
The Commitment Mural: Let's Decolonize Evaluation Together

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Background: Since the publication of the first journal in 1665, the purpose of journal articles has remained unchanged despite the various changes in form of the journal itself. Traditional rigid publication standards have resulted in a lack of access for Majority World practitioners, leading to a skewed production and documentation of knowledge. The process of decolonizing monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) requires not just a rethinking and redoing of how, why and for whom MEL is carried out, but also of how learning is generated and documented, whose voices are heard and through which media.

Purpose: To reimagine the roles of journals in the process of decolonizing from being an instrument of knowledge transfer and career progression to becoming a site for an action and change through ongoing and simultaneous act of knowledge coproduction, transfer, and diffusion.

Setting: In the first phase a mural was co-created with inputs from monitoring evaluation and learning practitioners across a range of organizations using the network of The Movement for Community-led Development; ongoing data will be generated through a live google form embedded in the article. The article is therefore an active site of data collection and knowledge production.

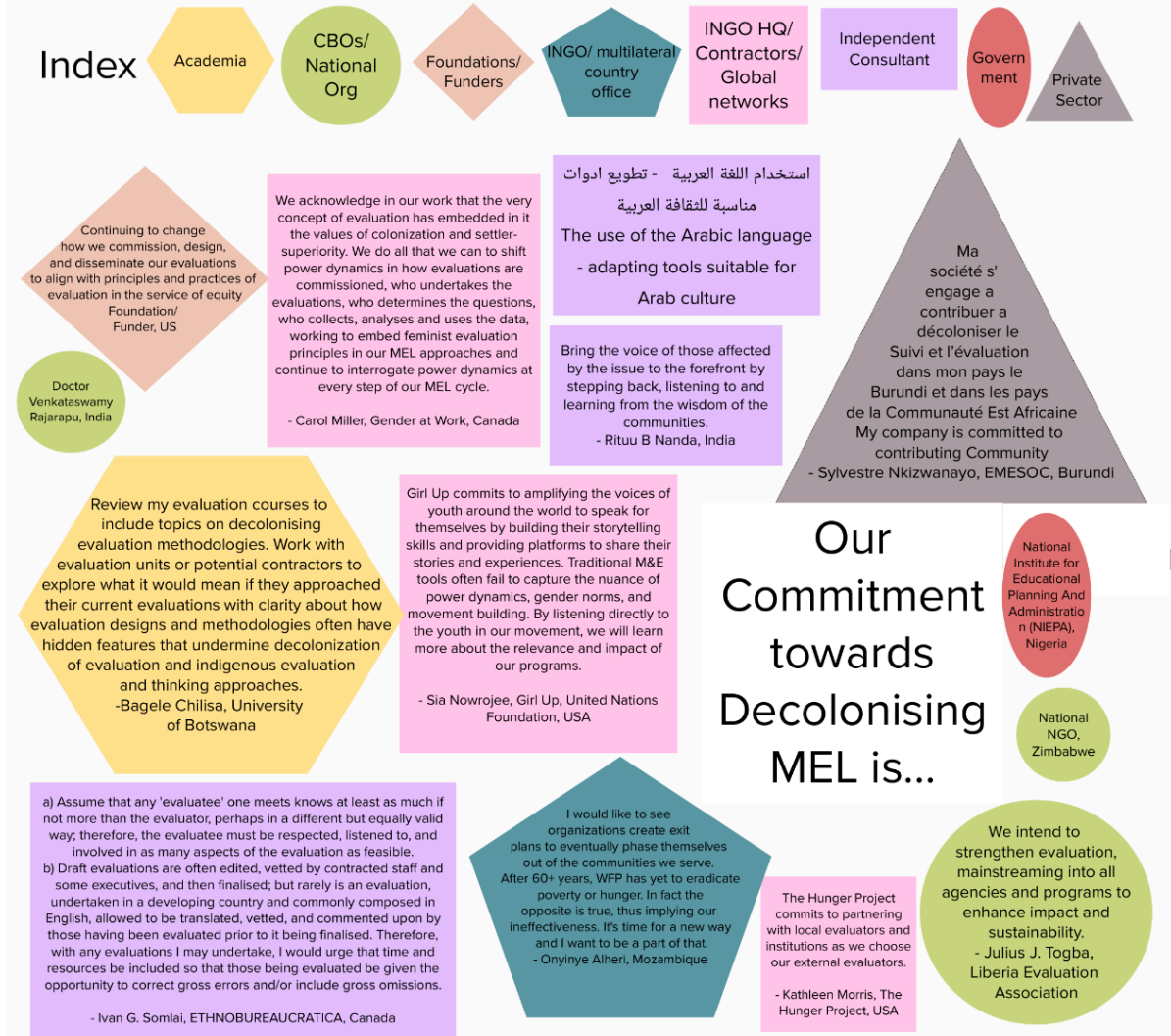
Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: Not applicable.

Data Collection and Analysis: Data Collection is ongoing through a google form. Analysis will be done by readers as they go through the mural itself.

Findings: Not applicable.

Keywords: *decolonization; shifting power; journal structures; decolonize evaluation; engineering serendipity; collaboration*







Note: This mural and article have been possible due to all of the cocreators who participated in this exercise (many of whom chose to keep their names in the mural) and due to Noah Greenspan, the student who put the first mural together for our team. The thoughts and ideas in the mural itself are therefore owned by all who have participated in it.

Introduction

The traditional publication structures rigidly adhered to by journals make them inaccessible for Majority World practitioners (often referred to paternalistically as the “Global South”) unless they adopt dominant frameworks and ways of expression. The audience for academic and scholarly journals is predominantly communities of evaluators and scholars schooled in formal Western evaluation paradigms, theories, and models. This has resulted in a skewed production and documentation of knowledge, marginalizing and often invisibilizing knowledge and learning from

the Majority World—learning curated through methods and languages that are culturally rooted or innovative in their search for greater equity.

Decolonizing evaluation, therefore, requires a rethinking and redoing not just of how, why and for whom monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) is carried out, but also of how learning is generated and documented, whose voices are heard and through which media. It requires a rethinking of the role of journals in MEL. In this article we propose that journals can be spaces for mobilizing practitioners and other evaluation stakeholders to act. The article calls evaluation practitioners and funders to action through an interactive reflection

tool, a mural An active link ¹ ensures that practitioners can continue to add commitments even after the publication of the article.

The article is a challenge to journals and publishers to rethink their roles in the publication space. Can they become a medium to urge evaluation practitioners and stakeholders to action; can they influence the choice of methods of knowledge production, documentation, dissemination, and follow-up? Often journals publishing a special issue solicit follow-up by requesting that readers react to the articles. With online journal publishing, creating follow-up links can evolve into an ongoing engagement among practitioners committed to decolonizing evaluation. In the trial of this publication strategy, the focus of the publication is action to bring change, instead of only reporting on good practices that bring about change.

The article is an attempt to explore ways in which nontraditional methods of publishing can shift evaluations from being instruments used by the “Global North” to appraise the “worth, motivation or achievement” (Dean-Coffrey, as cited in Donnelly, 2020) of “Global South” actors to becoming spaces that trigger cocreation, learning, and growth. By moving beyond rigid publication methods, could MEL turn into an instrument for appreciation, motivation, and change? Could the use of nonconforming structures make the “knowledge” and “learning” generated accessible for non-MEL professionals and non-native English speakers?

This article does not answer these questions. Rather, it is an active process to produce these answers through engineered serendipity ² using digital spaces. This marks another departure from established practice, in which journals “refine and define information and act as a scientific filter.” Even today, journal articles continue to retain the same purpose as they did in 1665 when the first journal was published: registration of claims, certification (through peer review), dissemination, and archiving (Rallison, 2015). Here, we reimagine the article not just as an instrument of knowledge transfer and career progression but as an ongoing and simultaneous act of knowledge coproduction, transfer, and diffusion.

¹ <https://forms.gle/iWbqwPvSiHrhSvNx7>

² In the world of entrepreneurship, engineered serendipity is a state of mind and property of social networks that leads to innovation through a casual collision of ideas (Lindsay, 2014). One of the few studies on the impact of engineered serendipity on knowledge production found that “engineered serendipity creates opportunities for synergistic collaborations over the

Our Approach

We see this article as an active step in the process of decolonizing evaluation. In responding to the special issue on decolonization, we chose to engage the journal as a site for mobilizing practitioners and stakeholders in a long-term process of decolonizing evaluation. Is there a future for action journal publication through nontraditional methods? Through posts on select networks of MEL professionals and civil society organizations, we invited practitioners to submit their commitment to decolonizing evaluation in a language of their choice, using either visuals or text. Respondents were asked to complete a sentence which read, “Our commitment towards decolonizing MEL in 2022 is...” In the first phase of this exercise, we decided to use an interactive visual tool (mural) to document the commitments submitted via Google forms. The choice was deliberate. People do not need to read through dense material in a non-native language to see how others are thinking about decolonizing. They can directly read people’s commitments in their own words and interpret them to inform their own strategies for decolonization. Our assumption is that asking people to make a public commitment will:

1. Apprise us of the direction the MEL field in international development is taking: Participants’ and organizations’ willingness and ability to make a public commitment would reflect personal and organizational constraints to decolonizing.
2. Create momentum for decolonizing evaluation: Putting our name to something publicly forces us to think deeply about it and brings in a level of accountability.
3. Generate new ideas and motivation: Decolonizing can be a painful and often lonely process. By seeing the commitments of others, we realize that we are not alone. We can gain not just ideas, but allies. If we are fence-sitters, we can get inspired or even forced to take action when we see the field moving in this direction.

long-run that have the potential to broaden collaboration networks and reshape research trajectories.” (Lane, 2021) Here we are seeking to engineer serendipity through the use of digital technology not just to trigger a process of simultaneous knowledge transfer, production, and diffusion, but to do so in an inclusive manner.

Learning and Reflections

For this article, we chose to not include a section summarizing and interpreting the data generated through the mural. Cocreation of the mural is a live process, and our hope is that this article will continue to bring more commitments (data points). Thus, the process of data summarization and interpretation for this article will also have to be ongoing—carried out by the readers, based on the data that is available at the time they are reading this article. By participating in the mural, the reader will become both a new data point and a knowledge producer in this mural. Moreover, our objective is not to confine people to our frames of interpretation, which are limited by our own contexts. Instead, we seek to hold the space for everyone to examine and interpret the mural through the lens of their own experience and context. What we share here are some limitations of our process and the learnings and reflections it generated for us.

There is a growing recognition of the need to decolonize MEL: The notion that MEL approaches are universal, apolitical, and devoid of the history of colonialism that speaks to the “white man’s burden”³ of civilizing the Majority World is under question. This was a quick, low-cost exercise to seek commitments from practitioners and organizations to decolonize MEL. The commitment form was initially open only for 14 days. It was circulated electronically and only in English in networks where the Movement for Community-Led Development (MCLD),⁴ a global consortium of civil society organizations committed to shifting the power in international development, had access. While a large network, MCLD’s membership is heavily skewed towards community-based organizations from the Majority World that do not have MEL practitioners. It has over 1,500 local civil society organizations and 72 INGOs as its members. Also admittedly, its INGO members already recognize the power asymmetries that characterize international development and humanitarian spaces. In 2 weeks, 64 people from 25 countries responded. To this we, as coauthors, added our own commitments. Over 86% of the respondents (57 people) felt ready to make a commitment, either for themselves or on behalf of their organizations, while just 2 felt their commitment would make no difference. We recognize that despite the invitation,

many people who were not ready to commit probably did not fill out the form. Nevertheless, the fact that so many professionals from some of the largest INGOs, development partners (traditionally called funders), academia, government, and community-based organizations responded, is telling.

Yet, organizations are wary of making public commitments: Many professionals put in personal commitments, because making an organizational commitment to decolonizing required clearances at the highest level. Some organizations were too large and bureaucratic to build a consensus on the issue within 14 days. Others feared how their investors, development partners, and boards of directors would react to such a public commitment. Would their commitment be construed as a tacit acknowledgement of prevailing colonial and racist practices by their own organizations? Would it impact their reputation and funding flows? For bilateral funders, there was also the concern of how the taxpayers (and therefore the government structures) would react to such a public statement. Consequently, 41% of the participants requested that their organization names not be listed (or did not belong to any specific organization). Encouragingly, though, only 4 out of the 66 respondents (including the bylined authors) requested complete anonymity. The rest were willing to be identified by name or organization, even if they were not ready to make a commitment yet.

Practitioners need opportunities to trigger change: The exercise provided professionals committed to decolonization with ammunition to trigger these conversations within their own organizations. This was especially true of the INGOs and the development partners. At least three large development partners wrote to us saying they were trying to build an organizational consensus on the issue and would need time (but the conversation had started), or that they would like to make a commitment but were unsure about what it would entail.

Different stakeholders are beginning to step up: Corsetti notes that an “unprecedented number of organisations based in the Global North” (2022, para. 5) are committing to decolonizing evaluation by naming racism and stating their intentions to examine and reform their relationship with those

³ “The White Man’s Burden,” a poem written in 1899 by Rudyard Kipling, presents as white people’s selfless

moral duty the conquering of non-white races, whom they believed to be less developed.

⁴ You can read more about MCLD at mclcd.org.

based in the Majority World. In this article, the mural is color- and shape-coded to represent the organization types for the commitments that were made. The shape coding was added to make the mural more accessible for those with color blindness. Not surprisingly, a large majority of participants who made commitments in the first phase comprised people from INGOs, particularly those based out of organizational headquarters. Participants also included a significant number of independent consultants (23%). But what was truly encouraging for us were the commitments made by professionals from the Majority World, academia, and even the private sector. Decolonizing begins with each one of us, and commitments from the Majority World show a recognition among professionals that inequities and colonial practices are embedded in their way of thinking and doing as well. India (17%) recorded the highest number of responses from a country after the United States (23%). This could, however, be because the MEL networks tapped were primarily populated by professionals from these two countries.

Cocreation of knowledge needs to be acknowledged: Confidentiality is a huge part of ethics in research, and most of the time the contribution of participants to knowledge generation goes unacknowledged even when they wish for their names to appear in evaluation research reports (Chilisa, 2009, 2020). In this cocreation exercise, people had the choice to stay anonymous or to be recognized. A vast majority (79%) chose to put their names on the mural. This is important because it will allow people to spot allies within their own networks, even as they take ownership of their own commitments. We believe this process will result in a mutual accountability mechanism.

Language matters: The very limited number of responses in languages other than English came as a surprise. However, since we had only issued the call in English and through English-speaking networks, this should have been expected. An important learning for us was that even when we choose nontraditional methods, we need to be more intentional about language accessibility, because linguistic subjugation has always been (and continues to be) both an instrument of colonialism and a form of colonial violence (Ravishankar, 2020; Vitantonio, 2022).

Technology presents an opportunity but also needs to be decolonized: Given the number of people from the Majority World in the technology space, one can sometimes forget how technology itself perpetuates

colonialism. For this exercise, we chose Google Forms as a platform because new technology platforms can be daunting. Yet Google does not support use of multiple languages in the same form. Moreover, its file upload feature is not intuitive. Those wanting to submit responses in a different language or using audio, video, or art files had to therefore write to us and submit the commitment via email. This additional step may explain the lack of language and medium diversity in the submitted commitments. Only one respondent expressed a desire to work directly on the mural board to add and make a commitment through artwork. Even this respondent felt stymied by the limitations of the platform and eventually decided to submit a written commitment. Thus, while technology and an online journal present us with an opportunity to engineer serendipity without physical colocation and turn journal articles into sites of ongoing knowledge production and transfer, the existing technological tools limit the process of decolonizing by privileging certain colonial languages and forms of expression. Further, as authors we acknowledge the irony of using a platform (Google) that has itself been accused of digital colonization (Kwet, 2019).

Conclusion

Commitments made in this mural complement, corroborate, and extend other voices on the need to decolonize evaluation in international development (McKay, 2022; Villanueva, 2021). Development partners (funders) in this mural commit to reimagining evaluation commissioning and design and redressing power structures in their organizations to question racism and address equity issues in evaluation. Community-based organizations, independent consultants, and academics commit to questioning methodological colonialism (Villanueva, 2021) and adopting strategies for meaningful engagement with communities using and envisioning tools embedded in the worldviews of the communities and communicating in their languages. The private sector and academia further speak to the need to address pedagogical colonialism (Tarsilla, 2014; S2SE, 2018) by either committing to curricular revisions or strengthening the capacity of evaluators from the Majority World.

Evaluation voices heard through the Maori evaluation framework (Kerry, 2012), the Made in Africa evaluation framework (Chilisa, 2015), the Eastern paradigm of evaluation (Russon, 2008), and many other evolving decolonial frameworks address relationship building and dissemination strategies in evaluation. These frameworks call for

relationship building as a fundamental principle that should guide every aspect of evaluation. Researchers and evaluators are, for example, called upon to build long-standing relationships with communities (Chilisa, 2020). The use of a mural in this article is an attempt to reimagine the role of journals in knowledge production. Can journals accept diverse ways of communicating knowledge that are inclusive and build relationships among evaluation stakeholders? Can they establish long-standing relationships with evaluation practitioners and stakeholders? Can they serve as a space for action and change? Can they reshape how we think about knowledge, data, and evidence, and how we generate, interpret, and use them?

In this proposed action publishing, the responses and commitments not only give us a sense of how people are thinking about decolonizing MEL, but also allow us to critically reflect on our own role in the decolonizing process, personally and organizationally. It expands the “us” from the byline of this article to everyone who has been and will continue to become part of this cocreation exercise through their commitments and follow-up action. Even before the mural closed for the first round of this exercise, participants and collaborators began to inquire about the next steps in the process. Our inquiry into the change we can expect to see has become a catalyst for the change itself.

The next steps in the process will be decided collaboratively with all participants. Our intention is to ask people who have made commitments to cocreate an accountability mechanism. We will ask them how we can individually and collectively realize the vision outlined in the commitment mural and how will we know that we have realized that vision.

The responses and conversations triggered through this mural clearly showed us how the field of evaluation is currently being shaped by those who control the funds. The wariness of organizations to make public commitments that might trigger “donors” highlights the need for a wider engagement with development partners on this issue. What will this engagement look like? At the same time, the responses from the development partners show that they are not averse to the idea of decolonizing—just wary and unsure. Could the set

of conversations we open with this mural address this? Only time will tell.

Meanwhile, we will continue the process of engineering serendipity inclusively, by converting this mural into an ongoing exercise. All readers of this article can become a part of this process of decolonizing knowledge production and transfer by making their own commitments in the mural⁵ through this live link.⁶ We will input new responses received through the form on to the mural on a monthly basis. Every quarter after the publication of the article we will take a snapshot of the mural. We encourage you to do the same. These snapshots will help us map the trajectory of commitments to decolonizing evaluations. Will more organizations be willing to step up? Will the pattern of colors and shapes change to reveal commitments by more development partners or academics? Will there be more responses by non-English speakers, more pictures and voices instead of words? Will the commitments be more specific or more ambitious, or will they just be repeated year after year with little progress?

All of this remains to be seen. But, if you are reading this article, we have already taken another step together in decolonizing evaluation and opening up spaces for expression of thought. Let's continue onward. Join us as we make this change!

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⁶ You can input your commitments for the mural at <https://forms.gle/6dFSQ6NUSHEpr249>. Through this form you can submit commitments as visuals, videos, or

audio. If you have questions or suggestions or face difficulty in filling out the commitment form, or if you would like to submit a commitment in your language, write to gunjan.veda@mclcd.org and mankhachilisa@gmail.com.

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