Dismantling the master's house using the master's tools? Rethinking the localisation agenda and its potential to deliver change through an examination of 'local knowledge' in DRR

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Abstract

Localisation is an idea of growing influence and debate within the aid system, with many influential organisations joining the call for the increased devolution of resources and decision-making power to 'local' actors. While some imagine localisation somewhat conservatively, providing better value for money and intervention efficacy, others regard localisation as a tool for radical transformation of the aid system, a means to right historical wrongs and begin a process of decolonisation. However, localisation and its critical prerequisite notion of the 'local' are both significantly undertheorised. As I show by drawing on an exploration of engagements with 'local knowledge' in DRR, the prospects for localisation to deliver radical, transformative change are ultimately poor. The Eurocentricity and depoliticising effects of how the 'local' is theorised within the localisation agenda serve important political functions that maintain the status quo and underwrite foundational ideas within the aid system. If system change is going to occur within the aid field, it will not come from within a predominantly Northern policy agenda predicated on Eurocentric attitudes towards both knowledge and the 'local'.

Contents

1. Introduction

Localisation is an increasingly prominent idea within the aid sphere which has gained momentum through a series of 'local turns' in peacebuilding, development and humanitarianism. Promotion of localisation is almost universal in grey and academic literature which speaks to it, at times reflecting a perceived panacea for inefficiencies and structural problems identified across the aid system. While there is relative consensus that progress is marginal and slow, optimism remains rife that the localisation agenda will pick up pace (see Frennesson et al., 2022; Harris and Tuladhar, 2019). As a result, various actors across the aid system are doubling down on their commitments to and ambition for localisation; take, for example, the myriad influential organisations signed to the Charter4Change.

However, localisation remains significantly undertheorised. What localisation might exactly entail is rarely clearly articulated and there is a lack of consensus surrounding what ultimate objective localisation is to serve. This is not merely an academic problem; considering the lofty ambitions for the more equitable distribution of resources and decision-making power that localisation represents, how localisation is understood and implemented will have meaningful implications for practice (Roepstorff, 2020). If optimists are to be believed, localisation will have profound effects in restructuring who gets to shape future humanitarian, development and peacebuilding interventions (see Cohen and Gingerich, 2015). If the warnings of more critical voices are heeded, then localisation may be another hollow buzzword, applied uncritically with the unintended effect of constraining the agency and influence of non-Northern actors (Shuayb, 2022). In either case, clearer theorisation of localisation will be required to understand how and why change does or does not occur, as well as what prospects there are for the localisation agenda to deliver on calls from within for radical, explicitly political transformation of the aid system.

In this dissertation I explore the theoretical muddiness of localisation by engaging with grey and academic DRR literature which focuses on the potential for 'local knowledge' to improve disaster risk management. This literature is well placed to reveal the assumptions and ontological positions which underwrite much contemporary theorisation of the 'local' within localisation because, in establishing what 'local knowledge' is, authors often move beyond the common presentation of the 'local' as being strictly spatial (Hermans et al., 2022). By drawing on critical literature from a range of disciplines, I demonstrate how the colonial logics and Eurocentric perspectives that underpin conceptions of the 'local' are instrumentalised by the localisation agenda in ways that perpetuate colonial legacies and inhibit transformative change.

I begin by briefly clarifying my cross-sectoral understanding of DRR before establishing the defining features of localisation as well as the principal debates within it. I then detail how 'local knowledge' is understood in opposition to 'scientific knowledge' which is universalizable, placeless, and able to uncover objective, factual 'truth'. In the fourth section, I explore alternative theorisations

of knowledge better equipped to avoid reproducing the problematic, Eurocentric categories of the 'modern' North and its Others, ultimately rejecting the popular multi-ontology approach in favour of Nadasdy's (2021) indeterminacy framework.

I then move to bring the three preceding sections together and establish how engagements with 'local knowledge' frame it in terms of the 'here-and-now' to produce a 'local fix' by which the political agency of supposedly 'local' people is curtailed. Finally, I then connect these ideas to broader critiques of localisation to argue that, on its current trajectory, localisation holds little promise for upsetting the fundamental decision making and resource hierarchies of the aid system. Instead, I suggest that the Eurocentricity and depoliticising effects of current theorisation of the 'local' produce important instrument effects which benefit already-dominant actors within the aid system, meaning that system change will have to come from outside of the localisation agenda.

2. DRR and localisation

While some authors conceptualise DRR as being in the domain of development and distinct from humanitarian activity such as preparedness and response (e.g. Cohen and Gingerich, 2015; Pichon, 2019), such categorisations do not reflect how practices and terminology frequently overlap (Taylor, 2023). As noted by Twigg (2015, p.6), "disaster risk is not a distinct sector," and DRR reaches far beyond the aid sphere, involving public administration, urban planning, environmental management, health, education, agriculture, and more. Even within the confines of aid, DRR spans the HDP sectors through the myriad interconnections between economic development, vulnerability, instability, environmental change, and conflict (Barakat and Milton, 2020; Mena et al., 2022). Thus, for the purposes of this dissertation, I employ a broad definition of DRR built on those proposed by Jamieson (2016) and Twigg (2015): the development and application of policies and practices that reduce the number of people killed, harmed or displaced, as well as the economic damage caused, by a disaster. Not only does such a broad conceptualisation of DRR capture its wide-ranging nature in discussion and practice, but it will also enable more productive analysis when put into dialogue with localisation, a similarly broad concept in its origins and use.

Localisation has its roots in the expansion of participatory approaches within the development sector in the 1990s (Pouligny, 2009), and was later informed by the 'local turn' in peacebuilding (Kuipers et al., 2020). Though it is common in humanitarian and development circles to talk of the localisation agenda, many organisations and authors refer to similar projects of change in different terms. In policies and debates spanning the aid system, distinctions are made between programming that is locally implemented, locally managed, and locally led or owned (Frennesson et al., 2022; Peace Direct, 2022). It is also common to speak in terms of participatory or community-led approaches (Chambers, 2017; Tozier de la Poterie and Baudoin, 2015), and in some areas of

development practice, such as resource or environmental management, local inclusion and co-management have been frequently used instead (Cameron, 2023; Nadasdy, 1999, 2005). All of this is to say that the localisation agenda is a broad one, drawing on trends, critical reflections, and movements within development, peacebuilding, humanitarianism and beyond (Barakat and Milton, 2020).

The breadth of practice and thought from which the localisation agenda draws is perhaps also why localisation is often so vaguely defined, used in numerous different ways by different actors to pursue different ends (Van Brabant and Patel, 2017; Goodwin and Ager, 2021). At the heart of the various understandings of localisation within the aid system is the imperative of shifting power (in the form of resources and decision making) from international actors to 'local' ones by recognising and increasing their role in interventions (Parry and Vogel, 2023). Such a shift is often communicated as going 'down' to the 'local level', typically understood in terms of national, sub-national, and 'community'/'grassroots' organisations (Frennesson et al., 2021; Harris and Tuladhar, 2019).

There is much disagreement over the extent to which localisation ought to be a largely technical exercise or whether it represents a transformative, explicitly political agenda that could form the basis for fundamentally reimagining the aid system (Fast and Bennett, 2020; Roepstorff, 2020). Van Brabant and Patel (2017, p.4) distinguish between "a decentralisation interpretation" and "a transformation interpretation". The decentralisation interpretation places emphasis on the possibility for localisation to make programming more effective, cost-efficient and accountable, easing the burden on the "overstretched" (UN-led) humanitarian system (Cohen and Gingerich, 2015, p.11; see also Geoffroy et al., 2017; Jha and Jha, 2011). By focusing on the possibility for localisation to meet technical objectives (by closing funding gaps, meeting accountability standards, professionalising local actors, etc.), the decentralisation interpretation does little to question the overarching structures of the aid system, nor examine its colonial origins.

Transformative interpretations of localisation "look beyond the 'humanitarian economy' to its 'political economy'" (Van Brabant and Patel, 2017, p.4), often explicitly connecting the need for localisation with calls for decolonisation and system change. As put by Slim (2021, p.2), "many people involved in local and national humanitarian aid… rightly see the current approach as colonial and infused with a white racist gaze" that assumes the inferiority of the non-Northern (Al-Soufi, 2023; Shuayb, 2022); a critique that has similarly been extended to both development (Pailey, 2020) and peacebuilding sectors (Paffenholz, 2015). Transformative localisation thus represents the centring of political analysis and actors directly involved in or affected by disasters (Harris and Tuladhar, 2019; Cheung, 2023), with the explicit aim of upsetting aid as a system of governance which rests on being largely unaccountable (on the governmentality of aid, see Barnett, 2011; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022; Duffield, 2002, 2014). By avoiding the depoliticising technical framing of localisation as decentralisation, transformative interpretations are also more inclined to include the thoughts and voices of those 'local' actors which localisation claims to benefit.

In either case, localisation pivots around being able to identify who, what, and where the 'local' is in order for power and resources to be shifted in its direction, yet it is often a taken-for-granted term used with little theoretical precision or consideration (Roepstorff, 2020). Thus, the issue of doing localisation goes beyond simply increasing the funding channelled to 'local' organisations. It includes attempts at categorising 'local' actors and NGOs (Parry and Vogel, 2023; Poole, 2018), identifying and preserving 'local knowledge' (Mutasa, 2015; Siambombe et al., 2018), integrating 'local' and 'scientific' knowledge and practices (Alston-Voyticky, 2022; Hermans et al., 2022), developing 'local capacity' (Baguios et al., 2021; European Commission, 2023), and engaging in 'knowledge sharing' (Ikeda et al., 2016; Klimeš et al., 2019). Across these efforts, 'local knowledge' takes centre stage as an important concept which is inextricably connected to understandings of the 'local'.

This is where an examination of localisation within DRR can prove fruitful. While it would be anachronistic to talk of a localisation agenda within DRR since the 1990s, DRR saw its own 'local turn' around that period as people working in and around DRR sought to engage with, understand, and integrate 'local knowledge' into their work (Hermans et al., 2022). As a result, there is an abundance of academic and grey DRR literature, situated at various points within the aid system and beyond, which explicitly engages with 'local knowledge' and ideas of the 'local' (Hadlos et al., 2022; Hermans et al., 2022). Across this literature, justifications for engaging with the 'local' in many ways pre-empted and now sustain arguments made today through the language of localisation. Importantly, in engaging with what constitutes 'local knowledge', authors often move beyond taken-for-granted or 'common sense' applications of the 'local' as that which is physically nearby, revealing its relational identity to imaginings of the 'scientific' and 'international'.

I turn now to examining some of this literature, identifying the various ways the 'local' has been conceptualised and deployed within DRR in relation to 'local knowledge'. Principally, I look to the overlapping, almost indiscriminate usage of different terminology which relies on a distinction between 'scientific' knowledge and its varied local/Indigenous/traditional others.

3. 'Scientific knowledge' and its 'local' others: Usage of L/I/TK et al.

Numerous terms are used by academics and practitioners when talking about 'local knowledge', with some finding notable distinctions between terms that others use interchangeably. Given the breadth of disciplines and objectives covered under the umbrella of DRR, it is perhaps not surprising that there is no well-established, singular set of terminology in use (Twigg, 2015). However, there are some consistencies across these varied terms and their applications which can reveal a lot about how both 'local knowledge' and 'the local' more generally are theorised, even if

much of this remains implicit. In this section, I examine how these ideas are formed through reference to what they are perceived not to be: neither scientific nor spaceless.

Though there were earlier engagements (see Maskrey, 1997), multiple authors point to the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami as a turning point for interest in the role that 'Indigenous' and 'local knowledge' could, or already did, play in DRR (Hiwasaki et al., 2014; Rai and Khawas, 2019; Shaw et al., 2009). Drawing on insights from four literature reviews of this field, as well as cited works above and below, the majority of research speaks to three dominant (and certainly overlapping) interest areas: understanding 'local knowledge' and how it interacts with DRR; looking to how 'local knowledge' and 'scientific knowledge' might be integrated; and exploring how 'local knowledge' might be leveraged in policy and intervention design (Hadlos et al., 2022; Hermans et al., 2022; Ryan et al., 2020; Vasileiou et al., 2022). Interest in the value of 'local knowledge' for early warning systems, as well as how 'local knowledge' might be validated by 'scientific knowledge', is particularly prominent across all three areas of research.

Up until now, I have used the notion of 'local knowledge' as a stand-in for the various terms that are actually used by different authors in order to aid coherent discussion. However, these varied terms require interrogation to better understand how and why they are deployed alongside one another. Though knowledge is very commonly referred to as being 'local' (LK) across DRR literature (Kniveton et al., 2015; Schneider, 2023; Šakić Trogrlić et al., 2021), 'indigenous' (IK) also sees frequent use (Reyes et al., 2020; Sithole et al., 2015; Šakić Trogrlić and Homberg, 2018), as do combinations of the two (ILK/LIK) (Hadlos et al., 2022; Hiwasaki et al., 2014). Some opt for 'traditional' knowledge (TK) (Jha and Jha, 2011; Rai and Khawas, 2019) or 'community' knowledge (Ryan et al., 2020). There are also plenty of similar acronyms in use, such as 'indigenous technical knowledge' (ITK), 'traditional ecological knowledge' (TEK), and 'local ecological knowledge' (LEK) (see Hermans et al., 2022).

Following Liboiron's (2021, p.53) reference to "TEK et al." in the world of scientific grant writing, I opt to refer to the above conceptions of knowledge in DRR collectively as L/I/TK et al. in order to enable a clearer discussion of the common elements that connect them. Given that the above terms are "sometimes differentiated on bases such as academic discipline, context and language" and thus should not simply be "treated as synonymous" (Kelman et al., 2012, p.13), it may at first appear as an error to amalgamate all of these ideas into one catch-all term. Indeed, I do not mean to suggest that what is local is also traditional and Indigenous and vice versa. Rather, I point to the significant overlap that exists between the 'local' and the similarly imprecisely conceived 'traditional' and 'Indigenous' in practice. In collecting these terms together under L/I/TK et al., I hope to engage with how different authors from across DRR construct and theorise these varied forms of knowledge in overlapping ways.

What is it, then, that brings these multiple terms together under L/I/TK et al.? Central to the usage of these varied terms is the dichotomy that authors produce between 'scientific knowledge'

and these 'local' others. As has similarly been found in a range of different sectors and disciplines (Agrawal, 1995; Duarte et al., 2019; Mac Ginty, 2015; Yeh, 2016), the 'traditional', the 'local' and the 'Indigenous' are understood within DRR literature, either implicitly or explicitly, in relation to that which is 'scientific' and 'international'. This is evidently the case in the Sendai Framework, the current UN framework governing DRR, which clearly distinguishes between "traditional, indigenous and local knowledge and practices" and "scientific knowledge" (UNISDR, 2015, p.15). As put succinctly by Hermans et al. (2022, p.1128) in their systematic literature review of 'local knowledge' in DRR, "arguably, what defines local knowledge is that it is distinct from scientific knowledge." The theoretical muddiness and interchangeability of the ideas within L/I/TK et al. is not helped by the fact that 'scientific knowledge' is frequently a taken-for-granted term; it is assumed by many authors that 'we' already know what scientific knowledge is and that to define it would be to state the obvious. In stark contrast, L/I/TK et al. is always given at least a cursory definition and overview.

For those authors who do try to make the distinction clear, 'scientific knowledge' is understood in a number of generally consistent yet still vague ways. Marquez and Olavides (2024, p.4) emphasise the "generalisable nature of scientific knowledge", mirroring widespread sentiments that 'scientific knowledge' is not contextually bounded (Hiwasaki et al., 2014; Kettle et al., 2014; Kniveton et al., 2015). Some authors draw on the use of "more formalised processes" (Raymond et al., 2010, p.1767) or "more formal methods of education" (Gaillard and Mercer, 2013, p.95; see also Hadlos et al., 2022) – note the relational framing. The more 'formal' or 'technical' nature of 'scientific knowledge' is often explained through reference to tacit and explicit knowledge (Derbile et al., 2016; Mercer, 2012; Raymond et al., 2010). 'Scientific knowledge' is understood to be primarily comprised of explicit knowledge that can be clearly articulated, communicated, and which is 'known to be knowledge' (Hermans et al., 2022). While some authors argue that L/I/TK et al. does contain explicit knowledge (e.g. Mercer, 2012), it is the primarily implicit nature of L/I/TK et al. that is said to render it less 'technical' and 'formal' in comparison.

The idea of space, particularly the connection of people and knowledge to it, is essential in the separation of 'scientific knowledge' from that which is 'local' or 'indigenous' (Hastrup, 2016; Connell, 2007). In DRR literature and beyond, L/I/TK et al. is understood to be "deeply embedded" in a particular environment and the 'cultural' relationship with that place (Mercer et al., 2012, p.75; Raymond et al., 2010). It is "rooted in people's everyday lives" and their use of land (Lin and Chang, 2020, p.2), and involves "long-term cultural ties or traditional ownership of a place" (Hadlos et al., 2022, p.1). When compared to 'scientific knowledge', L/I/TK et al. is in some sense 'deeper' (implicit) and 'rooted' in proximity to somewhere (context-bound). This contrasts with 'scientific knowledge' which explicitly addresses 'general' truths, performing the "god trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway, 1988, p.581). While some authors contrast 'international' or 'outsider' knowledge to L/I/TK et al. (Hiwasaki et al., 2014; Mercer et al., 2012; Gaillard and Mercer, 2013; Raymond et al., 2010), no actual space is defined or theorised in which this 'international' or

'outsider' perspective might be placed or positioned. For this reason, I refuse all notions of knowledge built on arbitrary binaries (indicated with apostrophes), including 'scientific knowledge' which, despite a long history of efforts to try and delineate the truly 'scientific', has always relied on a relational distinction from that which it is supposedly not (Agrawal, 1995).

The perceived universality of 'scientific knowledge' is most obvious in discussions within DRR around how it might be integrated with L/I/TK et al. For instance, in their proposed model for knowledge integration, Hiwasaki et al. (2014, p.22) write that "in cases where scientists cannot translate the local knowledge into its universal name, there is a need for more in-depth study" – the scientific and the universal are treated as one and the same. Though they do not take a clear stance themselves, Rai and Khawas (2019, p.285) note that other researchers argue that "knowledge that lacks universality in its application cannot be considered as knowledge but merely a skill… Therefore, the question of broader acceptance or legitimisation always covers the body of traditional knowledge". The extent to which L/I/TK et al. is accepted as legitimate knowledge varies, often depending on claims about "the extent to which there is a 'universal truth'" to which 'scientific knowledge' has sole access (Raymond et al., 2010, p.1770).

This disputation of whether L/I/TK et al. constitutes real 'knowledge' is reflected in its treatment by some authors as being comprised of varied beliefs about things that are 'culturally' and spatially specific, but which ultimately do not comprise knowledge (Yeh, 2016; da Costa Marques, 2014). Some authors argue that for L/I/TK et al. to be usefully applied within DRR interventions, it must be 'validated' to establish its "scientific basis" (Sithole et al., 2015, p.2; see also Dekens, 2007; Hiwasaki et al., 2014; Rai and Khawas, 2019; Vasileiou et al., 2022). This view is also found to be commonplace by Trogrlić et al. (2021) in their study of external stakeholders' attitudes towards the use of 'local knowledge' in DRR. In this sense, L/I/TK et al. contains knowledge to the extent that it can be confirmed by 'science'; 'local' people have culturally constructed views and beliefs about things which scientists *know* about. Underpinning these views is the assumed "existence of a (single) objective world that can be known/represented differently (and sometimes wrongly) by different knowers" (Nadasdy, 2021, p.358). This supposedly objective factual world is what enables 'scientific knowledge' (and its alternative 'international' moniker) to be both universalizable and without space (Agrawal, 1995). The 'correct' view is that which corresponds to 'factual reality' – positioning does not factor in.

However, such a stance is contested. Some authors note the controversy of attempting to validate L/I/TK et al. but avoid foraying into the debate themselves (e.g. Rai and Khawas, 2019), while a few explicitly write against notions of verification as "clearly reflecting a hierarchy" which marginalises the knowledge of certain groups (Hermans et al., 2022, pp.1128–1129; Šakić Trogrlić et al., 2022; see also Lane et al., 2011). Yet, among those who claim equal value or standing between 'scientific knowledge' and L/I/TK et al. (or at least leave open this possibility), there is little theoretical engagement with what it might actually mean to have multiple valid knowledges. For

example, returning to Hermans et al. (2022, p.1128), while they argue that "science and scientific knowledge are not objective entities but are socially constructed", the theoretical implications of this for the entire project of categorising knowledge into the 'scientific' and L/I/TK et al. remains unexplored. What does it mean to talk of 'local' or 'traditional' knowledge if the defining feature of these knowledges – their context-specificity and lack of objective universality – is rejected? Furthermore, what might the underlying ideas of the 'local' or 'knowledge' mean if we do not define these terms through relational binaries? These are questions I turn to address now.

4. Alternative theorisations of knowledge

The rejection of the objective universality of scientific knowledge stems from recognition of the role of social construction and historical contingency in producing the Eurocentric concept of knowledge. Here I understand Eurocentricity as the belief in Northern difference and superiority rooted in a "sensibility that Europe is historically, economically, culturally and politically distinctive in ways that significantly determine the overall character of world politics" (Sabaratnam, 2013, p.261). The notion of an objective body of knowledge – knowledge which can be 'uncovered' through disinterested, abstract engagement from an "absent location of thinking" (Mignolo, 2002, p.65) – was itself produced in a specific place and time. Intellectual turns in Europe, from the Enlightenment through to 19th Century interest in 'global difference' (Connell, 2007), were inextricably connected with the expansion of colonial and capitalist power; the two things were co-constitutive (Yang and Wayne, 2012). The ideas of modernity and linear progress that were employed by colonial powers to legitimate their expansion, later extended into discourses of 'development' through modernisation theory (Escobar, 2012), relied on the presupposition of an objective measure of advancement (Quijano, 2000). Similarly, it was also the power of empire which enabled European concepts of and attitudes towards knowledge to be privileged so exceptionally so as to now form the defining limits of what can (and cannot) be considered academia.

Take for example the historical course of sociology. In her exploration of its historical development, Connell (2007, p.9) highlights that the discipline was "created [in] the urban and cultural centres of the major imperial powers at the high tide of modern imperialism." The dominant method within sociology at the time – comparison between the societies and supposedly distinct evolutionary histories of the metropoles and their colonial Others – directly resulted in one of the central "geopolitical assumptions of the genre… that all societies are knowable, and they are knowable in the same way and from the same point of view" (ibid., p. 44). This Eurocentric approach, in which the world is understood through the exceptionalism of the West (variously defined depending on the period), still persists across disciplines, though often in less explicit forms (Sabaratnam, 2013). In their proliferation and dominance, Eurocentric attitudes towards knowledge

that centre the European perspective lost their spatial-historical specificity and, in the minds of many, came to define what knowledge could (not) be (Mignolo, 2002; Quijano, 2000). The socially constructed nature of knowledge has long been denied and obscured through ideas that were and continue to be socially constructed in specific times, places, and positionalities (Kuokkanen, 2007). This is seen plainly within the DRR literature discussed above which advocates for the verification of L/I/TK et al. with 'scientific knowledge' because scientists have knowledge and 'local' people have mere beliefs.

A series of 'ontological turns' in anthropology, sociology, geography, and various interdisciplinary fields have also encouraged scepticism of the universality and objectivity of knowledge from within traditional academe (Yeh, 2016; Cameron et al., 2014). Through interrogations of how ethnography represents those they study, as well as of what constitutes the 'field' or the 'local' within ethnographic research, anthropologists have questioned the validity of objective, placeless knowledge for some time (Rabinow, 1986; Gupta and Ferguson, 1998; de la Cadena, 2015; Winchell, 2022). Within geography, engagement with the politics of knowledge production, especially surrounding climate change and resource management, has drawn attention to the marginalisation of Indigenous perspectives in favour of those of 'international' environmental science (Ford et al., 2016; Cameron, 2012; Nadasdy, 1999, 2005). Post-colonial literature has also made important contributions to recognising the harms of the depoliticisation of Eurocentricity within academia, as well as the conflation of Eurocentric ideas with objective linear advancement (Spivak, 2010; Mbembe, 2001; Sabaratnam, 2013). It is also important to add that the notion of universal scientific knowledge has been challenged from beyond traditional academe for many years by Indigenous people for whom the coloniality of academic and expert knowledge has long been obvious (Kuokkanen, 2007; Todd, 2016).

One of the most prominent approaches to theorising knowledge in light of the rejection of an objective and universal realm of factual knowledge is through the idea of multiple ontologies or worlds (Blaser, 2009; de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018; Descola, 2013; Escobar, 2020; Viveiros de Castro, 2004). Proponents of the multi-ontology (or 'pluriversal') approach argue that multiple ontologies or worlds exist with different socially constructed truths, enabling the meaningful discussion of multiple and sometimes contradictory truths. 'Multi-ontologists' argue that reference to multiple ontologies is not a simple stand-in for discussing different cultures; to speak of multiple ontologies is to speak of multiple valid knowledges, whereas to speak of multiple cultures is to speak of different socially constructed assessments of and relationships to the supposed objective realm of factual knowledge (Blaser, 2009). This distinction is important – while someone could hold 'cultural beliefs' about something which are 'wrong' in that they do not correspond to 'factual reality', someone with a different ontological perspective could not be 'wrong' in the same sense (Blaser, 2014). For instance, in the commonly referenced example provided by de la Cadena (2015), whether or not the same referent is a mountain comprised of resources or Ausangate the Peruvian earth being is not a

question of factual truth – both claims are true within their respective ontologies, despite being contradictory.

This begs the question, then, of how one might conceptualise multiple ontologies to coherently speak about the relationships and transfers between them. Many authors speak of a proliferation of different ontologies or worlds, with all worlds being "completely interlinked, though under unequal conditions of power" (Escobar, 2020, p.27). What is 'true' or 'factual' – that is, knowledge – depends on the world that is occupied. Rather than depoliticising knowledge production through the assertion of supposed objectivity (Nadasdy, 2005), the multi-ontological approach attempts to centre the political nature of knowledge by suggesting that truth is a process of creation. Thus, many authors talk of 'worlding', whereby the ontological perspective itself "contributes to enact the reality of the fact" (Blaser, 2014, p.53), producing worlds that intersect and inform other worlds in more or less dominant forms (de la Cadena, 2015). While the anticolonial aims of the multi-ontology approach are noble, there are, nevertheless, some issues with theorising knowledge in terms of multiple ontologies that I seek to avoid through Nadasdy's (2021) indeterminacy framework.

First, the "uncontrolled proliferation of ever smaller but still homogenous worlds" leads to a sort of relativism that can undermine the explicitly political purpose of the multi-ontology approach (Nadasdy, 2021, p.361; see also Paleček and Risjord, 2013). If all ontologies are 'correct', including in their denial of differing claims from within other ontologies, then it is unclear how a multi-ontology approach would actually be effective in "carving out a space to listen… [and] to engage in other kinds of worlding that might be more conducive to a coexistence based on recognizing conflicts" (Blaser, 2013, p.559). While Blaser (2014) is correct in claiming that the act of adopting a multi-ontology approach is itself a political act – in the sense that it creates its own reality of upsetting the Eurocentric privileging of objective knowledge – the political potency is limited to recognising difference without problematising it. This reflects the "ultimately conservative nature of the ontological project" whereby different people with different knowledges can rest assured that they still have *a* complete knowledge with little incentive to engage with the knowledge of others (Graeber, 2015, p.7).

Second, theorising non-objective knowledge in terms of interconnected but ultimately distinct worlds or ontologies relies on the flattening of ethnographic complexity in order to find and value radical alterity (Cepek, 2016; Bessire and Bond, 2014). The first issue arises in trying to establish between that which is 'modern' and that which is 'Indigenous', as so many multi-ontologists attempt to, ultimately reproducing a binary that multi-ontologists seek to avoid (Nadasdy, 2021). While multi-ontologists suggest that people occupy, move between, and straddle multiple worlds, theorising in terms of discrete worlds unhelpfully forces a focus on categorisation; as put by Bessire and Bond (2014, pp.443–444), "in the rush to reclaim truly different difference, the ontologist may reify its boundaries". The proliferation of worlds, in a bid to take the claims of others 'seriously',

undermines the complexity of the people whose knowledge they seek to elevate (Graeber, 2015). By focusing on difference for distinction, the multi-ontological approach inadvertently seeks to "distill alterity-affirming content" and fails to capture the complexity of people's lives and the adaptability of knowledge (Cepek, 2016, p.625).

If the answer for how to theorise knowledge in light of post-colonial and feminist critiques cannot be found in the pluriverse, then where to turn? One option, which I adopt in this dissertation, is Nadasdy's (2021) framework of indeterminacy. Drawing on work by Bohr on the wave-particle duality of light (see Barad, 2007), as well as Mol's (2002) anthropology of medical engagements with atherosclerosis, Nadasdy argues that instead of multiple ontologies or worlds, it is more methodologically effective to speak of knowledge in terms of indeterminacy and complementarity. Indeterminacy refers to the idea that a 'thing-in-itself' or 'basic unit of existence' cannot be determined "without specifying the material practices used to observe/enact it" (Nadasdy, 2021, p.362). For instance, the nature of light is indeterminate, as it can be either a particle or a wave depending on the apparatus used to observe it. Here, knowledge is understood to be made through practice (not perspective, as objects do not exist 'out there' in a 'true' form to be perceived), with different practices generating different knowledge of the same referent (Mol, 2002). 'Practice' here is not just understood in terms of the material arrangements created by humans for observations, as if in a lab, but refers to the enactment of material-semiotic assemblages – 'webs' of discursive and material reality-making (see Blaser, 2014; Law, 2009; Nadasdy, 2021).

Complementarity refers to the mutual exclusivity of phenomena that "hang together" (Mol, 2002, p.84) in/around a referent. Repeating Nadasdy's (2021) example, the behaviours of light as wave or particle are complementary in that only one can be observed at any given time, but knowledge of the referent is incomplete without consideration of all forms of practice that can enact it. Applying this within DRR, knowledge of any given disaster is indeterminate and depends on the practices used to enact it. For example, Schwartz-Marin et al. (2022, p.593) examine the "spiritual and geological natures of Merapi," a volcano in Indonesia. They argue that an eruption is both "the dream/voice/roar that warns attentive and gifted locals about its unrest [and] the sounds and graphs produced by a seismometer and shared via Facebook or walkie talkies" (ibid.). These different enactments of Merapi and its eruptions are complementary as they require different practices to be produced, but knowledge is indeterminate until a particular practice has been enacted. As such, any efforts to understand Merapi's eruptions are incomplete without looking to both its spiritual and geological natures – environmental data and pyroclastic flow modelling can only show so much.

The advantages of the indeterminacy framework are multiple. As with the multi-ontology approach, the ontological assumption of objective, universal facts that exist distinctly 'out there' is decentred. However, with indeterminacy the political ramifications are greater; knowledge is incomplete if not all complementary phenomena are attended to, rather than there being multiple complete knowledges in different worlds (Graeber, 2015). Furthermore, as put by Nadasdy (2021,

p.363), "without the need for multiple worlds, there is no pressure to flatten the ethnographic record so as to produce distinct, homogenous, and radically other worlds." The vast and complex interconnections that exist between people and across space can be more easily accounted for when the task is to identify different practices of enacting knowledge, rather than attempting to classify which practices belong to one world (e.g. the 'modern') or another (e.g. the 'Indigenous') (Cepek, 2016). By focusing on knowledge as process and practice, rather than knowledge of collections of different distinct things, harmful reifications of difference can be avoided.

5. Confining L/I/TK et al. to the 'here-and-now' in DRR: Eurocentricity, depoliticisation, and the 'local fix'

By applying the alternative theorisation of knowledge and the debates discussed above to the use of L/I/TK et al. in DRR literature, it is possible to reveal how both the 'local' and localisation are theorised in fundamentally Eurocentric ways. This Eurocentricity is not only manifest in the presumption of objective, universalizable knowledge, but is also the result of using a distinction between the North and its Others as an analytical pivot point on which all understanding is built (see Sabaratnam, 2013 for this argument in relation to theories of the post-liberal peace). Through the construction of a number of binaries, engagement with L/I/TK et al. within the DRR literature emphasises the distinctiveness and importance of the North. These binaries, as explored previously, rely on distinctions between the 'international' or 'scientific knowledge' and L/I/TK et al. Their underlying presumption of Northern centrality have similarly been characterised in a range of (albeit subtly different) ways by different critical analyses of Eurocentricity: 'developed/developing' (Escobar, 2012); 'modern/nonmodern' (Latour, 1993); 'core/periphery' (Kvangraven, 2021); 'West/Other' (Sabaratnam, 2013); or 'liberal/local' (Agrawal, 1995).

Whatever concepts are preferred, the important point is that use of the division between 'scientific knowledge' and L/I/TK et al. continues to seek out and value alterity. As with the multi-ontological approach critiqued earlier, the ontological framing of the world into two categories – the North and its Others – creates confines to which all people, practices and knowledge are made to conform (Bessire and Bond, 2014). As put by Roepstorff (2020, p.291) in her critical reflection on the localisation agenda, "a dichotomous understanding is often coupled with a problematic essentialisation of the local and the international respectively." These essentialising confines have important political and intellectual consequences, in this case setting the boundaries for what comprises L/I/TK et al., what types of issues L/I/TK et al. has authority to speak to, and how the aid system might engage with L/I/TK et al. in localised programming.

Discussions of L/I/TK et al. within DRR overwhelmingly construct the 'local' in terms of a 'here-and-now' framing. What is perceived to be of value – as is found commonly in constructions of

the 'local' or 'Indigenous' elsewhere (Agrawal, 1995) – are the 'everyday' practices of communities which have been developed separately from 'scientific knowledge', instead being formed through 'deep connection' to land. For instance, Gaillard et al. (2008, p.391) write that "strategies to cope with floods are anchored in daily life". Hilhorst et al. (2015, p.517) concur, drawing across cases to argue that "indigenous coping capacities are largely embedded in their lifestyle". Across the literature, "livelihood-based adaptation" is identified as a crucial body of L/I/TK et al. for mitigating disaster impacts, especially when livelihoods are agricultural and involve a 'deep connection' to the surrounding environment (Hadlos et al., 2022, p.8). This works to define L/I/TK et al. as being in some way 'deeper' than 'scientific knowledge' due to its entanglement with the problem solving of 'everyday' life and work, reflecting earlier characterisations of L/I/TK et al. as being 'implicit'.

As an indicative example, Sithole et al. (2015, p.5) define 'Indigenous knowledge' as being: "derived from the solution of everyday life problems;" "used in solving the immediate problems faced by the community;" and "valued for its ability to solve prevailing problems." The distinction made between L/I/TK et al. and 'scientific knowledge' on the basis that the former is grounded in immediate daily experiences while the latter is more 'technical' or 'formal' echoes this same view of L/I/TK et al. as being about the 'everyday' (e.g. Gaillard and Mercer, 2013; Kelman et al., 2012; Mercer, 2012; Raymond et al., 2010; Vasileiou et al., 2022).

The spatial and temporal boundaries that arise from constructing L/I/TK et al. as being about problem solving in the 'here-and-now' severely limits the political scope of L/I/TK et al., reducing its perceived authority to speak to issues beyond the 'local' and 'everyday'. Extending Moore's (2005) idea of the 'ethnic spatial fix', the 'here-and-now' framing of L/I/TK et al. attempts to fix the identity of 'local' people to their immediate surroundings and the contents within it, creating a connection between 'authenticity' and proximity to territorial boundaries. While the 'local' here is more vaguely defined than the tribal territories mapped out by colonial administrators discussed by Moore, the result is similar. The political and ontological jurisdiction of those who hold L/I/TK et al. – what they are seen to have authoritative views and knowledge on – is confined to their 'authentic' or 'natural' spatial limits and practices. This mirrors critiques of Eurocentric theorisations of indigeneity whereby "one is understood to be Indigenous only insofar as one is located in a particular place and engaging in recognizably 'Indigenous' practices" (Cameron, 2012, p.105; see also Cruikshank, 2005; Escobar, 2001). The domain of L/I/TK et al. can thus be understood in terms of spatial and temporal immediacy; 'everyday' or 'context specific' survival activities count, but the views of 'local' people towards things that are seen to transgress the boundaries of the 'local' do not.

This is not only evident in the definitions explicitly given for L/I/TK et al. discussed above, but also in what kinds of knowledge DRR practitioners and researchers attempt to identify, extract and work with when engaging with L/I/TK et al. For example, proposed methods and frameworks for the integration of L/I/TK et al. with 'scientific knowledge' for DRR tend to treat L/I/TK et al. merely as a dataset of observational or empirical data. This is especially clear in frameworks where L/I/TK et al. is

said to need 'scientific validation' for integration (e.g. Chisadza et al., 2014; Gebremedhin et al., 2020; Hiwasaki et al., 2014; Klimeš et al., 2019), but is also apparent where authors refuse such hierarchical stratification (e.g. Kniveton et al., 2015; Šakić Trogrlić and Homberg, 2018). Those who are seen to possess L/I/TK et al. are valued for their ability to capture 'novel' (Other) data hitherto inaccessible through conventional methods of generating risk data and models but which can ultimately be 'integrated' into them. While integration methods and frameworks do sometimes include means for those who are said to hold L/I/TK et al. to reflect on and input in the models that their 'data' informs (e.g. Kettle et al., 2014), this is not the norm (Šakić Trogrlić et al., 2022). This is a far cry from the conception of knowledge as being always incomplete and dependent on practice from the indeterminacy framework – 'local' people can be described as having insights gleaned from experience, not different knowledge enacted through different practices. In many cases, 'local' people participate in the management of their disaster risk in much the same way that seismic sensors or rainfall gauges can be said to participate.

The point here is that the political agency of people deemed 'local' is inherently limited when the 'local' is theorised in terms of the 'here-and-now'. Limiting engagement with L/I/TK et al. in this way imagines this knowledge as a resource to be generated and consumed, not as a truly different way of knowing and making decisions (Liboiron, 2021). It is unclear to what extent L/I/TK et al. even represents 'real knowledge' for many authors, especially where the need for 'scientific validation' is stressed. Instead, L/I/TK et al. might be described more accurately as a collection of beliefs which can point researchers or practitioners towards potentially useful empirical data for generating 'real' knowledge (Nadasdy, 1999, 2005). In either case, the primary motive in discussions of the integration and validation of L/I/TK et al. is to make it 'work' in DRR. This is a fundamentally technical approach which takes for granted the existing institutions, processes and objectives (Nadasdy, 2005); engaging with L/I/TK et al. is a matter of solving problems to enable its (co-)creation, collection, translation, integration, triangulation, communication, etc. (see Hermans et al., 2022).

That L/I/TK et al. will be overseen by the same DRR managers in the same organisations is assumed. Consideration of how the knowledge of so-called 'local' people might be helpful in reconsidering the ways through which DRR is imagined and managed, including the use of 'scientific knowledge', is notably absent. The result is that people who are said to possess L/I/TK et al. have knowledge of things that can inform 'scientific knowledge' and the decision making of researchers and practitioners, but they are not regarded as being able to make those same decisions themselves (Moghli and Shuayb, 2022; Nadasdy, 1999). This is a powerful depoliticising process which obscures and reinforces the power relations inherent to processes of managing disaster risk, identifying what constitutes L/I/TK et al., and then 'validating' and 'integrating' that knowledge into 'scientific' or 'technical' frameworks. In this way, engagements with L/I/TK et al. for disaster risk management contribute to a rich history of the depoliticisation of humanitarian, development, and environmental

management practices through their rendering technical and assumed self-perpetuation (Ferguson, 1990; Li, 2007, 2011; Radice, 2022; Nadasdy, 1999, 2005). Ultimately this depoliticisation is enabled by the view of knowledge as an apolitical matter of 'objective truth' in tandem with the theorisation of L/I/TK et al. as being fixed to the boundaries of 'here-and-now' while 'international' or 'scientific knowledge' is not.

When adopting the indeterminacy approach to knowledge, this spatial/non-spatial distinction between L/I/TK et al. and 'scientific knowledge' must be abandoned; if knowledge is a process created through particular practices, and all practice exists in space, then the location in which those practices take place influences the material-semiotic assemblages that determine knowledge. As such, just as all knowledge is socially constructed, all knowledge is spatially located – it is not possible to 'know from nowhere' (Haraway, 1988). To talk of located knowledge, however, is not to talk of *bounded* knowledge as discussed above. As Hastrup (2016, p.44) demonstrates in her examination of climate knowledge in the Arctic Circle, all knowledge of a particular place "enters into one located knowledge space" with there being "no such thing as local knowledge as opposed to [global] scientific knowledge." Within the distinction between 'local' and 'international' or 'global' knowledges there is no real difference in scale "because both are equally based in knowledge that transcends the 'local' by far" (ibid, p.42).

It is the limiting of L/I/TK et al. to *only* that which is physically and temporally proximate, binding it to the 'here-and-now', that results in "a series of closures around who and what is legible" in studies of the 'local' (Cameron, 2012, p.108). This theorisation recreates the 'local/indigenous/traditional' person as being 'deeply rooted' in a space without the authority to have knowledge beyond that which is understood to be 'local'. These arguments are mirrored elsewhere by numerous authors who speak against understanding local knowledge exclusively as knowledge of things that are considered to be 'local' through performances of perceived indigeneity, tradition, or the broadly 'non-modern' (Nadasdy, 1999, 2005; Cameron, 2012, 2023; da Costa Marques, 2014; Yeh, 2016). This also again reflects how these different ideas are theorised in fundamentally similar ways that can be captured in their inclusion in L/I/TK et al.

Should the idea of 'local knowledge' be abandoned altogether then? I suggest that within the framework of indeterminacy, local knowledge ought to refer to knowledge of something that is determined by practices proximate to that which is under question. The important difference between this conception of local knowledge (henceforth 'proximate knowledge' for the sake of clarity) and the 'local knowledge' found in discussions of L/I/TK et al. is that while proximate knowledge may emerge in relation to the physically near environment, it is not *limited* to just those relations. While Eurocentric conceptions would erect fictitious limits to delineate what is 'local' and thus what 'local knowledge' can speak to (Sabaratnam, 2013), proximate knowledge speaks to unbounded knowledge that is created through practices enacted in proximity to a particular place/event/thing. While proximate knowledge exists in relation to something else in physical

proximity but which has sprawling interconnections beyond proximate space, L/I/TK et al. is spatially bound and exists in relation to the placeless categories of the 'scientific' and 'international'.

So far I have shown how the theorisations of the 'local' which underpin localisation within DRR reproduce Eurocentricity and unjust hierarchies of knowledge. I have also proposed alternative ways of thinking about both knowledge and the local which address these issues of Eurocentricity and the 'local fix'. While this meets an identified need to critically reflect on localisation and its underlying ideas (Roepstorff, 2020), it tells us very little about *why* these particular theorisations of the 'local' and L/I/TK et al. are used and to whose benefit they are employed (Ferguson, 1990). Thus, to develop a deeper understanding of how ideas of the 'local' interact with and inform localisation as an influential policy agenda, it is important to address the instrument effects of the Eurocentric and depoliticising construction of the 'local' and L/I/TK et al. explored above (Nadasdy, 2005). I turn now to suggest some of these possible functions in the localisation agenda and examine how they benefit certain elements within the aid system to reinforce the status quo.

6. The functions of Eurocentricity and depoliticisation in localisation

The most obvious function of the 'here-and-now' theorisation of the 'local' within the localisation agenda is that control over aid interventions is largely retained by existing actors. As noted above, the depoliticising effects of the 'local fix' work to limit the political jurisdiction of certain people to particular spaces and performances of alterity, placing the matter of 'doing' aid beyond the territorial and categorical boundaries of the 'local'. This extends beyond DRR engagements with L/I/TK et al.; similar arguments have also been made in relation to environmental management (Cameron, 2012; Nadasdy, 1999, 2005), microfinance (West, 2016), humanitarian relief (Enria, 2019; James, 2020), and the localisation agenda more broadly (Al-Soufi, 2023; Shuayb, 2022; Roepstorff, 2020). Theorising knowledge in terms of aid workers who can 'truly' know and decide about things and 'local' people who can merely inform on matters within their limited authority reinforces the presumption that certain people and organisations should be principally responsible for wielding the power and influence of the aid system.

The value in this formulation of localisation as a primarily technical move towards categorising and 'integrating' the 'local' into existing structures holds obvious value for dominant donor states. Through their control of resources, donor states have a sizeable say in in how and towards what ends the aid system works and it is difficult to imagine former colonial powers conceding the influence and control afforded to them by the aid system to further the cause of decolonisation. International agreements which speak directly to the localisation of aid – most prominently the Grand Bargain, but also the different frameworks for DRR agreed over time – increasingly see 'local' integration as a technical issue, requiring 'local' actors to be professionalised

in some respects to render them more legible to donors (see Barter and Sumlut, 2023; Nwe Hlaing et al., 2024; Tozier de la Poterie and Baudoin, 2015). This speaks to the dominance of the localisation-as-decentralisation interpretation among Northern donors who hope that localisation might improve cost efficiency (Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2023), not overturn the post-colonial power imbalances within the aid system from which they benefit (De Waal, 1997).

While this explains the functions of Eurocentric constructions of the 'local' and technical framings of localisation, both of these terms are used in vague and overlapping ways with this lack of theoretical precision itself serving notable political functions. To only characterise this variety and imprecision as a form of theoretical failure, as some critics do (e.g. Roepstorff, 2020), risks overlooking the constructive instrument effects it generates. Rather, I argue that the breadth of interpretations of localisation and the taken-for-granted applications of the 'local' coalesce to create a veneer of legitimacy and radical political ambition which supports the more conservative and technically oriented implementations of localisation-as-decentralisation.

As with other development 'fuzzwords', ambiguity in the theorisation of localisation and the 'local' is used to provide "concepts that can float free of concrete referents, to be filled with meaning by their users… [and] shelter multiple agendas, providing room for manoeuvre and space for contestation" (Cornwall, 2007, p.474). Through the language of system change and decolonisation, the localisation agenda as a whole, ill-defined and containing multiple schools of thought, is widely regarded in exclusively positive terms (Schenkenberg, 2016). While this tension between internal agendas exists concurrently with wealthy donor states and UN bodies employing more conservative imaginings of localisation, then existing power relations within the aid system can remain unchanged despite the claims of turning the aid system on its head made by proponents of localisation.

That the implementation of localisation is currently limited and often unambitious is recognised by a number of voices within the aid system (Frennesson et al., 2022), however this is often framed as a problem to 'solve' within the agenda, a matter of doing localisation 'right'. The value of localisation is often assumed without consultation or co-operation with the supposedly 'local' people whom the localisation agenda hopes to 'empower' (Shuayb, 2022). Instead, advocates for localisation appear to speak on behalf of those who are assigned the identity of the 'local' (Moghli and Shuayb, 2022), representing yet another Eurocentric tendency in bypassing target subjects of research and intervention (see Sabaratnam, 2013). DRR represents a good case in point for this tendency, where international frameworks have shifted "from treating local communities as valued partners with their own expertise and relevant beliefs… to 'aid recipients' to whom tailored risk information must be transmitted" (Tozier de la Poterie and Baudoin, 2015, p.137). This again reflects the constrained imagining of the 'local' which underpins localisation and reveals how the appearance of legitimacy afforded to the agenda through its focus on upsetting unequal power relations within the aid system is itself a thin veneer resulting from those same dynamics.

Beyond the immediate power and legitimacy concerns of those shaping and implementing localisation, functions are also being served in reinforcing the wider identity of aid workers as being 'neutral' or 'disinterested'. Feigning an 'objective' positioning and performing neutrality and impartiality have long been practices employed within the aid system, whether as useful fictions to ensure humanitarian access (see Redfield, 2011), or as depoliticising mechanisms to further particular political and economic objectives (see Ferguson, 2006). The 'local/international' binary employed within the localisation agenda bolsters these identities, imagining aid workers as placeless outsiders without political linkages and connections; a far cry from their imagining as agents of Northern geopolitical interest and governance systems as some critics suggest (e.g. De Waal, 1997).

The constraining of L/I/TK et al. to the here-and-now contributes to the framing of certain issues as 'local problems' by discounting political factors that exist across and beyond the categorical boundary of the 'local'. This in-turn informs what 'international' responses speak to and what 'international' responders look like (see Scott-Smith, 2016). If the political nature of knowledge production is revealed and recognised, with universal knowledge claims thus abandoned, then it is impossible to sustain appeals to objectivity and maintain the sort of neutral cosmopolitanism which informs aid worker identities (Rajak and Stirrat, 2011). The Eurocentricity of the 'local/international' distinction is not just useful within the localisation agenda for certain actors, it also underpins the identities of aid workers and the framings of interventions in terms of 'outside', 'technical' expertise devoid of political content and which can be helpfully instrumentalised (James, 2020).

Overturning the assumption of universal knowledge and Eurocentric relational binaries such as the 'local' and 'international' or L/I/TK et al. and 'scientific knowledge' therefore requires toppling substantial vested interests in an uphill effort. If localisation is to be pursued as an anticolonial, transformative agenda aimed at radically reconfiguring the distribution of power and resources, some of the foundational ideas of the aid system must also be dispensed with or similarly transformed. For instance, adopting an indeterminacy approach to knowledge rids the aid system of an important legitimating and authority generating mechanism; if knowledge is multiple and incomplete, on what basis do 'development experts' make their 'technical' recommendations and who decides what knowledge counts? Similarly, rejecting the essentialising 'local/international' distinction demands a complete rethink of the identities of aid workers in their traditional characterisation as belonging to the placeless place of the 'international'. The crucial question here is what a changed system might look like, who attempts to design it, and who has the power to drive the prerequisite deprivileging of Northern agency and knowledge in the face of resistance from currently dominant actors?

In light of this, the localisation agenda is the wrong vehicle for attempting truly transformative change. I do not dispute that more limited forms localisation may still contribute to a greater degree of epistemic and material justice for people beyond the existing epicentres of power within the aid system. In this sense, it may still be a worthwhile pursuit when all options are

imperfect and effected by colonial legacies. Rather, I argue that the decentering of the Northern cannot be achieved within a policy agenda which itself is Eurocentrically derived from predominantly European voices and which values and sustains the category of the 'local' (Agrawal, 1995; Sabaratnam, 2013). Harris and Tuladhar (2019, p.50) demonstrate that aid workers understand the paradoxical challenge of transformative localisation, noting that their interviewees were aware that the "centrality of Northern individuals, states and agencies in determining localisation's definitions, processes and goals renders localisation itself an oxymoron". A truly transformative policy agenda must begin not from a hegemonic "will to know" that tries to categorise and contain difference (Kuokkanen, 2007, p.117), but instead through efforts to learn with and from others (Sundberg, 2014). In other words, if there is to be a transformative agenda of any kind, it must be established through engaging with people on terms of mutual respect and reciprocity from the beginning to avoid speaking on the behalf of others.

Efforts to this end already exist and have been explored elsewhere. Engagements with vernacular humanitarianisms, for instance, engage explicitly with the ontological debates covered above to directly challenge the 'local/international' distinction employed in the imagining of humanitarian identity and what counts as aid (e.g. Brković, 2023; Fengjiang, 2023). Alternatives to development, such as Buen Vivir movements in South America, recognise the political content of ideas of 'progress' and 'modernity' and provide a possible basis for challenging the coloniality in representing interventions uncritically as 'aid' (e.g. Esteva and Escobar, 2017; Kothari et al., 2014; Walsh, 2010). Interpretations of aid as activism and solidarity also highlight how assistance might be provided to people through rejections of the neutrality, impartiality and the 'local/international' divide to pursue collaborative, politically charged campaigns (Kane, 2013; Vandevoordt, 2019).

These pursuits demonstrate that rethinking the fundamentals of the aid system is possible, especially from beyond its traditional boundaries. Moving beyond harmful Eurocentric theorisations of the 'local' and 'universal knowledge' within aid – if 'aid' itself is to be sustained in any form – requires more than theory. If the more transformative, decolonial ambitions of localisation are to be brought to bear, it will require working with and learning from others in collaborative practice based outside of the traditional 'international' aid system, and thus beyond the localisation agenda itself.

7. Conclusion

In this dissertation I have examined the different interpretations that exist within the localisation agenda, separating conservative support for 'technical' reform from more ambitious and explicitly political calls for transformative change. The idea of the 'local' has been explored by looking at the making of L/I/TK et al. in relation to 'scientific knowledge', revealing how the 'local' is constructed beyond the vague and 'common-sense' appeals to the spatially near that are commonly

given. In response to the Eurocentricity and imprecision which pervades theorisations of L/I/TK et al., I have put forward Nadasdy's (2021) indeterminacy framework as a better means of theorising knowledge, as well as suggesting how local (proximate) knowledge might be coherently conceived within it. This alternative approach to knowledge has then enabled a dissection of how L/I/TK et al. is framed in terms of the here-and-now within DRR, producing a 'local fix'. Finally, I have used this analysis to argue that the localisation agenda cannot deliver on the ambitions for radical transformation which some people have attached to it. The Eurocentric theorisations of the 'local' which underpin the localisation agenda, as well as the breadth of divergent goals contained within it, serve important functions in advantaging particular actors within the aid system.

On final reflection, the adage that 'the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house' neatly captures the prospects for localisation to deliver transformative, decolonising change of the aid system. For localisation to upset Eurocentricity and coloniality within the aid system, core pillars of both the wider aid system and ideas within the localisation agenda itself would require uprooting. Distinctions between 'local/international', L/I/TK et al./'scientific knowledge', 'political/technical', and 'recipient/aid worker' all revolve around Eurocentric conceptions of what knowledge is, who can know about what, and how both knowledge and people relate to space. This is not to suggest that making changes and working within the confines of the aid system as it exists today is necessarily undesirable; I do not advocate for the wholesale abandonment of aid work. A campaign of isolationism and neglect is not the answer to the pervasiveness of colonial legacies within and beyond aid (Macrae, 1998; Matthews, 2017). That localisation will perpetuate a flawed and harmful ontological approach does not mean that it will not also prove beneficial on balance (however that might be determined) in some cases. Problematic practices of aid might still legitimately be regarded as worthwhile (Schenkenberg, 2016).

However, if transformative change is the goal, then this must happen by learning with and from others from the beginning, not as a policy agenda originating from predominantly Northern spaces, voices and minds – from Northern 'tools'. Only through accommodating multiple practices of enacting the world can it be more comprehensively understood (Nadasdy, 2021). That the world can never be completely 'known' in a limiting, containing sense should not be regarded as a problem or deficiency, but rather merely as the nature of knowledge as a political and collaborative process (Kuokkanen, 2007). Those who continue to look towards localisation as a primarily 'technical' exercise ought to consider whose interests they are serving in doing so, including their own. On the other hand, those who approach localisation as a vehicle for more radical change should be aware of its limits; they ought to ask themselves whether the localisation agenda provides the right kind of 'tools' to affect the desired change and, if not, where else they might turn.

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