Epistemic Injustice and Rural-Driven Development

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Abstract: *David Monk, founding coordinator of the UNESCO Knowledge for Change (K4C) African Training Centre for Community Based Participatory Action Research at Gulu University in Uganda, reflects in this essay on the relationship between local knowledge and rural development. He argues that farmers are systematically discredited as knowers in development discourse and practice, which both rationalizes their economic exploitation and excludes crucial ecological knowledge from development planning. Drawing on the philosophy of knowledge and his experience living in rural settings in Uganda and Canada, Monk traces how urban-centric narratives demote rural life across political systems and historical periods. The essay then turns to the question of how institutions of higher learning might chart a different path. Introducing the activities of the Knowledge for Change Global Consortium and Gulu University's community-based participatory research hub, Monk shows how institutions can bridge knowledge cultures—treating communities as partners rather than subjects of intervention. These efforts suggest the benefits that come from shifting one's orientation away from bringing development to rural areas and toward recognizing what rural knowledge offers a planet in crisis.*

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> We are all experiencing, instantaneously, two fundamental events that are both systemic and multidimensional. On [the] one hand, the balance of the planet's natural processes is in jeopardy. On the other, the plan for the infinite expansion of capital aims, more than ever, to reduce society to the market and to ensure complete technical control over not only the essence of humanity, but over all living beings. What I mean is that of all the changes affecting life, not only humanity but all living beings, these two events deserve careful examination.
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> —Achille Mbembe, historian and political theorist[1]

I recently moved back to the village, about twenty kilometers from Gulu University in Northern Uganda. I have some goats, chickens, and rabbits, and I grow some food for household consumption. Mainly, I am obsessed with planting all kinds of trees—I feel that this is likely the greatest contribution to the world that I can possibly make. I rely on a healthy supply of sun for my power, a well for my water, and on my neighbors for directions about how, when, where, and what to plant, as well as how to take care of the animals. They have also tried to teach me about the nutritional and medicinal value of local plants, of which I remain a remedial student.

I say moved "back," because I grew up in a village on the other side of the world—on land that was stolen by my French, Irish, and Scottish ancestors from Mohawk people generations ago, and is now called Canton de Hatley. I grew up in an old farmhouse about 150 years old, surrounded by forest and rivers, and only a few kilometers from a good-sized lake, which we relied on for bathing in the hot summer months when the well dried up. As a child, I spent most of my free time exploring the woods with my siblings. Perhaps this is why I love trees so much. We also grew a good portion of the food we ate throughout the year. The local town, nestled around the lake, was a nice community. Every spring and autumn we would have work parties to clean up, renovate, and take down the local beach house and tennis courts; in the winter, we would do the same with the hockey rink.

In the years after I moved away to go to university, I was rather moth-like, allured by the excitement of lights and everything else offered by cities; Seoul, Ottawa, Victoria, and Gulu are all places that I have called home. But now I am back to my roots in the village, and I feel like my life has improved spectacularly, even with my hour-long bike ride to work. I feel safer than I have in any city, and my health is definitely better. There is no noise pollution, there are no car fumes. There is fresh clean water from the ground, an abundance of fresh food that I can confidently say is not sprayed with pesticides, and a good deal less stress.

[1] Achille Mbembe, "Pathways of Tomorrow: Contribution to Thinking Commensurate with the Planet," *UNESCO Education, Research, and Foresight: Working Papers* 32 (2023): 3.

Yes, the energy here is peaceful, but there is quite a lot of labor going on as well. Most people are in the field digging, planting, harvesting by five in the morning, to get most of their work done before the heat of the sun. For my own part, I still live with one foot in and one foot out of the city—my work is at Gulu University, where I teach in the faculty of education and humanities, and where I coordinate the Knowledge for Change (K4C) global consortium's African Regional Training Centre in Community Based Participatory Action Research.

It is largely this work at Gulu University that inspired me to write this essay, the main point of which is to explore what Patricia Hill Collins, writing in the context of liberatory and feminist ideas about epistemic injustice, terms "oppositional consciousness": contesting the exclusion of marginalized groups from the category of knowers.[2] I firmly believe that subsistence farmers are victims of epistemic injustice, and that this injustice has played a role in how narratives of rurality and development have been formed. I feel that, if listened to, subsistence farmers could significantly contribute to Achille Mbembe's call, found at the beginning of this essay, to accelerate the dawning of a new planetary consciousness.

Knowing all this about me should hopefully provide some insight regarding my position on the undervaluation of rural life. I have an itch on the matter that needs scratching, made itchier by the prolific and deep thinking shared by Catherine Odora Hoppers in personal conversations and in her many writings and presentations about conceptions of development, knowledge, and power that frame rural places as backward, uncivilized, and poor. For example, she has written that

> rural is equated not only with the peasant, but peasant is closely knit with poverty, which is a good income raiser when peddled on the right bandwagon. Once this point is reached, it is but a short step before rural is equaled to absolute ignorance à la social Darwinism, with very little in the grey areas to demarcate realities such as frugal subsistence, which is a way of livelihood. There is also little by way of breaking the rural-equals-poverty equation by, for instance, introducing concepts such as "knowledge rich but economically poor."[3]

In engaging with this work, I am keenly aware of my position as a white man living in a village in northern Uganda, whose own life experience, particularly in relation to knowledge traditions, is firmly ensconced in the colonial legacy of white male science. Yet I am also keenly aware of the epistemological injustice perpetuated on people living in rural areas, particularly subsistence farmers.

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[2] Patricia Hill Collins, as cited in Nancy Tuana, "Feminist Epistemology: The Subject of Knowledge," in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. Ian James Kidd et al. (Routledge, 2017), 127.

[3] Catherine Odora Hoppers, "Beyond Critique to Academic Transformation: Reconceptualising Rurality in the Global South," *Postcolonial Directions in Education* 6, no. 2 (2017): 152.

So, in the essay that follows, I will first consider the nature of epistemological injustice, then interrogate assumptions of what development is and question the basis upon which self-proclaimed "developed" people and nations "do development" to others whom they have categorized as not developed. I am especially troubled by the indicators and evaluation framework because its data exclude rural knowledges and lifestyles and are used to categorize rural people's epistemic and social contributions as less valuable in comparison to those of "developed" peoples, and consequently to rationalize their exploitation. Lastly, I will draw on the Knowledge for Change Global Consortium movement for knowledge democracy and the field of epistemic injustice to advocate for deeper and broader approaches to promote the planet's flourishing.

Epistemic Injustice

For my understanding of epistemic injustice, I draw heavily on the *2017 Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, edited by Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr.[4] The book explores epistemic injustice as a philosophical inquiry from almost every perspective except that of farmers, apart from a reference from Nancy Tuana as she explores epistemic injustice from a liberatory feminist perspective.[5] She uses farmers as an example of how entire groups of people are marginalized and exploited based on their lowered social status as "knowers."

Pohlhaus explains epistemic injustice as bringing together political ethics and epistemological branches of philosophy "to consider how epistemic practices and institutions may be deployed and structured in ways that are simultaneously infelicitous toward certain epistemic values . . . and unjust with regard to particular knowers."[6] These unjust outcomes can come to pass through reducing the credibility of a knower or group of knowers, or by disregarding or confusing knowledges. Luvell Anderson draws on Miranda Fricker's work to describe these two types of epistemic injustice. The first is testimonial injustice, which arises when "a hearer, due to prejudice triggered by the speaker's social identity, attributes a credibility deficit to the speaker."[7] The second, hermeneutical injustice, stems from a gap in a society's collective resources needed to understand someone, which places that person at a social disadvantage. Relatedly, Anderson explains that epistemic arrogance is the generalization of one epistemic system to everyone with the assumption that it is both superior and applicable to all. Epistemic ignorance, the total incomprehension or lack of interpretation of different epistemic practices, is often a close accompaniment to this.

[4] Ian James Kidd et al., eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice* (Routledge, 2017).

[5] Tuana, "Feminist Epistemology," 128.

[6] Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., "Varieties of Epistemic Injustice," in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, eds. Ian James Kidd et al. (Routledge, 2017), 13.

[7] Luvell Anderson, "Epistemic Injustice and the Philosophy of Race," in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, eds. Ian James Kidd et al. (Routledge, 2017), 140.

Epistemic injustice can be willful or based in ignorance. It can also be individual or systemic. It is accomplished within and through epistemic institutions such as schools, universities, and courts of law.

I am interested in both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, through which subsistence farmers' knowing is disregarded and discredited. This is manifested socially through narrow and incomplete definitions of what success is and historically has been used to rationalize the organizations of economic systems that devalue and exploit subsistence farmers, despite their clear contribution to social well-being as a result of their knowledge of food production and healthy living.

To rationalize the oppression of (subsistence) farmers, as with most marginalizations, societies have to be convinced that farmers' knowledges and cultures are less valuable than that of others, that they are not able to make decisions for themselves, and thus that they are less deserving of the same rights as everyone else and that their labor needs to be exploited both for their own good and for the good of society. As a result, epistemic injustice toward subsistence farmers is closely tied to social injustice. Such epistemic injustice is also a major problem for planetary well-being, in that important knowledges and cultures of living have been excluded from our planning for the future. Before pursuing this discussion of development, I would first like to expand briefly on how subsistence farmers are exploited and excluded.

The Demotion of the Rural

> As usual, in every scheme that worsens the position of the poor, it is the poor who are invoked as beneficiaries.
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> —Vandana Shiva, scholar and environmental activist[8]

In a workshop I was conducting about arts-based inquiry a few years ago that was looking at food systems, a participant spoke of a local proverb that suggests not to trust people who are not planting food. The idea is that those who don't grow their own food would come to either beg or steal food when they were hungry. This is sage advice, considering the historical context of farmers (often called serfs, peasants, subsistence farmers, villagers) being coerced and forced into producing food at an unfair and unrealistic market value for people who do not want to grow their own.

In her book *Earth Democracy*, Vandana Shiva illustrates some of these nefarious historical power dynamics that use cultural demotion to take advantage of subsistence farmers.[9] She argues that this is often done in the name of development and progress, but it is really just

[8] Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (North Atlantic Books, 2016), 123.

[9] Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Zed Books, 2005).

motivated by greed and laziness. It is in fact the background to stories of "civilization" and "progress" throughout history—whether communism in the Soviet Union, republicanism in the Roman Empire, regency in Europe, industrialization in Great Britain, or capitalism in the United States. People need food, and they don't want to work for it. It is usually paired with some form of dogma related to the greater good.

Marxist-oriented scholars additionally call attention to the way that capitalist development has deskilled rural farmers through the introduction of technologies that reduce reliance on traditional knowledge and practices (that were often more sustainable) and instead made farmers dependent on corporate products that they must pay for, thus placing them in debt.[10] Madhumita Saha and Sigrid Schmalzer give the examples of pesticides and seeds that cannot be replanted.[11] Lena Kaufmann examines China's shift to neoliberal policies, demonstrating how the loss of traditional knowledge in rice production pushed farmers in large numbers into urban areas, where they had significant challenges finding work and living well.[12]

Meanwhile, feminist philosopher Lisa Heldke, in her 2006 article "Farming Made Her Stupid," discusses how the urban gaze depicts the rural as comparatively backward and less civilized. She emphasizes how twentieth-century American intellectuals demoted and degraded rurality, so that farmers became understood as crude and ignorant.[13] Charles Okumu draws on the great Ugandan postcolonial thinker Okot P'Bitek to show the colonial foundations involved in demoting rural culture in northern Uganda, emphasizing the role of formal education in creating an elite class that looked down on rural cultures.[14] Cognitive justice scholar Catherine Odora Hoppers similarly elaborates on the role of universities in sustaining narratives of rurality as poverty in the African context: "In Africa as is the case also in many parts of the developing world where research is externally oriented and aimed at gaining endorsement of the [Global] North…assumptions embedded in the definitions of poverty bypass critical terrain by always equating frugal subsistence with poverty. It makes things so much simpler!"[15] Yan Hairong and Chen Yiyuan likewise explain how state policy in China shifted to agricultural capitalization in the 1980s with purposeful "depeasantisation" of

[10] For example, see Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (Monthly Review Press, 1974).

[11] Madhumita Saha and Sigrid Schmalzer, "Green-Revolution Epistemologies in China and India: Technocracy and Revolution in the Production of Scientific Knowledge and Peasant Identity," *BJHS Themes* 1 (2016): 145–67.

[12] Lena Kaufmann, *Rural-Urban Migration and Agro-Technological Change in Post-Reform China* (Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

[13] Lisa Heldke, "Farming Made Her Stupid," *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 151–65.

[14] Charles Nelson Okumu, "Okot p'Bitek's Literary Inspirations for Decolonisation of Education," in *Transforming Higher Education for Community Development: Participatory Reflection on a Decade of Mutual Capacity-Building in Northern Uganda*, eds. Lone Dirckinck-Holmfeld et al. (Brill, 2025), 48–67.

[15] Hoppers, "Beyond Critique," 153.

agricultural learning, gradually removing farmers' participation from decisions about agriculture change, making them customers rather than masters.[16]

The list goes on.

I hope these examples are sufficient to demonstrate that the epistemic injustice that farmers have faced is not a phenomenon isolated to a particular place, time, or political belief. Moreover, these examples demonstrate what Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. calls the process of "devaluing the credibility and the creation of epistemically disadvantaged identities."[17] And, as Nancy Tuana explains (drawing on Lisa Heldke and referring to rural farmers explicitly), the claim of not knowing leads the not-knower to become seen as a lesser person and consequently rationalizes their exploitation.[18]

Rethinking Rural Development

There are a number of dimensions involved in the historical demotion of farmers and therefore many complexities to untangle in their relation to power and society, particularly in terms of food systems. The underlying epistemic narrative that undermines the richness of rural lifestyles—particularly those of subsistence farmers—in relation to development narratives is just one of these. The current dominant story of development, from my perspective, is skewed and does not align with a prosperous, peaceful, and healthy world. Instead, I see a brutal and increasing destruction of the entire planet through the pursuit of money and power manifested in the ability to control and make decisions. War, genocide, the rampant pillage of nature for the extraction of resources—all seem to be related to this chase for more. This is the story of progress, supposedly, as though we have a strategic plan for the end of everything.

Faced with this situation, the world desperately needs different paths and new stories of development, new definitions of success, and new aspirations for collective well-being and coexistence. We need to move beyond our cultural knowledge biases to engage in cross-epistemic dialogue in order to learn and live differently. Farmers are not just wallowing in mud and ignorance as intellectuals would have us believe. Their intellect and their perspectives of life are needed to guide a different story of a developing society. (And which society is not developing?) In short, development theory needs to look more closely at the rural intellect and ask what we can learn from the rural. But how does that work in practice?

[16] Yan Hairong and Chen Yiyuan, "Agrarian Capitalization Without Capitalism? Capitalist Dynamics from Above and Below in China," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 15, no. 3 (2015): 366–91.

[17] Pohlhaus, "Varieties of Epistemic Injustice," 19.

[18] Tuana, "Feminist Epistemology," 128; and Heldke, "Farming Made Her Stupid."

The Knowledge for Change Global Consortium

Gulu University, where I work under the leadership of the current Vice Chancellor Professor George Ladaah Openjuru, is in fact doing quite a lot in the rural knowledge game through its participatory approach to community engagement and the purposeful actions it is taking to bridge knowledge cultures.[19] The university is located in a newly established and vibrant city that is driven by the rural area that surrounds it. All of the learning programs are oriented toward rural development in partnership with the community. One example of how we are trying to purposefully integrate knowledge ecologies and the promotion of knowledge democracy is the Knowledge for Change (K4C) global consortium African Regional Centre for Training in Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR). In this section, I will use the example of our CBPR consortium to interrogate development and to consider how universities can play an important role in promoting and benefiting from a plurality of knowledges and worldviews. My hope is that this can provide a strong foundation for rethinking development narratives and power in many other contexts as well.

The K4C is an initiative of the UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education. It emerges from more than thirty-five years of radical adult education and participatory research undertaken by the founders and UNESCO co-chairs, Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon, as a movement to promote knowledge democracy and bridge knowledge cultures between universities and communities.[20] The K4C supports training in community based participatory research through a twenty-one week mentorship training program (MTP), which is project based and includes a ten-day in-person residency. The program uses a "teacher of teachers" model designed for community development practitioners in and out of the university and focuses on knowledge democracy, arts-based inquiry, context-specific curriculum development, facilitation techniques, and developing what we call "hubs": institutional partnerships between universities and community organizations that teach and practice CBPR.[21]

Hubs use participatory approaches to knowledge generation to co-generate actionable solutions for local social and environmental problems. Hub research partnerships such as these have resulted in such outcomes as young and vulnerable artists' empowerment,

[19] George Ladaah Openjuru and David Monk, "Community University Engagement as a Model for University Transformation and the Cultivation of Humanity," in *Higher Education Community Engagement and the Cultivation of Humanity*, eds. Margie Maistry et al. (Rhodes University Press, 2026).

[20] *Knowledge for Change*, Community Scholars' Fund, University of Victoria, 2023, retrieved from https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/globalstudies/assets/docs/community-scholars-fund_final.pdf.

[21] Rajesh Tandon and Budd Hall, eds., *Teaching Community-Based Participatory Research: Socially Responsible and Ethically Anchored* (Hachette India, 2025).

activism against illegal deforestation for charcoal, and developing access to clean water.[22] At a foundational level, the goal is to promote long-term relationships within communities where visions for the future—and pathways to get there—are collaboratively negotiated and acted on. At present, there are twenty-seven hubs in sixteen countries, mostly in the Global South. A belief in embracing diverse knowledges and approaches to research and solving problems is integral to the movement.

I have been involved in the CBPR movement ever since I entered a master's degree program in 2012 and began learning about the radical adult education work of people like Paulo Freire, Miles Horton, Darlene Clover, Budd Hall, George Openjuru, and Rajesh Tandon. I also owe a great debt to the work of my master's degree supervisor, Arpi Hamalian, and PhD supervisor, Kathy Sanford. In 2018, when I joined Gulu University, I had the opportunity to undertake the K4C Mentorship Training Program and start a K4C Hub in Gulu. In 2023, Gulu was designated as a Regional Training Centre for the K4C Program in the African Region, and we have just welcomed (as of September 2025) our second cohort for mentorship training in CBPR. In addition to training and doing CBPR, we have made contributions as a consortium to international forums in higher education such as the 2022 UNESCO World Higher Education Conference and the 2024 UNESCO and African Union Forum on Transforming Knowledge for Africa's Future in an effort to influence policy and funding frameworks.[23]

In the K4C flavor of participatory research, we advocate for researchers and development workers to be actively engaged in the communities they work in and to be integrally involved in the various and diverse activities of the community over time—not just when they are being paid or acting in their professional capacity. This is partly why we insist on institutional partnerships between communities and universities as a requirement for participating in the K4C training. Epistemic inclusion and bridging knowledge cultures is essential to the work.

Over my years of teaching participatory research courses in various formats—MOOCS, short two-week residency programs, engagement courses at the university, as well as the more in-depth K4C MTP—I have come to see that gaining a better understanding of community-university engagement and participatory approaches to learning and research means asking both "what is development?" and "what is community?" These questions are at the core to

[22] David Monk et al., "When the Guns Stopped Roaring: Acholi ngec ma gwoko lobo," *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement* 13, no. 1 (2020): 1–18.

[23] See "UNESCO World Higher Education Conference 2022 (WHEC2022)," International Political Science Association (IPSA), May 18–20, 2022, www.ipsa.org; and African Union Commission and UNESCO, "Transforming Knowledge for Africa's Future," International Forum of UNESCO Chairs and Partners, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 30–October 2, 2024, https://au.int/en/newsevents/20240930/transforming-knowledge-africas-future/.

the pursuit of Mbembe's call for a new paradigm for the future, and I would like to end by reflecting on them.

The Question of Community

In all the courses I teach that are related to community engagement, there is an element of practice through a community project of some kind. The greatest problem that most university-based participants encounter is finding a community to engage in for their project. As researchers, they have tremendous trouble situating themselves as part of any type of community that needs to be researched. Consequent interrogation brings forth assumptions about research that create artificial boundaries between the researcher and the community to be researched, often based in othering and a hierarchical aid-based mentality.[24] The researchers in such cases—this also describes many development workers—are inclined to look for some inner city slum or rural area that their preconceived stereotypes tell them needs fixing. In other words, they are inclined to define their target community as poor and in need of help, as well as something external to their own lived experience.

The first issue I have here is that this kind of researcher or development agent knows nothing about the complexities and contextualities of the community and their potential problems. The second is that they are applying their development gaze to formulate judgments related to what the community "should" aspire to, assuming that the community has a problem and doesn't know how to solve it.[25]

Our K4C goals in community based participatory research are primarily oriented toward shifting such perspectives of community, at both a local and global level. We do this by insisting that research and development ideas must come from within the community so as to be based in cultural, social, and historical understanding. We ask our participants to reflect on their own underlying frames for making sense of the world and dig deeper into their assumptions about success and what those might be. We ask them to conduct research in a community in which they personally participate. The "participative" element of participatory research is therefore mostly directed at the researcher. By participating in a community, they will be able to see the wealth that exists in the diversity of talents and experiences in all communities.

This is a seemingly simple but often difficult task for the researcher or development agent. They are hesitant to think that their own lives may be in need of improvement and are more comfortable fixing people they don't know. Often researchers participate in their

[24] Catherine Odora Hoppers, foreword to *Bridging Knowledge Cultures: Rebalancing Power in the Co-Construction of Knowledge*, eds. Walter Lepore et al. (Brill, 2023), xi–xiv.

[25] On the concept of the "gaze," see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988), 277–316.

communities but are hesitant to conduct research in them, or they do not recognize that they are undertaking research or projects within them. This mindset is in turn connected to how they are defining community in oppositional terms, as discussed above. Such researchers or development agents also see participating in community improvement as part of their paid work, with community engagement outside of their scope. Moreover, they may feel dependent on grants to do community work. This is connected to the desire to be paid for community work as well as to a notion that community work requires cash. Part of the dependency is also related to top-down and short-term grants that pull people away from longer-term relationships and projects.

We strongly urge researchers to move away from the dependency complex which has infiltrated the world of community change. The K4C suggests that research and development is a way of life, not a paid endeavor. We hope that they see that community development is a continuous process that depends on healthy relationships, first and foremost. Communities have a remarkable wealth of experiences, skills, and knowledge; to reduce these to nothing based on an assessment of fiscal wealth is epistemically unjust and disempowering.

In our Gulu K4C hub, we instead assume an approach to community engagement and development that begins with skills, knowledge and experiences rather than waiting for finance. We have shared visions and long-term goals related to sustainable peace, environment sustainability, and lifelong learning. We work toward these goals together with a diverse group of partners who bring with them remarkable passion, experiences, and talents. When we do come across opportunities for research or development projects, we find ourselves in an informed position to engage in proposals and work that leads to meaningful change and contributes to the long-term goals of our communities. We observe that, in reality, we can realize significant change in our communities with little to no external money. For example, we have developed an herbal medicine program at Gulu University that includes an herbal medicine garden in a local village setting within university land, where herbal doctors practice and research in a context where they feel comfortable. We also host regular gatherings with elders around the fireside to collectively discuss relevant issues. In this space, we have built several local-style buildings and a public washroom with almost no external funding.[26]

So What is Development, or, What is Success?

> The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral

[26] For a detailed overview of this work, see David Monk et al., "Engaging in a Movement of Cognitive Justice at the Gulu University K4C Hub, Uganda," in *Bridging Knowledge Cultures*, eds. Walter Lepore et al. (Brill, 2023), 133–57.

> courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as we have defined it.
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> —David Orr, professor of environmental education[27]

In the K4C movement, we first seek to inquire and negotiate what we see as individual and collective aspirations and visions of success in development work. We interrogate the underlying assumptions of why and how we are deciding on this, think about what different visions might be, and ask how we might be able to accommodate them.[28]

I like to use a simple arts-based exercise with my students to engage with the question of development. I ask them to draw a picture that represents development to them. Usually, the answers represent a stereotypical techno/industrial/modernist/urban vision. Paved roads, big cars, schools, malls, skyscrapers, cell phones, and the like. After they share their responses, I then ask them to draw another picture, this time of a healthy community. Inevitably, they draw pictures of trees, fresh air and water, food gardens, homes with some happy chickens and goats, along with happy people living in peaceful coexistence. (Remember that Gulu, where I live and teach, is a post-conflict and rural area.) The difference in the pictures really brings forth an idea of what people are told by media and development agents about what development and progress is meant to be (urban and financially oriented) and what they feel is a good life (rooted in the environment and caring). In between comes all of the complexities of people's diverse aspirations for the status of development and progress and achievement of healthy lives. These are not always at odds with each other. But they are definitely different. Money and status drive the development question. Relationships and care drive the healthy life question.

The points I am trying to illustrate here are: first, that assumptions and generalizations that equate modernity and capitalism with progress are very influential as starting points in development thought and that this is a problem; and second, that in actuality communities and societies have very diverse aspirations for their lives, which need to be collectively negotiated even though they often are not. In other words, development should be an accumulation of multiple stories and visions that are constantly changing. However, more often than not it is imposed on individuals and societies based on a capitalist urban-centric perspective that devalues rural life. The assumptions are fundamentally the symptom of an epistemic problem which creates a single story of what success is and a singularly defined pathway to achieving it. In order to overcome this deficit, we need to expand our capacity for thinking and imagining beyond our habits for understanding the world so that, when we

[27] David W. Orr, foreword to *Ecological Literacy: Educating Our Children for a Sustainable World*, eds. Michael K. Stone and Zenobia Barlow (Sierra Club Books, 2005), x.

[28] David Monk et al., "South-South Networks Catalysing Social Responsibility in Higher Education," *African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement* 2, no. 1 (2025): 94–114.

come across difference or something we don't understand, we take up the opportunity to learn rather than arrogantly dismiss it as nonsense.

Drawing on Ekin Birol, Odora Hoppers states that "it is clear that it is impossible to create a well-functioning society and a way of approaching livelihoods and human security from a knowledge base that excludes the knowledge-holders in real time. It is what has made 'development' as we have known it fundamentally inadequate, seriously incomplete, and in many instances mistaken in its basic assumptions."[29] I agree with Professor Odora Hoppers. It seems to me that we need to pause our incessant rush for more and let time sweep us up in the questions of what for? Who for? Why?

We also need to consider our current model's repercussions and perhaps seek out alternative approaches to thinking about life and success and the world we are trying to create. Rural and smallholder farmers are people we can learn from. On the one hand, this is because they often have been left out of the academic and policy decision-making spaces. On the other hand, this is because they often have a much stronger connection than urban dwellers to the broader-than-human world and the realities of coexisting with nature over generations, as a result of figuring out how to maintain a self-sustaining food supply. Ultimately, I have found that the wisdom and wealth of the rural communities where I have lived, though in completely different parts of the world, are similarly nourishing in mind, body, and spirit, and as such offer enormous potential to shape a shared pathway to greater planetary well-being.

[29] Catherine A. Odora Hoppers, "THINK PIECE: Cognitive Justice and Integration Without Duress - The Future of Development Education—Perspectives from the South," *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning* 7, no. 2 (2015): 93.

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