

INTRODUCTION

Researching Africa – for whom and to what end?

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Most of the research in and on Africa has long held an intellectual tradition that measures African societies against externally produced ideals of order, progress, and modernity. This view manifests across disciplines, such as modernisation theory, globalisation discourse, and liberal developmentalism, with a common narrative that Africa is lacking, delayed, or incomplete, as though the continent were a failed version of the West or a social world awaiting rescue from the Western world. Such traditions have not merely described Africa; they have actively framed the terms on which African realities are interpreted and governed, and their transformation pursued.

This special issue, **"Researching Africa: For Whom and to What End?"**, emerges from a conference (Researching Africa Conference 2024) during which this intellectual tradition was challenged. This collection, as well as the conference that gave birth to it, was motivated by the need to interrogate what research in Africa is for, whose interests it serves, what worlds it seeks to reproduce, and what futures it makes thinkable. The questions that guided the conversations included: What kinds of knowledge are produced when African societies are studied through categories that are external to their own historical and ontological conditions? What happens when research is tied to developmental ambitions whose meaning is rarely examined but routinely assumed? And how should we think about the relationship between knowledge production, power, and social transformation in contexts where both the material and epistemic infrastructures

of research are often externally oriented? In short, we are compelled to ask not only how research is done, but also what it does, for whom it works, and to what end it is ultimately directed.

A central concern of this special issue is the extractivist tendency that continues to shape research in Africa. Communities frequently provide the data, histories, experiences, and social worlds from which scholarship is made, yet they do not always benefit from the knowledge produced. In this sense, research may offer the promise of social transformation without centring the communities researched. The issue, therefore, invites reflections on the uses of research results within African communities, the false hopes that research may sometimes generate, and the structural limits of knowledge production that remains externally funded and theorised, conceptually dependent, or institutionally accountable to audiences beyond the continent.

Also, the papers in this issue challenge the way “development” is viewed and researched. Research, especially in today’s research and funding landscape, is often justified in terms of its contribution to development, yet the meaning of development remains deeply contested. Whose idea of development is being pursued? What conception of the good life underpins it? Why do Eurocentric visions of modernity continue to exert such force on African scholarship, planning, and policy? And what alternative aspirations, rooted in the lived social worlds of African peoples and communities, are obscured when development is imagined as movement towards externally validated models of political order, education, economy, health, family, governance, and well-being? This special issue treats development not as an unquestioned goal but as a problem of intellectual and political critique.

The papers in this issue approach these questions from different disciplinary locations, but they are united by a shared concern with the politics, purposes, and consequences of knowledge production in Africa. Some of the contributions engage directly with the epistemic problem itself, showing how the coloniality of knowledge production continues to shape development thought and institutional practice in postcolonial Africa (e.g. Reconstructing the coloniality of knowledge production and development in postcolonial Africa). Others examine how indigenous political systems, community-based institutions, and traditional mechanisms of conflict management continue to

offer resources for rethinking governance, justice, social control, and national stability (e.g. Indigenous community-based political system and national stability in Africa; Okonko masquerade cult and communal conflict management in Ndoki communities of Ukwu-East LGA, Abia State, Nigeria). These papers do not romanticise the indigenous or present it as a simple return to the past. Rather, they invite a more careful engagement with African social worlds as sites of political thought, moral order, institutional memory, and practical knowledge.

Other contributions turn attention to the changing conditions of everyday life in contemporary Africa (e.g. Gendered representations of sexuality and romantic relationships in social media comedy skits by Nigerians; Families in the digital age: How technology is reshaping parent-child relationships in Enugu Urban, Nigeria; Social media, patriarchy, and women's political participation: Reimagining democratic development in Nsukka Urban, in the context of the Africa we want). They examine how digital technologies, social media platforms, and new forms of popular culture are reshaping family relationships, gender relations, political participation, sexuality, romantic life and other aspects of social life. These studies show that digital spaces are not merely tools of communication or entertainment. They are also arenas in which power, morality, identity, intimacy, and social expectation are produced and contested. Whether in the representation of gender relations in social media comedy skits, the use of social media for women's political participation, or the impact of digital technology on parent-child relationships, the papers insist that African social change must be studied from within the lived realities of those experiencing it.

The issues addressed in some papers also extend into education, youth development, infrastructure, and institutional life, where the relationship between knowledge, policy, and social transformation becomes especially visible. The paper on juvenile delinquency, and infrastructure abandonment raise important questions about how African societies respond to inherited colonial systems, urban transformation, weak institutions, and policy failure (e.g. Urbanisation and juvenile delinquency in Nigeria: Evidence from Nsukka Local Government Area, Enugu State; Weak institutions and infrastructure abandonment in Nigeria: A policy and governance Analysis). They ask what happens when educational practice ignores the linguistic realities of learners, when urbanisation

disrupts traditional systems of social control without replacing them with effective support structures, and when public infrastructure projects are conceived and implemented without sufficient research, accountability, and continuity. In these different ways, the papers remind us that research becomes meaningful only when it speaks to concrete social problems and to the communities whose lives are affected by them.

These contributions interrogate power and positionality in research outcomes; community roles in research design, participation, and expectation; the politics of access to "the field"; the role of funders as gatekeepers of research agendas; and the ethical complexities surrounding data production, interpretation, and manipulation. They also extend into applied arenas where epistemic struggles are especially pronounced, including social work, education, legal training, public health, governance, digital culture, family life, political participation, infrastructure, and economic life.

Across these domains, a shared question persists: how might research move beyond extractive representation towards forms of inquiry that are accountable to African communities, attentive to ontological diversity, and open to alternative imaginaries of collective life?

Taken together, the papers in this issue do not offer a single answer to the question posed in the title. Rather, they insist that the question itself must remain central to scholarly practice. To ask "for whom?" is to reopen the politics of knowledge production. To ask "to what end?" is to challenge the teleology that often passes unquestioned in research and intervention. This special issue, therefore, seeks not only to deepen critique, but also to create space for re-imagining the purposes, publics, and possibilities of research in Africa. In doing so, it invites a shift from "research on" African communities as objects of knowledge to "research with" and "research for Africa" as participants in the making of intellectually and socially meaningful futures.