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The future as a public good: decolonising the future through anticipatory participatory action research

Robin Bourgeois, Geci Karuri-Sebina and Kwamou Eva Feukeu

Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to nurture reflections on the colonization of the future in the present with a particular focus on Africa. This paper aims at exploring how participatory research and particularly anticipatory action research can contribute to a decolonising process.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Considering the future as a public good, this paper develops a reflection on the colonization processes that can turn it into a club or a private good. This paper mobilizes the notions of participatory knowledge production and local action research as a way to decolonize the future and empower imagination. This paper revisits the tenets of participatory action research as a means to achieve this objective and discusses the main features of a non-colonial anticipatory action research in the context of African futures.*

Findings – *This paper highlights the challenges associated with connecting anticipatory endeavours focusing on action research, the creation of collective intelligence and co-design, with the intention of encouraging the decolonisation process. It includes design principles and anticipates a possible process of counter-decolonization.*

Research limitations/implications – *This is a conceptual paper, which does not provide field-tested evidence. Yet, the authors hope it serves as an input enabling to design methodologies that will prevent the colonisation of the future when engaging in future-oriented research activities in Africa and elsewhere.*

Originality/value – *This paper provides an integral approach to the colonisation of the future, as a renewed old question. This paper also connects this process with a reflection on the nature of what could be non-colonizing anticipatory action research.*

Keywords *Anticipation, Public good, Participatory action research, Coloniality, Decolonising futures, Futures literacy*

Paper type *Conceptual paper*

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Introduction

The growing decolonial literature has often drawn attention to the destruction or foreclosure of alternatives to predetermined colonial worldviews (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Dabashi, 2015; Santos, 1992). It has hinted at "stolen futures" in which individuals, groups, peoples and nations, especially from the South, are denied other trajectories and what could have been in the absence of coloniality (Feukeu, 2022; Fanon, 1952). These thinkers have focused largely on the role of colonisation in past narratives and narratives of the past and yet, colonisation may linger because of its hold on narratives of the future. This multi-dimensional phenomenon is known as coloniality, transcending the historical marker of colonisation (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012; Lugones, 2008; Quijano and Ennis, 2000).

For over three centuries, colonisation has been experienced worldwide as the systemic imposition of particular, exclusive or definite ways of sensing, knowing, understanding and surmising that precludes or discredits all others (Mendoza, 2020; Santos, 2014;

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Césaire, 1950). Influenced by postcolonial and decolonial movements, African policymakers (from Thomas Sankara to Aminata Dramane Traoré) have denounced the economic and political implications of colonialism, and foreseen the consequences of systemic impoverishment and North–South interdependency (Boudet, 2021; Nubukpo, *et al.* 2016; Mehmet, 1999).

Over time, activist articulations of decolonising as a concept, aspiration and praxis have demonstrated the connection of their economic and cultural critiques to a wider epistemological concern: requiring the power to define what knowledge is, by whom and for whom. Their claims gave priority to the (re)valorisation of Southern thoughts and knowledge-production systems (see, for example, Odora Hoppers, 2000; Spivak, 1988; Thiong'o, 1986). This development generated two fundamental realisations relevant to futures studies:

1. the possibility and need for methodological alternatives; and
2. the possibility that the future has been or could be commodified in light of prevalent coloniality.

Firstly, this holistic understanding of colonisation has opened up methodological alternatives and motivated societies (and their peoples) to shift away from, and refuse to conform to, a single image of what is true, believable and real (Akomolafe, 2015; Santos, 2014; Smith, 2000). It invites consideration of novel or unheard-of ways of being in the making.

Secondly, coloniality emerges from the commodification of all natural resources from water to human bodies as legally marketable goods. Futures scholars are encouraged to question whether something that does not exist but affects all parts of human life, i.e. the future, would be or has been exploited as a resource that can be stolen. But because the future is imaginary, what could be exploited in the present are the perceptions that we have of the future, that is, our imaginations. Imaginations are the images of the future that we can hold; Césaire (1950) described them as our "archives of the present" (Kisukidi, 2020).

Futures studies essentially examine why and how we use our imagination (WFSF, 2019). Imagination deals with the power of the mind to see and to form and hold images, concepts, descriptions and representations that do not exist or have not been physically experienced (yet) (Savransky, 2017; Santos, 1992). This ability to see and perceive with our minds phenomena that do not yet exist is essential to creating new forms, reforming old paradigms and thinking about and (re)inventing our futures as spaces of possibility (Sen, 1999), or sensing and making sense of novelty (Miller, 2011).

One of the critical arguments made for decolonising our imaginations is that our built (non-biological) systems – education systems, political systems, physical and social environments, cultures, worldviews, etc. – are based on, or were heavily influenced by, systems and values inherited from colonial periods that we mistakenly assume to only be a relic of the past (Feukeu, 2022; Kwazema, 2021). In fact, these colonial conditions and forces not only affected our unevenly shared past, but also continue to persist in our perceptions, imaginations and representations of both the present and the future today (Nandy, 1996). However, futures scholars and practitioners have yet to pay closer attention to coloniality's impact on our capacity to anticipate, our anticipatory assumptions and our capacity to use the future and our imaginations.

The question is how to extricate our imaginations from the confines of these rooted norms and structures. How can we think about, or rethink, our own futures in a manner that is neither determined nor restricted by the inherited structures and that does not perpetuate their existence, thereby opening them up to the actual possibility of freedom of choice? Decolonising our collective and individual imaginations appears to be urgent to open up to revolutionary thinking and alternative "utopias", and to see beyond the dominant narratives that are continuously held up to us as the only relevant images (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012).

However, the aim should not be to replace one form of colonisation with another. The case is being made for opening up to, and not closing, possible imaginaries.

If we accept the case that decoloniality is about freeing imagination within various actors and contexts, which reclaims power and agency, then it raises the question: how do we decolonise our collective and individual imaginations? What approaches enable us to diversify our images of the future beyond those the colonial hegemony deems acceptable? How do we get beyond the limited images that the global media, conventional systems of education and governance and mainstream narratives preserve and feed to us?

This paper explores this field of inquiry with the purpose of inviting reflection on the processes that colonise the future in the present, and then offering some ideas for how research – and particularly action-oriented research – might contribute to a decolonising process. Starting with the argument that the future is a "public good" that has been turned into a club or a private good, this essay then articulates the colonising processes the future has undergone. We offer then participatory knowledge production and local action research as one important way to decolonise the future and liberate imagination.

Revealing the colonisation of the future

Using the future as a public good

There is no fact about the future, as by definition, a "fact" is something that is known or proven to be true. Humans can make no statement about the future that one would considered as a fact since its veracity or truth is unknown and unknowable at the time it is made. All that can be said about the future is based on how we perceive it, how we imagine it. The future has at best the attributes of a kind of knowledge that is not based on facts, but on skills acquired through sense, experience or education; knowledge that is not about what the future *will* be, but what the futures *could* be.

Over the past decade, advances in the discipline of anticipation (Miller *et al.*, 2018), a discipline focusing on how humans use the future in the present (Rhisiart *et al.*, 2015), have introduced new concepts such as "anticipatory systems" and "anticipatory assumptions" (Rossel, 2010; Miller, 2011). Going further on, they have provided insights about the existence of different anticipatory systems and assumptions and their implications in using the future (Miller, 2018). One of these implications is that every human is equipped with anticipatory systems and implicitly or explicitly uses the future in the present. This means the future is a resource, and as such, it can be used in various ways to the benefit of its users.

We argue here that this resource, the future, has in theory all the attributes of a public good as defined in economics – as a good that is simultaneously non-excludable and non-rival (Oakland, 1987). The future qualifies as a non-excludable good because it is impossible to exclude anyone from consuming (that is, using) the future given that this ability is inherent to the anticipatory systems that we all possess (Miller, 2018). It is also a non-rivalrous good because its consumption or use does not affect its availability for subsequent use; we can all imagine as much as we wish to.

However, just like other resources, the intrinsic quality of the future as a public good does not prevent it from being captured and turned into an impure public good, which is defined as a public good that meets non-rivalry and non-excludability only to a certain extent. This transformation can go further to shifting the essence of the future from being a public good to being treated as a "club good", meaning that its use becomes restricted to, and controlled or dominated by, a certain group of individuals or institutions. This can go even further, changing the future into a completely private good, which others have to pay to access, meaning that those who cannot afford it cannot use it (Appadurai, 2013).

This may sound abstract, but in fact, there is past evidence of the future being treated as a club good, restricting others from using it. Such "clubs" included social castes (such as pythonesses and shamans) and religious organisations (sects, confessional organisations). The transformation of the future into a private good is also ancient, with common people paying specialised professionals who knew how to use the future (oracles, fortune-tellers, soothsayers, mediums). Alleged mastery of technological devices (crystal ball, trance, tarot, bones reading[. . .]) was a common means of exclusion, often justifying the constitution and operation of these "clubs".

Today this situation endures with updated forms of institutions and technologies. The new clubs are made of institutions or individuals who master complex technologies. Mathematical models, sophisticated qualitative tools and methods have substituted crystal balls and bones reading. The new clubs are made of international organisations, and Western or BRICS research centres and private think tanks, which dominate the production of imaginaries about the future (Bourgeois and Sette, 2017; Jeflea *et al.*, 2021). New professional associations specialised in using the future have emerged. As a result, specialists can perpetuate the privatisation of the future as an economic business, selling their competences to those who believe that the future is a matter of professional authority. This does not mean that one epistemology is better or worse than another is; what we point out here is that the existing power relationships that are linked to the production and control of images of the future can be analysed through the prism of the future as a good.

This age-old and enduring transmutation of the future from a public to a club or a private good is what we call here *colonising the future*. This is not just about who has a monopoly in the production of images of the future, but about who controls whom and how these images are produced. It operates across, as well as within, countries and cultures, across social strata in a fashion that abides by colonial patterns denounced by Southern decolonial thinkers (Feukeu *et al.*, 2021; Paradies, 2020; Andreotti *et al.*, 2019). A Southern lens is therefore seen as pertinent to analysing the implications (Singh, 2019; Kwazema, 2021).

Colonising the future: a renewed "old" question

As early as 1975, futures scholars were asking questions about the future being subject to colonisation (Dator, 2005). For some, Futures studies were "becoming the tool for the colonization of the last frontier — the non-Western future itself" (Sardar, 1993, p. 187). There is evidence that Western thinking has shaped the practice of using the future as an established stream of knowledge (Kelly, 2002). The Westernisation of mind-sets and behaviours has resulted in the marginalisation of several parts of the human society, particularly non-Western cultures, women, and all categories of people whose future is determined by others (Gunnarsson-Östling, 2011).

International agricultural research and development actors, for example, determine the future of African farmers (Bourgeois *et al.*, 2017) and non-African organisations still produce most of the recent publications on the future of agriculture and agrifood systems, health and technology and innovation systems in Africa. In 1994, OECD and Club du Sahel made of a majority of Western countries prepared "A vision for West Africa in the year 2020" under the leadership of Western experts (Cour and Snrech, 1998). Altogether Western minds undertake global works on the future on a diversity of topics with a stunning absence of Africans.

The narrow understanding of futures as a Western area of expertise to be taught to Southern actors is contemporary to the lack of Southern or minority actors in the field. Dating back to the early 1990s after a series of economic oil and cocoa crises in West Africa, the UNDP has trained civil servants from over five West African countries to plan 5-, 10- and 20-year scenario schemes (Sall, 2003). The existence of ministries of planning, foresight and development in countries such as Ivory Coast or Togo, or the current "2040 Ivory Coast"

and even the African Union's "2063 Agenda" are remnants of the era (Karuri-Sebina, 2020). The future is seen as a tool to be mastered, tamed to fit humans' needs. Although we rarely question whose interests lie behind the humans' needs they serve.

It must be acknowledged that the dissemination of these futuring capabilities were institutionalised through formations such as the UNDP African Futures Programme through which futures exercises were carried out under the OAU (now African Union) and numerous African states during the 1980s and 1990s. Through the inclusion of African leads and teams, these efforts began to explore methodologies that were more grounded and participatory (Kwazema, 2021; Adesida and Oteh, 2004; Sall, 2003; Adesida, 1996). However, the conventional frame for the application of futures methods and use of the future remained primarily northern.

We revisit in this paper this "old" but enduring question with a renewed angle, considering the future as a resource.

Dimensioning the colonisation process

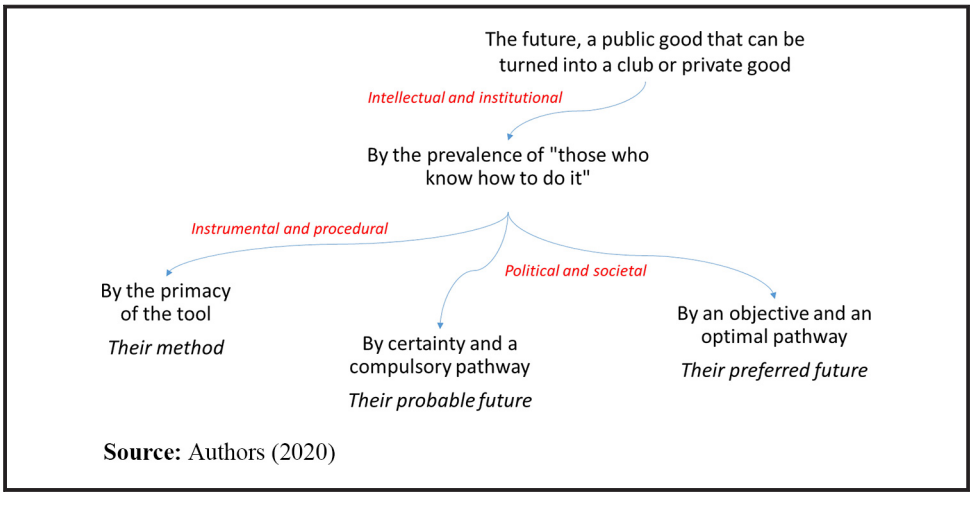
It is proposed that the colonisation of the future connects three primary dimensions: an intellectual and institutional one, an instrumental and procedural one, and a political and societal one (Figure 1).

The intellectual and institutional dimension

The intellectual and institutional dimension of the colonisation of the future consists of having the colonised anticipatory systems dominated by "those who know better"; in other words, an elite (a club) or a profession (business) captures the use of the future. Sardar (1993, pp. 179, 183), at his times, identified this elite as "white, mainly American, male scholars" who "control the discipline and decide who is and who is not important in, and what is and what is not important for the field". This elite colonises the tomorrow by imposing its present perception or imaginary of the future either as a target to achieve, or as something to be prepared for.

The future as a public good tends to become a club good when norms and barriers of entry are established, such as having to be recognised by a community of peers, or possessing a degree in futures studies/foresight or similar branding. So the future can become a club good through established practices in Futures studies which follow scientific standards that are shaped purely by Western ontologies and epistemologies. The result is the creation of a

Figure 1 Three dimensions of the colonisation of the future



Source: Authors (2020)

group of people who abide by, and reproduce, the same dominant standards. For example, most associations of professional futurists have their own entry rules, with a common rule being the godfathering by members or publishing in recognised journals. When professionals or organisations charge for the use of the future, as a service, the future becomes a private good – the development of private expertise is demonstrated by the proliferation of organisations and experts who make a living from using the future. The recent formalisation of futures literacy, and anticipation as a discipline, could also fall prey to driving an institutional and intellectual colonisation process (Facer and Sriprakash, 2021) unless one sees it as an empowerment process (Bourgeois *et al.*, 2017) and develop a reflexive capacity on their own practice (Mangnus *et al.*, 2021).

The instrumental and procedural dimension

Advances in technologies as well as academic and pragmatic progresses in practices have enlarged the range of tools and methods available to make use of the future. Forecasting models, multi-agent models, serious games, role-playing, future wheels, Delphi, critical uncertainty matrix, co-elaborative scenario building and 3-Horizon graphs are but some of these technological means practitioners have developed to enrich the ways we can use the future. This could have been expected to increase the capacity of lay people to engage in using the future for themselves and collectively. This has not happened as the sophistication of the methods and their associated specialised language turn them into barriers to entry. Diverse tools associated with different anticipatory systems have even created "schools of thought" and lengthy debates among the club of futurists itself, making the entry of "outsiders" even more difficult. The tool (technology) is a barrier that creates either a club because of the ritualistic entry to the discipline and the initial mastery of the tool, or a business because of the cost of learning the tool, which becomes marketable mainly in the form of exclusive expertise.

The political and societal dimension

The two above-mentioned dimensions feed the third dimension of this colonisation process, the political and societal dimension. The latter refers to how "those who know better" share their truth about the future with "those who do not know". This gives full meaning to the expression "colonising the future". When people are convinced that using the future is something that requires particular skills, knowledge and instruments, they are deprived of their capability to use the future by themselves and are imposed futures occupied by others. These futures occupied by others are "used futures" (Inayatullah, 2008) which prevent the imagination of alternative futures.

This process works through two specific anticipatory systems, preparation and planning (Miller, 2015; Poli, 2015), which have an intrinsic power beyond that of the institutions imposing it. This power stems from the idea of using the future as a target. In the case of preparation the power of colonisation comes from the belief that the future is knowable (probabilistic future) and therefore one can be prepared for it as long as one abides by the recommendations of those who know the future. In the case of planning, the power comes from an indisputable societal choice (preferred future) made by those who know how to use the future and frame this choice in accordance with their own perceptions and imaginaries. In both cases, colonising the future separates the "doers" and the "beneficiaries", whereas this dichotomy should not exist because the future is a public good.

The way these three dimensions connect and interact constitute an overall structure of knowledge that decoloniality intends "to delink or detach in order to engage in an epistemic reconstitution [...] [o]f ways of thinking, languages, ways of life and being in the world" (Mignolo, 2017).

To envision decolonising, we come up with the following question:

Q1. What does decolonising an anticipatory system, worldview or episteme mean?

Adopting Buntu (2019) reasoning, a decolonial episteme could lie somewhere in between a combination of the following features:

- produced outside of the established centres of dominant and supposedly colonial or imposed epistemes;
- produced by peoples of/from formerly colonised societies (irrespective of where they are located);
- representing or fitting within the indigenous (and decolonial) ways of thinking and imagining the futures of these "other" – formerly colonised – societies; and
- produced using their "original" epistemes and worldviews, even if not produced by them.

Decolonial methodologies would therefore draw from changing who initiates and documents, where the knowledge originates from, and what is described as acceptable knowledge. This essay focuses on the questions seasoned and novice researchers should ask, for them to challenge and address coloniality in their futuring. Challenging the prevalence of this overall structure of knowledge requires: characterising its features and identifying who and what it affects (Figure 2).

Such a process makes it possible then to decide the extent of the need and possibility to produce an alternative overall structure of knowledge (epistemic reconstitution). The next section is a discussion of this reconstruction, mobilising the methodology of participatory action research (PAR) as a way to escape from the current colonising process.

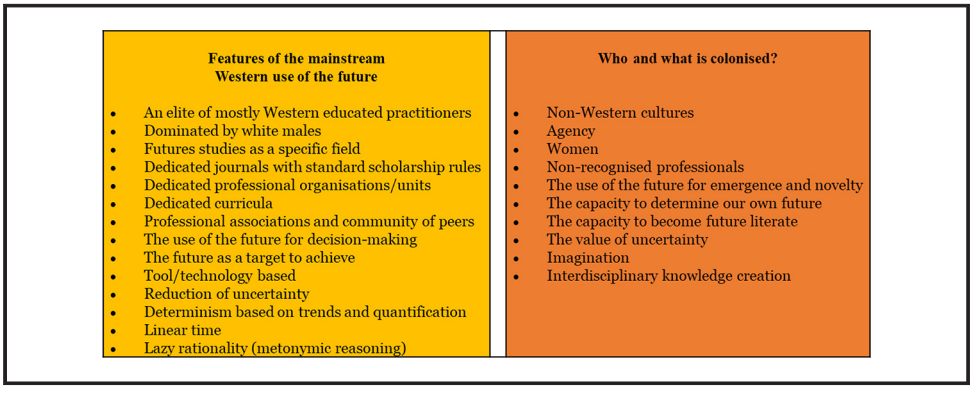
Decolonising the future through participatory action research?

Participatory action research as a decolonising process

PAR is an inclusive, practice-enhancing process that has its roots in the 20th century works of Lewin (1946) from the North, and Freire (1970) from Latin America. As a framework for knowledge creation, it recognises the agency of communities, and is tailored to meet its participants or co-researchers' expectations (Sandoval, 2000).

Their involvement means that the activity is contextualised to nurture reflection on co-researchers' practices and to facilitate the development of scientific theories. In its design, local knowledge, social spheres and networks are crucial for the research process, as no learning can bloom in the absence of learners. The process is an open circle "based on complexity and relationism, complementarity and reciprocity" (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012, p. 14).

Figure 2 Features of the current use of the future and the colonised



This implies that community learning is a never-ending practice and that the object-subject model disappears in favour of the subject-subject model: practitioners proceed to the action research of their own practices, while "the researcher's actions become the practitioners' research" (Robertson, 2000, p. 324).

PAR thus reintroduces "citizenship awareness" or "consciousness" in learning processes. It challenges the laziness of orthodox reason, which is unable to fathom objects that it does not comprehend as part of its whole. The polycentricity of actors, sources and manifestations of knowledge creates non-hierarchical communication and contributes to the blossoming and negotiation of shared meanings. They are attributes of re-exploring the conditions of change for reclaimed, resurgent agency and dissent from the predominantly abstract practices, "understood as mirroring the prevalence of top-down approaches to knowledge construction and the scientific relevance of bottom-up approaches" (Barongo-Muweke, 2016, p. 271).

Aligned with the classification of "power", PAR covers the desire to make informed decisions relevant to one's contexts ("power from"). It also presents the opportunity to affirm oneself against forms of oppression, which first requires detecting pervasive expressions of inequitable power relations (Hollander and Offerman, 1990). Detecting is a first step towards self-recognition beyond the eyes of the other, a self-recognition whose finality is not (only) determined by the other but negotiated with one's community. As such, PAR is a project for social justice and social change and, therefore, committed to "reciprocity, reflexivity, and reflection" (Robertson, 2000, p. 301).

When structured around a community, PAR methods are referred to as community-based participatory research. Their principles emphasise empowerment and community (and individual) capacity-building, through balancing research and action, and ensuring shared reflection, critical dialogue, knowledge co-creation and agency (Israel *et al.*, 1998, quoted in Catalani and Minkler, 2010, p. 425). As such, PAR may be pursued through many means. These include, for example, the reality check approach (immersions into the households of the "unheard"), photovoice (using photographic techniques to identify, represent and enhance the community; Catalani and Minkler, 2010; Wang and Burris, 1997), theatre for development (Abdullahi and Salaudeen, 2017) or digital storytelling (first person voice-storytelling supported by technology combining art therapy with participatory media production, orality and creative writing).

Dealing with exogeneity: from contact spaces to transformative spaces

Participatory approaches result from the perception of research contexts as "transformative spaces" (Schurr and Segebart, 2012, p. 150) or "contact spaces" (Askins and Pain, 2011, p. 803). Herein lies the source of tension within participatory research as practised today: working and walking the fine line of the "indigene-coloniser hyphen" (Jones and Jenkins, 2008, p. 471).

PAR fosters renewed relations between different worlds, or "situated solidarities" in the midst of intersectionality (Nagar and Geiger, 2007, p. 269). Empowerment through creating knowledge emerges from the negotiation between the external researcher and the community addressed. Such research is inherently about external–internal relations, with a blurred identification of the initiating agent, as in the case of exogenous research funding sources but prospectively endogenous calls for projects. Even research aimed at promoting capacity building reflects the power dynamics, which are simultaneously partly the subject of intervention.

Indigenist researchers are encouraged to call out the agenda at play, and to recall the early decolonisation theory that "Afrocentricity is a perspective which allows Africans to be subjects of their own historical experiences rather than objects" (Asante, 1993 quoted by Rigney, 1999, p. 110). This form of Afrocentricity is different from the colonisation-centred

definition of decolonisation. It is conceived as both resurgence and resistance. Resistance is the "emancipatory imperative for indigenist research" (Asante, 1993 quoted by Rigney, 1999, 116). However, reading between the lines of work produced by indigenous researchers, resistance comprises context-induced practices and behaviours, which arise as a philosophy of being in the face of adversity. Context is situated in both time and space: "[t]he "local" that localizes critical theory is always historically specific" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008, p. 12) and so is too restrictive to limit indigenous agency to its opposition to the dominant system; in brief, to reduce it to an epistemology of denunciation. In relation to the "other" who could also act as a co-researcher, our thinking needs to go beyond primary resistance, as a reactive mechanism that defines our methods in opposition to Western models, and rather embrace resistance as fluid and adaptable resilience through reflexivity and reciprocity. PAR offers this co-design possibility.

We should not consider thus the embrace of PAR as merely a rejection of dominant forms of research. European researchers in fields such as development geography have also had to address the global West/South divisions and to consider the distinctions between indigenous elite and non-elite groups, although without necessarily addressing Spivak's (1988) theory of subalterns (women, marginalised ethnic groups, etc.). How do subalterns share ideas and paradigms with the rest of the world? Can our knowledge creation systems prevent the implantation or persistence of (neo-) colonising processes? Even when external researchers are not involved in the project, what can be done when our minds have already been colonised by methods and ideas of knowledge creation? How do we become subjects of research and knowledge? How do subalterns own their ideas?

For this, PAR is initiated by and rooted in a collaborative participatory performative inquiry. Just like with Buntu (2019), we notice that decolonising the way we conduct futures projects implies interrogating "who" initiates and benefits, the "whose", "what" and "why" futures matters (Polchar *et al.*, 2020). In the next section, we will see how these decolonial considerations resonate with futurist Ramos's five characteristics of action research in futures.

Anticipatory participatory action research?

PAR becomes even more powerful and meaningful when referenced to an item that does not exist: futures. Participatory approaches to the future offer the possibility to democratise long-term thinking and thus provide additional depth to PAR. PAR also democratises futures tools, from predictive data production to scenario building, as empowerment cannot be "power to" simply reduced to an increased access to knowledge production. The objective is both methodological and ontological, because these futures tools abide by a specific episteme, which should not be imposed upon anyone seeking resurgence. The use of the future in a PAR frame has thus the capacity to empower as long as its users know first why they use it and then how to use it accordingly.

Participatory futures cover a broad range of citizen-centred approaches to exploring possible futures, acknowledging the plasticity of futures. Futurists at UK's National Innovation Agency for Social Good identified objectives for participatory futuring, which include the "translat[ion] of collective images of the future into new collective actions and behaviour in the present", which resonates with PAR (Ramos *et al.*, 2019, p. 15).

The confluence between action research and futures studies also offers powerful possibilities. Ramos (2006, p. 3) identifies five characteristics that posit action research as a tool for democratising research:

1. It generates "practical being and action for human betterment".
2. It is "inclusive of plural ways of knowing in the constitution of theory and practice".

3. It is "iterative and heuristic, a continual process of evolving inquiry and action, by learning from reflections on successes and failures".
4. It is "research by participants for participants, which addresses the fundamental question of "research for whose benefit".
5. It operates with "a democratic ethos, which aims to critique power relations, address grievances of marginalised groups and achieve local empowerment in the face of entrenched institutionalised power".

Ramos (2006) further identified several futures studies with at least implicit references to action research by known practitioners, such as Bell, Bezold, Dator or Schultz. A few years later, action research was identified as one type of participatory futures methods (Gidley *et al.*, 2009). Since then, more anticipatory approaches have claimed a direct connection with action research, such as causal layered analysis as an intuitive action research approach (Inayatullah and Milojević, 2015), the Futures Literacy Laboratories (Miller, 2015) or co-elaborative scenario-building (Bourgeois *et al.*, 2017).

Action research is a crucial component of decolonising using the future as it seeks to break the power of control that characterises an "inner circle of initiates" (Ramos, 2010, p. 117). For example, at the community-level, anticipatory action research can deliberately devolves the leading role to local organisations, so that "local community organizations engage in, and use future thinking as producers of foreknowledge to reflect, and potentially act, on their own futures" (Bourgeois *et al.*, 2017, p. 4).

Action research is also "a process of inquiry that incorporates a heuristic movement through experimental action, concrete experience, empirical observation, personal and dialogic reflection, and can thus be considered a movement toward holism" (Ramos, 2010, p. 119). It responds to the call to add a transdisciplinary dimension to the participatory dimension in the practice of anticipation (Gudowsky and Peissl, 2016). Thus, action research becomes a fundamental methodology for creating collective intelligence within a given community that shares a common project. This happens because of its intrinsic local dimension, making it suitable for designing anticipatory approaches for local action at a local level (Karuri-Sebina and Rosenzweig, 2012).

However, participants in action research still have to overcome various challenges, as they have to Rogers *et al.* (2013):

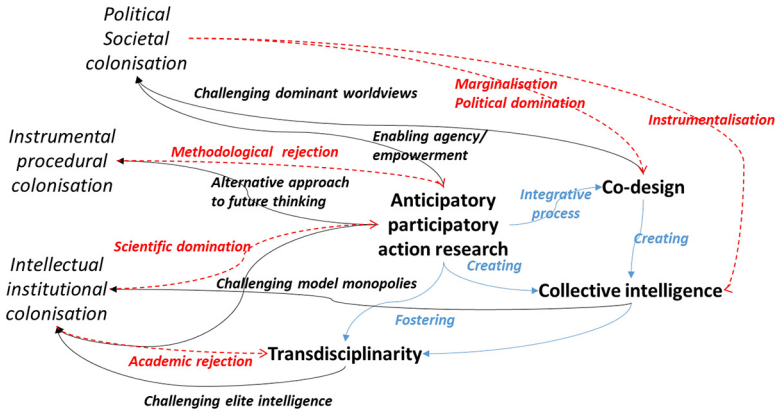
- acknowledge their own perceptions and frames of references;
- accept that those of others are as valid as theirs; and
- accept a transformation process that will modify all perceptions and frames of reference, bringing them into a new complex perception.

When such challenges are overcome, anticipatory PAR can be seen as a means through which capacity is acquired and turned into agency. Through this empowerment process, the recurrent gap between anticipation and action is bridged.

Figure 3 displays how anticipatory PAR could provide a basis for resisting the colonisation of the future by anticipating how the imposed system could be fought.

The blue arrows indicate positive interactions within the anticipatory PAR – co-design-collective intelligence-transdisciplinarity complex (normal case). The black arrows indicate how the elements of this complex act to reveal, challenge and thwart the colonisation of the future in its three dimensions (*italics case*). The red arrows display potential reactions of the colonisation process against the implementation of anticipatory PAR and this complex. The latter corresponds to the way we anticipate the processes of colonising the future described in the first section could adjust to the implementation of anticipatory PAR when it is conceived as part of a decolonial agenda that begins to preserve or restore the

Figure 3 Recursive interactions between colonisation processes and anticipatory participatory action research



Source: Authors (2020)

future into being the public good that it ought to be. Black and red arrows indicate that recursive conflicting interactions are likely to take place.

Roads to decolonising the future

The liberating power of anticipatory PAR lies in the systemic challenging of any attempt to colonise how one imagine and use the future. Epistemological assumptions affect any participatory research, which implies that forms of recolonisation continue to appear. What is needed is "structural transformations of both knowledge production and development cooperation [which includes] new funding schemes for research and development cooperation, a rethinking of evaluation criteria for both academic success and development progress, obligatory training in [...] [de]colonial thought, and reflexivity in academia and development practice" (Schurr and Segebart, 2012, p. 152).

Emanating from the above discussion, and taking into account these conflicting interactions with a multi-dimensional system which does not want to abandon its control (Figure 3), this essay endeavours to offer a way forward towards decolonising the future in light of the Capacity to Decolonise project. From this reflection, we identify several design principles: transdisciplinarity (see Figure 3), cooperative design, contextualised learning for being, locally led initiation of the inquiry together with the empowerment of local actors and servant leadership.

These do not form a roadmap, but potential directions consistent with the spirit of a decolonising approach to the future that is grounded in humility, uncertainty and plurality. These "design principles" are not prescriptive but informative and definitively exploratory.

Participatory use of the future is a negotiated process of cooperative design (co-design) that must involve all actors. Maximum reciprocity induces trust and allows room for shared meaning and reflexivity, leading to collective reflection (Robertson, 2000). Therefore, empowerment stems from the humility of all parties as a form of ethics and commitment, a responsibility that is reflected in every step of the process, from initiating the inquiry to measuring the success indicators. In designing the anticipatory PAR experience, co-researchers are invited to acknowledge not only their doing (research), but also their being (identity) and the way they are perceived. This is because the researcher's identity influences "the type of information they are able to collect during fieldwork" even in South-South research – for example, a Nigerian mother conducting research work on and with

women in post-conflict Liberia (Bob-Milliar, 2020, p. 6). The involvement of several identities significantly changes individual identities and reduces the gap between individuals by revealing and rendering their differences common. It also creates a space where meanings can be negotiated through, but not limited to, intercultural interpretation (Santos, 2014).

Co-researchers are thus invited to recontextualise their practice, as the "purpose of [decolonised] research is not the production of new knowledge *per se*" but the "production of moral discernment, a commitment to praxis, an ethic of resistance" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008, p. 18). Such efforts support and sustain process as a source of learning by itself: the notion of learning-by-doing grows in favour of learning-for-being. The reflexivity that is sought does not take the form of discovering an exogenous truth. Learning's transformative role is self-awareness – the knowers' understanding of the world in which they are immersed. Reflexivity as a mutual benefit can be assessed through critical inquiry. One can ask the following questions: "How has this research transformed you? Has it penetrated deeply into your daily life and work?" (Robertson, 2000, p. 321).

Local actors being at the forefront of the inquiry is essential for creating indigenous-led transformative knowledge, as "self-determination intersects with the *locus* of power in the research setting" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008, p. 3). Anticipatory PAR is initiated by, and rooted in, a collaborative participatory performative inquiry. When conducting PAR, Smith (2000) recommends purposefully asking eight questions:

Q1. What research do we want done?

Q2. Who is it for?

Q3. Who will benefit?

Q4. Who will own the research?

Q5. What difference will it make?

Q6. How will we know it is worthwhile?

Q7. How do we want the research done?

Q8. Who will carry it out?

This is why the *suggested approach embraces the framework of servant leadership*. It consists of six dimensions that correspond to the values behind these questions: voluntary subordination, authentic self, covenantal relationship, responsible morality, transcendental spirituality and transforming influence (Eva and Sendjaya, 2013). In particular, authentic self-captures "leadership behaviours which flow from one's true self and manifest in his/her humility, integrity and accountability", while covenantal relations entails "mutual commitment by individuals characterized by shared values, open-ended commitment, mutual trust and concern for the welfare of the other party" (Eva and Sendjaya, 2013, 593).

These principles do not intend to produce a standardised and imposed form of decolonial future-oriented research practice. Similarly to recent warnings about the risk for Futures Literacy to become a new normative (Facer and Sriprakash, 2021), we suggest here that adopting and adapting these principles could help equipping individuals, communities and institutions to reflect upon their own research practices when using the future.

In conclusion

The future does not exist in the present, yet the way we perceive or imagine it shapes our actions in the present. The future can therefore be considered as a resource. As such, it possesses in principle the attributes of a public good. However, as many other resources it is subject to commodification to the point that it can become a club good or even a private good. We argued here that coloniality has provided, and still is providing, an environment which contributes to deprive parts of the world population from its own capacity to

determine its own future. Structural forms of exclusion are shaped by a colonial matrix which affects the mobilisation of our capacity to imagine.

Despite – or maybe because of – its imaginary nature, the future is a power space where the voices unheard are as telling about knowledge creation processes, as those heard.

In the context of research for development, which this essay focused on, this colonisation process abides by principles from scientific exclusion to political domination and marginalisation of specific opinions or alternatives that resonate with decolonial critiques.

We advocated here for promoting anticipatory PAR as a posture for counteracting the colonising of the future in its three intellectual and institutional, instrumental and procedural, and societal and political dimensions. We suggest some design principles for anticipatory PAR, which we feel could help researchers counteract coloniality when using the future. These principles include transdisciplinarity, cooperative design, contextualised learning for being, locally led initiation of the inquiry together with the empowerment of local actors and servant leadership.

For societies and their peoples whose ways of being, knowing, imagining and of sense making have been dislocated, the intrusion and pervasiveness of the colonial matrix has created an artificial alterity. The revelation and critique of this artificial alterity makes African thinkers and practitioners for example examine their decolonised, resurgent, self-reflective anticipatory systems and processes.

We acknowledge that anticipatory PAR is not uniquely "made for Africa" knowledge. It is, for some, the "enlightenment and awakening of common peoples" (Fals-Borda and Rahman, quoted in Bergold and Thomas, 2012, p. 8) and aims to reconstruct "their knowledge and ability in a process of understanding and empowerment" (Bergold and Thomas, 2012, p. 8). It is not about rejecting all forms of non-indigenous knowledge. Indeed, history has blurred the line between strict authenticity and exogeneity, as records have been written by all parties. Rejection would only lead to competing with the West under the same epistemological rules that were denounced by previous post- and decolonial thinkers. It is about shifting the geography of reason to "subsume [all forms of knowledge regardless of its origins] within the vision, needs and lifestyle of indigenous nations" (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012, p. 15). It is not about diving into indigenous knowledge *per se* despite the importance of identifying the indigenous people, their systems of value and how they connect with the rest of the world. At the core of the knowledge to be produced will be endogenous knowledge-creation principles, regardless of its sources of influence.

That being said, African action researchers are better situated to question the desire to invite the margin into the centre without questioning its codes. More bluntly, African actors are invited to escape the catch-up philosophy that leads to simply "add Africa [to the larger globalised soup] and stir" (Abrahamsen, 2016, p. 127). Capability-based approaches to knowledge provide researchers with a "potent tool to deprovincialise their object of study" (Bob-Milliar, 2020, p. 8). The research outcomes and methodological tools and approaches used should be freed from the "we" and "they" dichotomy, to unearth or create a transformative understanding of knowledge useful to its readers, without a need to capitalise on Western *répertoire d'action*.

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