the community members first, and then engaging with the pre-set log-frame of the donor. The theoretical contribution would be to abandon the concepts of structure and agency as opposites, and theorize the evaluator as a pragmatic and spontaneous strategist operating within the ‘cracks’ of the system.

The synthesis which appears as the outcome of this critical analysis is directed to an integrated Critical Relational Theory of Evaluation. It is a theory that would not attempt to resolve these tensions but would maintain them in positive, dynamic balance. It is a synthesis of the clear-sighted structural power analysis of the political economy, the normative insistence on justice and action of the transformative paradigm, and foundational re-orientation of the IKS towards relational ontology, and plurality of epistemologies. It assumes that decolonized evaluation cannot be viewed as an untainted methodological apparatus or an all-inclusive indemnification of Western philosophy. It is, rather, a negotiable contextual, power-conscious, relational accountability practice. It requires a new praxis on behalf of the evaluator. A form of praxis that blends the modesty of a facilitator who is guided by IKS, the criticality of a political economist, and the strategic maneuverability of a transformative activist. The evaluator becomes an intermediary of tough knowledge conversations, reflexive participant in the very regimes they criticize, and an unrelenting negotiator who wants to create, even in the smallest degree, more open spaces of epistemic justice in the entrapping, convoluted, and politicized context of development practice. The development of this theory will be determined not by ensuring practitioners find an easy way out during such competitions, but by offering them a more solid guide in terms of making ethical,

rigorous and truly transformative praxis.

SYNTHESIS OF THEORETICAL ADVANCEMENTS

The critical analysis of the previous discussion permits the examination of a critical theoretical contribution to decolonize M&E. Beyond the outlined contradictions between structural change, epistemic dominion, and political economy, this section will introduce an integrated framework that is entitled Critical Relational Evaluation (CRE). This framework does not only represent an additive combination of the existing theories but rather an innovative synthesis that comes to produce a new consistent logic of evaluation practice. CRE is designed as based on three overlapping pillars, namely a transformative ontology of epistemic justice, an axiological principle of relational accountability, and a methodological orientation of participatory sense-making. By keeping these components in a state of dynamic balance, CRE offers a theoretically challenging, but also practical channel through which evaluators should negotiate the realities of power, knowledge, and value in the contexts of postcolonial and global development, and as such thus responding to the core call to the question of a philosophically sustainable de-colonial praxis.

The initial and most fundamental pillar of CRE provides the transformative ontology that is focused on epistemic justice. This addresses the acute conflict between the attention of the transformative paradigm to material structures and the attention of Indigenous Knowledge Systems to cultural worldviews by suggesting a fundamental interconnection between these two components. Contemporary power asymmetries and coloniality have been working in a multiple mechanism of material dispossession, systematic devaluation, or erasure or appropriation of non-Western knowledge systems (Chilisa, 2019; Smith, 2021). Thus, decolonizing assessment should focus on distributive injustices and ontological injustices at the same time. CRE suggests that the initial position in any assessment should be a participatory negotiation of ontological and epistemological ground (ground zero) by which inquiry should commence. This is done through a conscious ‘de-secularization’ of the assessment space, where spiritual, ancestral, and relational conceptualizations of reality are not classified as subjective belief but utilized as legitimate structures of delineating problems and achievements (Cram, 2019). As an example, community well-being may not be interpreted as the specific set of health or income indicators, but rather in terms of harmony with the land, respect of the ancestors, and the vitality of a community,

summarized in concepts such as Ubuntu (Wright Fields, 2020; Ntseane, 2011). The main role of the evaluator during this stage is to provoke a discussion within which these often-unarticulated ontologies emerge, and then to work with them to create the main questions and criteria of merit underlying the evaluation, a process which effectively decolonizes the very nature of what is being evaluated prior to any data being collected.

CRE moves forward on the second pillar that promotes relational accountability as its central axiological commitment, which is a synthesis of Indigenous ethic of reciprocity and a political economic analysis of institutional power. Relational accountability transcends a generic moral rule to become the redesigner of power in the process of evaluation. It requires that the primary responsibility of the evaluator lies to the community partners with a promise of respectful, reciprocal and sustained relationships that exceeds an individual contractual project (Wilson, 2020). This squares up with the extractive culture of audit that is criticized by the theorist of political economy. This is operationalized by the real-life practice of the Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) that guarantees the right of a community to own, control, access and possess data about themselves (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016). Here, communities in a CRE process participate in data collection tool design, possess physical or custodial control of the raw data, control the interpretation of the findings, and may veto the use and sharing of the findings. Moreover, relational accountability needs the evaluator to become a critical companion who openly charts the political economy of the evaluation, that is, recognizing donor interests, bureaucratic limitations, and funding flows, but openly discusses the realities with the community. This makes the evaluator more of a broker of power-filled knowledge conversations, whose social capital is to maneuver institutional systems as they continue to vigorously reinforce community agency and guard their epistemic and data property rights.

The third pillar of CRE recommends the approach of participative sense-making methodology through which rigorous theory-based inquiry is combined with pluralistic, community-based approaches. This pillar concerns the methodological dilemma between positivist or causal needs and decolonial or pluralist needs of epistemology. CRE uses theory-based evaluation techniques, including realist evaluation or contribution analysis, but invests in the redefinition of these methods. The evaluator enables community members to create their own theories or explanations

of change based on their lived experiences and ontological insights rather than testing a pre-conceived, linear theory of change through program documents (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). The community-based theories may encompass the spiritual, social, and ecological causal mechanisms that have not traditionally been a part of the standard models. CRE favors participatory action research (PAR) and imaginative endeavors such as photovoice, digital stories, or participatory systems mapping to unearth these compound causational accounts (Blake et al., 2024; Wilkinson et al., 2021). As an illustration, a community would employ participatory mapping to graphically follow the associations between the loss of sacred lands, loss of cultural pride, and increase in youth substance abuse, and then form a causal theory wholly beyond a traditional log-frame. The function of the evaluator is to assist in organizing this sense-making process, and ensuring the emergent causal narrative is written down in a rigorous manner, and then open up the dialogue between this community-created theory and the official program theory. This makes a rich, controversial and complex appreciation of ‘what works, to whom, in what situations and why’?, which is theoretically complex and deeply rooted in local reality.

Conclusively, the synthesis made by the Critical Relational Evaluation framework is a substantive theoretical improvement. It offers a consistent framework that cuts across the key fault lines in the decolonization of M&E theory. CRE provides the transformative paradigm with a tangible means to anchor its justice agenda in certain cultural ontologies. It gives Indigenous Knowledge Systems a strategic praxis on how to engage and transform powerful systems of politics and methodology. Lastly, it transforms the frequently limiting criticism of political economy into a collection of principled, tactical positions as a critical companion and negotiator on the part of the evaluator. The most important contribution of the framework is the redefinition of rigor. In CRE, the conceptualized rigor is viewed as the intensity of critical reflexivity, the tacit of relational accountability, the multiplicity of knowledge systems involved, and the power of the participatory process that negotiates the sense-making. This brings the discipline out of the sanitized debates surrounding method to an emphasis upon the quality of relations and discussions which form the basis of knowledge production. In this way, CRE provides evaluators with a theoretically fair, morally motivated, and practically feasible guide to their involvement in decolonization as well as epistemic justice in their everyday practice.

IMPLICATION FOR M&E THEORY AND PRACTICE

The development of a Critical Relational Evaluation (CRE) framework has far-reaching and encompassing consequences that require the reorganization of the theory of M&E and its professional practice on a fundamental level. In the case of M&E theory, the decolonial and critical relational principles require a paradigm shift in the epistemological basis of the field. It questions positivist and post-positivist paradigms which have traditionally treated Western scientific rationality as the only judge of acceptable evidence. This conceptual shift, as postulated by theorists aiming to decolonize curriculum and knowledge production, necessitates the step of going beyond a mere inclusion of multiple perspectives to include a major restructuring of the questions we pose and the standards we cherish (Lohaus-Reyes, 2019; Ntloedibe, 2025). Ontological pluralism now demands theory to formally recognize that realities are multiple, culturally constructed and in many instances spiritually embedded such as Indigenous views of the world such as Ubuntu. As a result, such fundamental theoretical concepts such as validity, rigor, and causality should be extended. The redefinition of rigor is no longer held by the orthodoxy of methodology, but by the intensity of critical reflexivity, authenticity of community practice and robustness of processes in negotiating knowledge within the context of various epistemic systems. This changes the core theoretical inquiry of evaluation from a technocratic 'what works', to a more political and philosophically minded "works to whom, upon the knowledge of whom, and to what sort of a future? Such a change makes M&E theory an essential area to discuss the idea of epistemic justice and the democratization of knowledge, requiring the development of new hybrid theoretical frameworks by making them contextually sensitive and philosophically consistent.

In the case of professional practice, such implications are transformative as well, requiring that the role of the evaluator, ethics, and methodological toolkit be re-conceptualized altogether. The evaluator moves from being an external expert or neutral auditor to a critical companion, facilitator and modest listener. This novel praxis, which is discussed in terms of the concept of evaluation capacity building, entails a combination of technical expertise and rich relational abilities, cultural humility, and political dexterity to negotiate complicated power relations (Wade & Kallemeyn, 2020). The mainstream tools, such as log-frames and results-based management, need to be reconfigured or challenged. They ought to be augmented or substituted with participatory and emancipatory methodologies that emphasize on co-construction. Practical application includes

exploitation of participatory systemic mapping, digital storytelling, and other methods with cultural grounds that enable societies to depict their personal complexities and causal theories. The realization of Indigenous Data Sovereignty is a non-negotiation pillar, where the community must own, control, access and have their data so the information can be transformed into a self-determination instrument rather than an external assessment tool. Moreover, the CRE model promotes evaluative monitoring, which combines ongoing, real-time critical study into administration to achieve adaptive learning and transfer responsibility to community stakeholders.

Finally, these theoretical and practical changes are impossible to achieve without addressing and changing institutional and political economies that control M&E. The established systems of development funding, professional accreditation and training of its staff are all serious obstacles. Typically established funding modalities and reporting timelines seek to be upward accountable and predictable, whereas relational evaluation requires long-term, iterative, and trust-based processes to be supported. This asks donors and governments to concede a significant amount of control and tolerate emergent outcomes and community-determined measures of success. In the academic field, curricula should be decolonized by shifting away from the mainstream approaches taught as universal to a revolutionary critical assessment of their past and recent political and historical origins and educating future evaluators on facilitation, negotiating, and critical philosophy (Govender & Naidoo, 2023). Professional associations are challenged with the need to update the ethical codes and competency models so that the emphasis is placed on the relational accountability and epistemic fairness. Although it is a challenging route, these implications give a required direction to the field. Incorporating a critical relational perspective is not just an ethical decision, but also a practical one, necessary to make M&E more legitimate, relevant, and transformative towards the promotion of equitable and self-determined development.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

A critical discussion of the theoretical bases of M&E has been provided in this paper and a compelling case has been made in favor of decolonizing that directly addresses the historical involvement of the field in extractive and colonial paradigms. The paper has advanced a Critical Relational Evaluation (CRE) framework through the synthesis of postcolonial theory, the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), the transformative paradigm, and the political economy

analysis. According to this framework, rigorous and ethical evaluation should be essentially reconstructed on the grounds of epistemic justice, relational accountability, and ontological pluralism (Chilisa, 2019; Smith, 2021). It requires one to relinquish the judgment of the evaluator as an outsider who uses standardized tools to the evaluator as a critical companion and facilitator of knowledge conversations. The eventual aim of evaluation is rationalized from no longer proving the outcomes of the donors but in aiding community self-determination, dignity, and eliminating systemic inequities (Mertens, 2007; Mertens, 2008; Cram, 2019). This conceptual development acts on the ominous criticism that standard M&E practices may be a source of intellectual dependency and marginalization, but a deliberate decolonized practice can be used to promote social-ecological resilience and equitable development (Biggs et al., 2022).

To transform this theoretical suggestion into a long-term academic and practical contribution, targeted future studies are needed on a number of related frontiers. One of the urgent and direct premises is the empirical confirmation and methodological clarification of decolonial and CRE approaches. The studies should not stop at conceptual argument but document and study real-life case studies in which concepts such as Indigenous Data Sovereignty and participatory sense-making are applied (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016). It requires comparative, longitudinal research studies on the measureable effects of these strategies on quality of evaluation, empowerment of communities, and sustainability of programs in comparison to the results of projects that have been conducted through traditional, log-frame-based frameworks (Walker, 2024; Rousseau, 2024). As an example, the outcomes of programs such as the social innovation programs in South Africa, where community stories and systemic feedback are part of the evaluation could be examined to create an evidence base of alternative efficacy (Boadu & Ile, 2025; Biljohn, 2017). This should also be methodologically innovative and establish strong procedures to examine and combine culturally-based instruments, including digital storytelling, participatory mapping, or embodied performance, as acceptable and rigorously valid forms of evaluative evidence (Blake et al., 2024; Wilkinson et al., 2021).

The second areas of critical research need to investigate rigorously the institutional and systemic architectures that contribute to the current inhibition of decolonizing M&E through a prism of political economy and institutional theory and determine how these mechanisms might be

restructured or reconfigured to promote relational practice (Bosk, 2020). Findings should determine particular leverage points within the donor agencies, governments and non-governmental organizations to motivate long term relationship building, as opposed to short term auditing, and formalizing the value of process results such as strengthened community agency and networks. This involves policy critique of prevailing and predominant assessment norm and challenge, and prescribe the implementation of equity and relational accountability as practices of ethical practice to be located at the center, not the periphery of professional standards (Parkhurst, 2016; Fransman & Newman, 2019). Moreover, the study of evaluation capacity building (ECB) needs to be reconsidered on a decolonial level, exploring ways of building critical reflexivity, humility, and facilitator skills not as supplementary but core elements of training programs for Global North and South evaluators (Wade & Kallemeyn, 2020).

Third, the ethical dilemmas and micro-politics of power sharing in evaluation practice require deep considerations in future studies. This demands critical ethnographic research of processes of evaluation that seeks to question the micro-dynamics of co-creation by examining who speaks, who is listened to and how the tensions caused by incompatible worldviews are managed in the real world (Nshimirimana, 2023). Studies are required to explore the realities of knowledge-equity co-production without romanticizing local knowledge and to challenge the hegemony of the default knowledge as represented by Western scientific evidence (Gillette & Singleton, 2022; Barber, 2021). The piece is directly connected to the studies exploring the decolonization of the evaluator as a position, by paying attention to the required personal and professional skills and how it can be developed within the frames of transformative learning (Govender & Naidoo, 2023). This is traced to the larger, more urgent project of decolonizing knowledge production in academia which is such a key concern in contemporary global scholarship.

Lastly, in order to keep this work grounded and actionable, the emphasis needs to be put on supporting and studying long-term, action-oriented research partnerships. The development of future scholarship must create partnerships with the community or practitioners in the South to jointly design M&E systems, test CRE models across various fields such as public health or environmental governance, and learn through these interventions and publications. Such alliances ought to not only result in the creation of academic works but also useful tools, instrumentals,

guides on reflection and new measures of the assessment of relational health, that reflect the decolonial values they advance (Chilisa, 2019). The end result is the production of an ethical loop of praxis, in which research and practice answer and modify each other. Finally, decolonizing M&E is an ongoing, community-wide, and contentious process that must take place. Through rigorous and modest exploration of these interrelated lines of research, researchers can aid in changing evaluation from a device of external accountability into a disciplined act of solidarity, deep listening, and an evocative contributor to the equitable futures that communities are working towards creating.

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