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## Reflections Upon our Way of Invoking an Indigenous Paradigm to Co-Explore Community Mobilization against Irresponsible Practices of Foreign-Owned Companies in Nwoya District, Uganda

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## Reflections Upon our Way of Invoking an Indigenous Paradigm to Co-Explore Community Mobilization against Irresponsible Practices of Foreign-Owned Companies in Nwoya District, Uganda

### Abstract

This article offers our reflections upon how we invoked an Indigenous paradigm in undertaking/facilitating qualitative research in a setting in Northern Uganda (2020/2021). The research was aimed at co-exploring with participants how they mobilized as a community against social and environmental injustices attendant with the entry of certain foreign enterprises into their community. We set up four focus group sessions in three villages to generate discussion in regard to how they had built up a community protest (with some success) against the operations of two enterprises who had been operational in the community. In our article we do not concentrate so much on the content of the focus group sessions (or the ensuing dissemination/discussion workshop), but rather, on how we enacted our understanding of an Indigenous paradigm in this research initiative. In this way we share possibilities for activating an Indigenous paradigm in the doing of research. We do this in order to help strengthen and further credentialize this paradigm in academic paradigmatic discourses and help secure its respected place on the paradigmatic “dance floor” (to use a metaphor offered by Chilisa, 2020).

### Keywords

Indigenous-informed research, decolonization, relational sampling, community learning, responsiveness to participants, dissemination as discussion

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# Reflections Upon our Way of Invoking an Indigenous Paradigm to Co-Explore Community Mobilization against Irresponsible Practices of Foreign-Owned Companies in Nwoya District, Uganda

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This article offers our reflections upon how we invoked an Indigenous paradigm in undertaking/facilitating qualitative research in a setting in Northern Uganda (2020/2021). The research was aimed at co-exploring with participants how they mobilized as a community against social and environmental injustices attendant with the entry of certain foreign enterprises into their community. We set up four focus group sessions in three villages to generate discussion in regard to how they had built up a community protest (with some success) against the operations of two enterprises who had been operational in the community. In our article we do not concentrate so much on the content of the focus group sessions (or the ensuing dissemination/discussion workshop), but rather, on how we enacted our understanding of an Indigenous paradigm in this research initiative. In this way we share possibilities for activating an Indigenous paradigm in the doing of research. We do this in order to help strengthen and further credentialize this paradigm in academic paradigmatic discourses and help secure its respected place on the paradigmatic “dance floor” (to use a metaphor offered by Chilisa, 2020).

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## Introduction

In this article, we reflect upon how we proceeded with a qualitative research study which embraced our desire to invoke what various scholars call an Indigenous research paradigm. This paradigm is regarded as distinct, existing alongside the so-called “big four” – so-named by Dillard (2006, p. 61) – namely, postpositivist, constructivist, pragmatist, and transformative paradigms (see also Chilisa, 2012, 2020; Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Dillard, 2006; Held, 2019; Kovach, 2009; Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004; Rix et al., 2019; Romm, 2015b, 2018, 2020b; Smith, 1999, 2012; Weber-Pillwax, 1999, 2003; Wilson, 2003, 2008; Wulff, 2010, 2021). Dillard opposes the hegemony of the “big four” paradigms that are cited in much of the academic literature on paradigms, which renders less credible notions of inquiry proffered by Indigenous scholars or scholars of color who seek modes of research that “resonate with our spirit as well as our intellect” (p. 60). In a conversation with Cynthia Dillard during a conference at the University of Toronto in 2013, Francis Adyanga (the first author of this article) agreed with Dillard’s stand against the hegemonic paradigms which in effect serve

to discredit non-Western paradigms when she suggested that “we can’t sit and watch this injustice masquerading unscathed.”

Likewise, Chilisa (2020) pleads for us to appreciate the metaphor of “paradigms in concert” on the paradigmatic “dance floor” – which would mean that “Indigenous paradigms are allowed to dance their own steps” (p. 21) rather than being subsumed under other paradigms, unappreciated for their distinct value, or even simply ignored as a paradigmatic option. In her pictorial representation of the circle of the dance floor, she names Indigenous paradigms, postpositivism, constructivism, pragmatism, and transformative stances, hereby depicting Indigenous paradigms as offering a fifth position alongside the oft-named major four (even Makombe (2017, p. 3367), as an African author, in his “expose” of paradigms and their links to methods and research design, also makes no mention of Indigenous paradigms).

As remarked upon by Edwards et al., “while there is no single Indigenous research paradigm, there are some common foundations in trusting relationships and transparent accountability” (2020, p. 9) in the inquiry process. As we hope to highlight through our article, the concept of “relationality” is central to the theory and practice of an Indigenous paradigm.

Briefly put, Chilisa explains that what is distinct about an Indigenous research paradigm is that it embraces “ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions emanating from the cultures, histories, philosophies and lived experiences of those [often] marginalized by Euro-Western paradigms” (Chilisa, 2017, p. 814). An Indigenous research paradigm takes seriously the cultural legacies of native inhabitants of Western-colonized areas, while inviting a (re)consideration/revitalization of these in terms of their import in the current era. Wilson summarizes the significance of invoking an Indigenous paradigm, where the research itself is intended to become a “source of enrichment to the lives of community participants” while bearing in mind a responsiveness to “all of creation” – that is, not only to human “beings” (Wilson, 2008, p. 55).

In the case of our Uganda research, we focused on relationships in terms of an Indigenous-informed relational perspective, where, as Wilson puts it, relationships include “interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental, and spiritual relationships, and relationships with ideas” (2008, p. 74). Ontologically speaking, Wilson notes that we can appreciate multiple realities because reality includes our relationship with “the world;” so that it is not “out there,” independent of our relationship with “it.” This, in turn, implies an epistemology, in that knowing, too, is relational – it is developed in relationship between knowers engaging with the world. Axiologically, we as knowers (and actors) are called upon to embrace a commitment to strengthening relational existence in all its forms. As far as methodology is concerned, Wilson suggests that what is of prime importance is to create what he calls a research “ceremony.” In such a ceremony, people – professional researchers and research participants as co-researchers – can together build a climate where they are ready to “step beyond the everyday and accept a raised state of consciousness” (p. 69) as they reconsider their thinking in relationship with each other and with “all of creation” (p. 74). In her book on Indigenous research methodologies, Chilisa (2012) favorably cites Wilson’s work when she suggests that in the practice of research, the idea is to capitalize on “the multiple connections” that we have with those around us “and with the living and the nonliving” (p. 3).

Our article is structured around elucidating how our way of proceeding with participants in the Uganda research can be seen as having been inspired by an Indigenous paradigm. In order to contextualize our article, it should be noted that Norma (born in South Africa) is classified as White in terms of South Africa’s official apartheid categorizations introduced by the national government in 1948, while Francis is (Black) Ugandan and has taken issue with the way in which Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of knowing have been inferiorized in the process of producing Western knowledge (Akena, also known as Adyanga, 2012, 2014, 2022). His interests on issues of Indigenous people emanate from many years

witnessing the Ugandan government's marginalization of minority groups regarding social service delivery. This was later buttressed by seeing the unequal treatment of Indigenous people in Ontario, Canada where Francis engaged in post-graduate study and work, before returning to live in Uganda. Lastly, he was motivated by the United Nations Minorities Declaration which seeks to promote and protect the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic minorities to enjoy the political and social stability of the society in which they live (UN General Assembly, 1999). Norma regards herself as "Indigenous-oriented" in the sense of subscribing to an Indigenous research paradigm (synthesized from reading work by Indigenous researchers worldwide) and having learned much from her interactions with many Indigenous scholars and sages over her career (see Romm, 2018, for more detail on her positionality as she conceives it). Her positionality is also articulated by Romm and Adyanga (2017) and again in a more recent conversation (personal communication, February 2022) when Francis, as part of a dialogue with Norma, said the following:

You are an ally, you are an indigenous-oriented scholar, but for me I call you indigenous scholar, because of the way you articulate issues and because you know the importance of respect, relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility/accountability. All those four R's [central to the Indigenous paradigm] are deeply embedded in your professional practices and they are also deeply embedded in the way you train your students.

Speaking from her Maori background, Ritchie (2015), in her discussion of "counter-colonial research methodologies" makes the point that "there are a number of non-Indigenous critical scholars who have worked in partnership with Indigenous colleagues to raise the profile of Indigenous knowledges [and ways of knowing] within their research and methodologies" (p. 82). Ritchie explains that this kind of stance as taken by such scholars (whom we suggest can be called "Indigenous-oriented") involves "opening one's worldview to respectfully incorporate an Indigenous worldview," and implies "engaging in transformative social, cultural, and ecological praxis" (p. 82). This is because it moves "outside of a monolingual, monocultural focus to embrace multilogicality," and in the process it "revalidates ways of being, knowing and doing that the colonial ancestors dismissed as inferior" (p. 83). She points out that one of the strengths of Indigenous onto-epistemologies is that they have the potential to restore our damaged relationships not only with one another as humans, but with the "more-than-human world" (p. 82). The phrase "more-than-human world" is sometimes used by Indigenous authors to avoid placing humans as central in "the world" – that is, to avoid an anthropocentric approach (Mabunda & McKay, 2021).

Indigenous and Indigenous-oriented scholars also take issue with the prevalent ways of referencing the texts of those Western authors who have offered critiques of "conventional" research (which upholds the Cartesian subject/object dualism), without acknowledging the contributions of Indigenous authors who, likewise, question this binary (these Western critiques spring from Euro-American authors who name themselves as poststructuralist, posthumanist, and/or post qualitative). Indigenous authors have similarly pointed to Indigenous concepts of relationality as being in direct contrast to the view of humanity and of knowledge creation expressed in Descartes' famous expression: "I think therefore I am" (Chilisa, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Ngara, 2017). Indigenous ways of renouncing/foregoing the Cartesian divide between "knower" (as subject) and "object" (of knowledge) tend to be ignored by those writing from "post" philosophical perspectives.

Higgins, who defines himself on the website of the University of Alberta as having a "longstanding involvement with cross-cultural educational programming in over 50 reserve and urban Aboriginal communities" (<https://ualberta.academia.edu/MarcHiggins>), shows

resonances between Karen Barad's view of intra-relations and the intentionality in Gregory Cajete's "ecology of relationships" (Cajete is Tewa writer and professor from Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico). According to Higgins, both Barad and Cajete signal "a way-of-knowing-in-being in which the world is enacted through the flux of relationships" (Higgins, 2016, p. 269). Higgins therefore suggests that authors citing Barad's (2007) critique of Descartes' subject/object dualism (where she poses a different onto-epistemology) should also be citing the onto-epistemological writings of Cajete (e.g., 1984, 2000).

Maqutu (2018) makes a similar point in regard to the contribution of the African philosophy of Ubuntu when she suggests that the African perspective has been undervalued and "misplaced from the recipe of Western philosophy" (2018, p. 6). Maqutu recognizes that Ubuntu is not easy to define: "because the African worldview is not easily and neatly categorised and defined, any definition would be a simplification of a more expansive, flexible and philosophical accommodative idea" (p. 8). But she states that broadly defined, it "denotes both a traditional African form of life and a communal or communitarian ethic" (2018, p. 9), or as Quan-Baffour and Romm put it, Ubuntu manifests when we practice "we-directed" styles of living (2015, p. 460). Furthermore, as noted by Chilisa, an inclusive "we" includes not only the quest for caring relationships with other humans, but also implies a relationship "with all of creation. It is with the cosmos; it is with the animals, with plants, with the earth" (Chilisa, 2020, p. 24, citing Wilson, 2008, p. 56).

As mentioned above, an Indigenous paradigm is grounded in a *relational ontology* which sees "relationships" rather than "objects" as constituting reality, and which sees people enmeshed in a dynamic web of relationships of interdependence (Chilisa, 2020). Chilisa (2009) also explains that a *relational epistemology* recognizes that "knowing" is a function of our relationships and is generated via these relationships, and from an ethical perspective, a *relational axiology* suggests that we are accountable to all our relations in the research context.

How, then, did the spirit of an Indigenous paradigm infuse our work in the Ugandan project? In answering this question, we find particularly relevant Wilson's remark that as he got down to explain what an Indigenous paradigm "is all about," he realized that "much of this knowledge" [regarding doing research through an Indigenous paradigm] came to me in intuitive fashion" (2008, p. 69). Likewise, with this article, while we both were well acquainted with the value of the different Rs of the Indigenous paradigm (respect, relationality, reciprocity and responsibility) – which helped to guide the research process – as we got down to writing the article, we had to reflect together upon how the project had evolved in resonance with an Indigenous paradigm. Before we continue with our narrative, it should be noted that due to COVID-19, which prohibited Norma's travel, Francis, together with chosen research assistants (RAs) familiar with the research locality, were at the forefront of actual physical involvement with all the relevant parties (including a trusted Chief of the villages in the community where the participants lived). Francis and Norma engaged in extensive email discussions, including designing the questions that became the basis of our interview guide for the four focus group (FG) sessions and in emphasizing the importance of holding the "dissemination" workshop as a discussion forum. In this article we indicate how our way of proceeding with this research was based in research literature – some of which we were familiar with before proceeding with the project and some of which we looked up for the purposes of this article.

What we focus on is what we regard as relevant for reflection (on the part of ourselves and readers of this article) regarding possibilities for enacting an Indigenous paradigm in the facilitation of research.

We will concentrate on our ways of:

- Setting up our research in accordance with a decolonization agenda
- Using a relational sampling method

- Gaining oral consent
- Facilitating the FG sessions to encourage community reflection and learning (including how we, as researchers, learned from the participants in the co-research process)
- Expressing a sense of community with the participants and our allegiance to the movement towards more social and ecological justice
- Complying with participants' requests to speak with local and national government officials as part of our obligation to take forward their anguish and their suggestions
- Organizing a dissemination workshop with the study participants to present our report and invite further discussion
- Developing our analyses for wider audiences, which would be non-deficit in character and would express the contribution of Indigenous wisdom to discourses on "development" (this included asking the participants during the FG sessions and in the final dissemination/discussion workshop what issues they felt needed highlighting to share with wider audiences)

On this last point, we underscore how the participant reflections point to the value of social and ecological relationality as part of their cultural heritage, which is to be respected and not devalued in the name of "development." We will not fully delve into links between the participants' Indigenous conceptions of relationality and the writings of Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors who refer to relationships as the grounding for sustainable development. This is reserved for another article.

The nub of our argument about non-deficit analysis is that we need to show due respect towards Indigenous perspectives in terms of their relevance for the current era rather than dismissing them as implying an unrealistic return to a romanticized "past" and therefore as not relevant to local and global discourses regarding approaches to addressing current challenges. In this regard, we concur with Simon and Salter's suggestion that we need to contest, as part of decolonizing research practice, "why some narratives are in play [in social life] more powerfully than others and in whose interest" (2020, pp. 87-88).

### **Brief Background to the Project**

In March 2020, while Francis was driving his young brother to Nwoya district, they had a conversation about some protests against a factory operating in the area. On his way back from dropping his brother off, he stopped in the village hosting said factory (Bukona Agro Processors) and informally spoke with a few people at a trading center to understand from their experiences some of the issues that his brother had raised during their conversation. Recognizing that he spoke the local language (Acholi), some of the villagers opened up to him about what they considered to be the dire social and ecological effects of the Bukona factory, which is Indian-owned and had set up its Agro processing operations in 2016. According to these villagers, the factory had not functioned according to promises made and had been polluting the waters and land of the community. They indicated that, in response, the community had mobilized and managed to organize so that the National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) stopped the operations of this factory, pending Bukona acting more responsibly (NEMA, 2019). At the time of writing this article, the factory was still closed. The community had also managed to insist that another foreign-owned construction company called ZhongMei (a Chinese road construction company) build a borehole to supply the community with clean water due to the water pollution they had caused. Later this Chinese company left the district and moved on (as is normal practice in road construction).

After hearing about the grievances of the protestors, Francis mentioned this to Norma while attending an online (due to COVID-19) conference organized by Francis towards the end

of 2020. We realized that we could possibly use our research skills to set up FG sessions in the community where they could continue to discuss together how they had developed the momentum of the “movement” against the companies and how they had built a collective sense of agency to confront the felt injustices. The discussions on the part of the community members which we hoped to arrange via the FG sessions could, we thought, help them to recognize their collective strength and also to discuss in-depth together their understandings regarding the involvement of foreign companies in their community.

Through the aid of a trusted village Chief in the area, Francis was able to arrange for FG discussions to be initiated. In the rural community of northern Uganda, it is a practice that outsiders coming into that community for any activity need to first gain approval from the traditional leadership. Being from northern Uganda, Francis was aware of this (these traditional leaders (i.e., Chiefs) inherit their position on the basis of their belonging to a royal family; these leaders are different from the councillors who are elected leaders). So, when Francis approached the community, he asked a group of people whom he met at the trading station/centre to be directed to the home of a Chief. They decided to take him to the home of a Chief at the local (village) level. Had they not trusted this Chief, they might have taken him to another. Francis briefed the Chief about our study and its focus on foreign-owned companies in their community. He told him that we thought it might be fruitful to have FG sessions in his community so as to develop deeper understanding about their experiences with foreign-owned companies and their protests. The Chief indicated that he was familiar with the organizing of FG discussions as he had organized these in a previous government position which he had held before he retired and he felt that he could mobilize his people around such a project.

The Chief then held a meeting to which he invited all interested members of the community and Francis explained what the research would be aimed at exploring; namely, issues connected with the protest movement. He explained to prospective participants that if they wished to be part of the research, they would participate in FG meetings in which the purpose was to generate discussion within the group rather than hear individuals simply state their opinions. This, as he knew from his Indigenous background, would have resonated with their Indigenous understandings of collective and relational knowing; this purpose was familiar to them. He explained that the discussions would be prompted by certain questions posed by the facilitators that would help focus the conversation. He indicated that the facilitators involved in the project would be two research assistants (RAs) and himself (involved in different FG sessions), while a researcher from South Africa was virtually involved. (The RAs were post-graduate students at a public university located near the study district who had been recommended to Francis by one of the professors. They belong to the Acholi groups like the study participants; hence they were conversant with local culture and spoke the same native language.)

Francis mentioned to the participants that the sessions would be mutual learning encounters in which the participants could learn from each other, and the research team would also learn from them. He explained that if a participant did not want to speak, no one would be pressuring them to speak: it was entirely voluntary. He furthermore stated that in any reporting by the research team (oral or written) in which statements of participants might be included, only the gender of the speaker would be mentioned and no other identifying information. He mentioned that after the FG sessions, the research team would compile a draft report which would be shared and discussed in a workshop (study dissemination workshop) about eight weeks after the FG sessions had been held.

With this intent explained, he asked if 40 people (about 20 men and 20 women) would volunteer to be part of the research, so that FGs would have more or less equal numbers of men and women. The 40 participants would be divided into four groups of ten across three villages in order to encourage many ideas to be raised and discussed. Forty participants gave “oral

consent.” Thereafter, Francis and Norma proceeded to construct a training guide that included the FG questions to guide the group facilitation by Francis and the RAs. Francis and Norma liaised back and forth via email to create a set of stimulating questions based on what Francis had heard from the initial encounters with the villagers about their concerns. The training manual, which Francis discussed face-to-face with the RAs, offered guidelines for facilitating the FG sessions and especially for introducing the purpose to the participants (as a process of mutual learning), so that the participants could feel at ease to contribute and to add to, modify, or question one another’s statements. This process was encouraged so as to generate varied perspectives around which participants could engage.

While the RAs each made the arrangements to facilitate a FG session in two of the villages, Francis facilitated two additional FGs (one RA facilitated a FG in a village where Francis also facilitated a session). As Francis read the transcripts after the FG sessions, he realized that the issues raised in the two FG sessions facilitated by the RAs largely echoed the ones conducted by him (but his sessions had lasted longer, namely, 1¾ and two hours respectively, with more probing on his part during the sessions). The quotations from FG participants that we use in this article derive from the FG sessions facilitated by Francis.

Regarding the social positions of the study participants, most were peasant/subsistence farmers who had been asked by the Bukona Agro Processors factory at the start of its operations (in 2016) to grow cassava with the understanding that they would be paid for their produce at a pre-arranged price. It was later discovered that the cassava was under-priced at the point of selling and at times was not being bought at all from the farmers. The company had instead bought up land to grow cassava themselves; so that they were not dependent on the farmers in the community, and thus were able to undercut the price. This “land issue” was one of the issues that caused much upset for the farmers that came out during the FG discussions and again in the workshop.

There was also a small segment of participants (mainly youth) who had become employees of the factory since its inception (previously they had also been peasant/subsistence farmers). Their presence in the FG sessions was helpful in that they were able to share “inside information” about the working conditions and pay (and sometimes delayed payment) for workers, and also issues related to sexual harassment of some of the females. Across all the groups, the participants offered detail about the way in which Bukona had been polluting the land and the rivers with waste from the factory. This is what had finally prompted the community to begin to mobilize, with the women in particular insisting that community meetings be held to consider possible actions. In all the FG sessions, various men and women pointed to the role of women in promoting community-level meetings that ensured that the villagers’ complaints would not be confined to their individual homes. Adyanga and Romm (in press) offer more detail on this in terms of its significance for gender relationships.

When the community noticed that none of their local government leaders seemed to be making any headway in speaking to the responsible people in the company and no action ensued after the officials apparently visited the company, the community approached the local radio station, Mega radio. Mega proceeded to publicize the environmental issues. This prompted the local leaders to invite the NEMA to investigate the Bukona factory which, in turn, led to its closure. Meanwhile, the participants in the FG sessions indicated that the pollution of the river had been exacerbated by another foreign-owned company (ZhongMei). Following a community protest at the ZhongMei gate where the community refused to allow entry or exit to anyone until they were taken seriously, this company constructed a borehole so that the community would be provided with clean water. As indicated above, after drilling this borehole, and once the Chinese company had finalized this part of the road, they moved on. During the FG sessions, some of the participants conjectured that perhaps the strong protest by the community at the gate of ZhongMei may have alerted the district leaders (elected leaders

representing the locals at the district level) to the community “strength” and that this helped to prompt the leaders to call in NEMA to investigate the Bukona Agro processor factory’s waste disposal mechanisms.

As the RAs and Francis engaged with the participants by asking the questions laid out in the interview guide (see our Appendix) and also by some further probing, the participants responded to the “tenor” of the questions posed. The questions were designed to be sensitive to the concerns indicated by some of the villagers upon Francis’s first encountering them, while enabling them to reflect further on the role(s) of the foreign investors and how the community had managed to mobilize in protest as a collective (in terms of a sense of justice), including what lessons can be learned for themselves and others in this regard. Our questions were not designed to express a neutrality on our part, but to “resonate” with social and ecological justice concerns. The questions were intended to, in Wilson’s terms (2008), create a ceremony of increased understanding of the issues of concern as the FG participants generated discussions around them. Our involvement with the participants thus was not premised on an epistemology of “detachment” on the part of professional researchers aiming to be more or less “value-free.” Smith (1999, p. 5) indicates that the conventional research protocol of mainstream research where researchers try to understand from a “distance” is out of place in Indigenous and decolonizing research. As she states: “research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions.” M. Gergen (2020), in referring to the notion that research is, as she puts it, “value-invested” (2020, p. 19), indicates that constructionist-oriented social researchers (who appreciate that the world as “known” is always a co-construction) “are conscious of how a research practice constructs the research participants, themselves, and the world” (p. 19). She goes on to add that:

As well, they [social constructionist researchers] may be sensitive to indigenous viewpoints which may diverge from their own, differential power relations among diverse groups, and ethical concerns that are absent from those accepted in Western scientific communities [especially insofar as the Indigenous paradigm is de-credentialized]. (2020, p. 19)

In terms of a decolonizing agenda, researchers are called upon to appreciate the concerns which have attended processes of colonization, and which continue to afflict marginalized communities in a postcolonial context.

### **Setting up the Research in Accordance with a Decolonization Agenda**

As indicated in our brief background to the project, our decision to facilitate the research process arose while we were attending an online conference in 2020. The conference was hosted jointly by the Society for the Advancement of Science in Africa (SASA) and the Ministry of Health (MoH) of Uganda. While waiting for other speakers to come online, Francis mentioned to Norma the pollutive consequences with detrimental health and environmental effects taking place in certain villages in a community in Northern Uganda. We were both cognisant of the importance of organizing research around the concerns of (prospective) participants rather than formulating a topic based on a theoretical “literature review” which identifies gaps in the literature that require further study, but which has little or no relevance for the participants (Mkabela, 2005).

When we say that we initiated the process with the involvement of the Chief who decided to call a meeting with the villagers to ascertain their interest, we want to emphasize that in terms of a decolonization agenda we did not have preconceived ideas regarding how the

participants might present their deliberations around their strategies for mobilizing against felt injustice, nor regarding how and whether they would consider a potentially constructive involvement of foreign enterprises in this (and other) communities. Our proposed topic and the ways of interacting with participants were, we believe, sufficiently open to allow for possibilities to be explored within the community.

In regard to researching social movement organizing more generally, Bivens (2021) urges that it is important to experiment with cooperative forms of inquiry between professional researchers and such organizers. She underlines that in the process of re-imagining justice, we need to acknowledge that “ordinary people can think and theorize as they act collectively” (Choudry, 2015, p. 2, as cited by Bivens, 2021, p. 404). Our research was likewise premised on an understanding of the co-production of theory-building and knowledge-making, as also emphasized by Indigenous authors positing that professional researchers should not dominate how knowledge-making ensues. Bivens refers here to Dillard’s point that in this process we should not be confined to a “handful of research paradigms that define ‘what is or is not important or reasonable’” in the doing of research (Dillard, 2006, p. 62, as cited by Bivens, 2021, p. 401). What we chose to encourage in what Wilson calls “research is ceremony” was a research intent to facilitate a “raised state of consciousness” (Wilson, 2008, p. 69) so that people together (including ourselves) could develop knowledge-making anew. We suggest that our provocative questions, focused around specific issues that we posed for reconsideration, were helpful in contributing to this.

### **The Sampling Method Used (Relational Sampling)**

The participants in this research were recruited from across three different villages: namely, the villages directly surrounding the Bukona factory. Our intention was to generate what had not yet been discussed at length in a focused fashion, and to engage with community members in a way that could become meaningful to them and others in the community. We also hoped that their insights might become relevant to other communities who may be similarly considering protesting against the unregulated disruption by “big business” on the quality of social and ecological life (perhaps through our writing these ideas up in various forums).

As pointed out in our brief background earlier, one criterion that we specified when we invited participants to volunteer was that the gender composition of the participants should be more or less equal – ideally 20 men and 20 women – in order to “represent” the gender composition in the community. We also decided to request equal numbers of men and women to participate in this project in order to validate women in the community. Furthermore, Francis specifically suggested that it would be helpful if, say, ten workers from the factory (again divided equally by gender) would participate, so that the workers (who were mainly youth) could also be “represented.” This meant that in terms of social categorization the youth were not left out (and would not feel left out) – and also their inside stories regarding their work in the factory could be expressed. As it happened, nine workers volunteered, but we still had 40 volunteers altogether. The representation of social categorizations here is not aligned with efforts to make generalizations to some larger population as in quantitatively directed research, but to make provision for a wide variety of issues of concern in the community to be included (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

As far as the participants’ decisions to volunteer are concerned, we believe that they felt they could likely contribute to a discussion on the community protest. They also probably appreciated Francis’s statements to the effect that the FGs would facilitate opportunities for them to discuss their views together in a focused fashion. We surmise that they also volunteered

because they considered that it would give them a platform for their voices to become heard in various forums (beyond the FG sessions).

We can label our sampling procedure as “purposive” in that it was based on what Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007, p. 242) define as “the researcher purposefully selects individuals, groups, and settings for this phase that increases understanding of phenomena” based on participants’ (presumed) richness of knowledge and experience. Or, as Liamputtong summarizes, in purposive sampling for FG research as in other qualitative research, “put simply, the participants need to be selected to suit the investigated issue” (2011, p. 53). While these authors are not coming from an indigenous paradigmatic perspective, we could label our sampling approach as *relational sampling* (Kovach, 2009). While Kovach sees some resonance between the proposals of those writing from a qualitative framework and researchers advocating Indigenous methodologies, she highlights specifically, by referring to the advice of Wilson (2008), that, as she puts it, it is “time to release our dependency on Western research traditions” (Kovach, 2009, pp. 25-26). This requires highlighting the principles specifically of Indigenous methodologies. In view hereof, she states that in relational sampling, which is the preferred sampling approach when adopting an Indigenous methodological perspective, the sampling is based on the *participants trusting the researcher(s)* and expecting that the community might derive some benefit from the research endeavor (pp. 125-126).

Relational sampling “is not just a matter of the *researcher* choosing participants” (Kovach, 2009, p. 126, our emphasis). That is, it is not a matter of the professional researcher being in control of the selection of the study sample in order to “advance knowledge” which may have no relevance for the community. Kovach indicates that in doing research in Indigenous communities, “the process is more reciprocal” and is based on the felt “trustworthiness of the researcher” (2009, p. 125). In the case of the Ugandan community, we suggest that the participants’ choosing to be part of the study was based partly on the fact that a trusted community leader (the Chief) “vouched” for the researchers in addition to Francis indicating how the research may be meaningful to them. Of course, once sampling is seen in this relational light, this places obligations on the researchers, as Wulff notes, “to the people who we include in our research – we cannot let them down” (2021, p. 1160).

### **The Process of Gaining (Oral) Consent**

Francis had prepared written consent forms in the local language (Acholi), which described the purpose of the research, what would be expected from the participants if they agreed to participate, their right to withdraw, and their right to anonymity in any reporting. He also specified in the ethical application to his university that because many people in this community have not acquired formal education and are illiterate in this sense, their consent to participate would be verbal in the presence of other community members – as is often the case in verbal agreements endorsed by community witnesses. In the meeting arranged by the Chief, Francis realized in situ that asking those participants who may be able to write to sign the written consent form might appear as if he is asking them to sign a “contract,” which could make them suspicious of the process. This is an experience mentioned by many researchers engaging with vulnerable populations and especially with people more familiar with oral modes of communication (Adyanga, 2019; Chilisa, 2009; Crow et al., 2006; Ellis & Earley, 2006; Kovach, 2009; Romm, 2018). Most institutional ethical review boards across the globe “press” for written consent forms or, failing this, “thumb signing” to be organized by researchers – mainly to protect the institution legally in case of “adverse events occurring within the research” (Truman, 2003, para 3.13).

But provision is made by some institutions for oral consent procedures. This is the case with Kabale University (where Francis is based) and also the University of South Africa (where

Norma is based), as well as many universities and research institutions in various geographical contexts now beginning to recognize Indigenous protocols for research (Romm, 2018). Of course, we were aware of concerns of universities who might be apprehensive about legal consequences if participants feel maltreated/misled by the university researchers, but we assured the participants that our intention was not to “use” them to extract data for ourselves, but to generate a mutual learning process, and we operated accordingly in terms of relational principles. Smith (2022, p. 86), in her contribution to CohenMiller and Boivin’s book (on *Questions in Qualitative Social Justice Research*) which she entitles “Inside the inside,” laments the attitude of gaining entry “in order to ... carry out whatever research the researcher wanted to do.” Likewise, we were cognisant not only in terms of potential legal “comebacks” for our institutions but in terms of moral considerations that our way of handling the consent process and the research itself needed to be fair.

Francis handled the (oral) consent process as follows: the written “consent form” that had been prepared regarding the purpose of the research and the ethical issues contained in the form were orally explained. While explaining the ethical protocol during the meeting with prospective participants, he indicated that if someone who volunteered to attend a FG session wished, they could still decide not to attend the session as arranged, but that he would appreciate it if they would give some notice of this, so that another participant could be sought in their place. As it happened, they were all keen to join in. But in addition (as noted in the previous section), Francis made it clear that if participants did not wish to speak even after they joined the FG session, they had a right to *not* speak. This was in lieu of telling them that they had the “right to withdraw” at any point (which is one of the conditions normally provided for in written consent forms). He recognized that a participant asking to withdraw from (or leave) a session once they had joined would be embarrassing for them, so he dealt with this by instead indicating to them that speaking would be entirely voluntary.

As far as the issue of anonymity is concerned, Tolich and Tumilty make the point that when conducting FG research, “researchers hold no ethical sanction over a participant should they [the participant] reveal outside the focus group what was disclosed by another focus group member” (2020, p. 25). In this study context, in terms of Indigenous understandings of collective processes of generating ideas, “individual” opinions as voiced are in any case always subject to *collective discussion*. So, the fact that an individual may have initially made some statement does not mean that that would be regarded as their final statement that can be “revealed” as their position; the insights that are ultimately generated do not belong to any individual. As many authors writing about African and other Indigenous epistemologies emphasize, relational epistemologies offer options for more collectively oriented knowledge generation, through people’s sharing and developing views in a group context (Adyanga, 2014; Dei, 2011; Goduka, 2012; Ndimande, 2012, 2018; Romm, 2015a; Urquhart et al., 2020; Wulff, 2021).

Accordingly, although Francis avoided promising that “individual” views as expressed would not be circulated by FG members to others outside the sessions, this would not in any case fit the culture of relationally developed understandings and insights that emerge in joint discussions. What he did promise was that in any reporting – oral or written – as undertaken by the researchers, only the gender of a participant making a statement in the course of the discussion would be mentioned, so that no one reading any reports or accounts would be able to tell who had said what and that it was the focus group discussion as a whole that would be of prime interest.

As far as being able to offer “sufficient” information about the research, for prospective participants to make an informed judgement about whether to participate (as specified in the USA-commissioned Belmont report, 1979), we suggest that some trust in the process needed to be at play for the research to proceed. St. Pierre (2019) makes a similar point when speaking

about what she terms “post qualitative” inquiry (to distinguish it from conventional qualitative inquiry protocol). She indicates that we cannot make assurances of what “will come out” of the research process. She states, citing Rajchman (2000), that the research has to be undertaken in the spirit of an “affirmative trust” on the part of the research team and the research participants that “something may come out” (St. Pierre, 2019, p. 10). This indeed can only emerge in the actual process. But using an Indigenous research paradigm means that, at the very least, a story that affirms the community “assets” and strengths (for the community and for wider audiences) should emerge from the process, rather than a deficit account which degrades the community (Chilisa, 2012).

And finally, Francis and Norma decided to audio record the FG sessions. In presenting this idea to the participants, Francis explained that the FG sessions would be audio recorded. He indicated that this process was important since the researchers would prefer to concentrate on the FG conversations (instead of taking notes) as well as the participants’ exact expressions as co-knowledge producers would be recorded. Francis then asked participants if they consented to their voices being recorded. They were told that any member who wished for his/her voice not to be audio recorded was free to say so and in that case a different arrangement would be made. Specifically, the new arrangement would entail getting two or more people who declined the voice recorder in one FG session where their views would be written down. Participants were further informed that only the research team would listen to the audio files in the process of transcription and that the audio files would be safely stored. All participants gave oral consent to have their voice recorded.

### **The Facilitation of FG Sessions as Impetus for Community Reflection and Learning for the Participants and for the Researchers**

We have indicated in the sections above that certain researchers – Indigenous, Indigenous-oriented and/or non-Indigenous – question the Cartesian divide between the knowing “subject” and the object apparently “out there” that is being investigated (e.g., Chilisa, 2012, 2020; K. Gergen, 2015; M. Gergen, 2020; St. Pierre, 2019). Lincoln and Guba, in their 1985 book *Naturalistic Inquiry*, already contested the conventional assumption (derived from the positivist tradition but also transported into some interpretive inquiries) that it is required of researchers to avoid or at least minimize their functioning as “intervening medium that ‘bends’ the response” (1985, p. 293). That is, researchers are then required to do their utmost not to influence the responses that become generated through their interactions with participants.

The “problem” of unduly influencing responses is sometimes called the “problem of reactivity” in conventional research parlance (as discussed in Romm, 2010, pp. 241-243), stated as a problem of participants reacting to the presence of the researcher. In “post qualitative research” discourses, one of the inspirations for appreciating that as “knowers” we always affect what is “observed,” is Karen Barad’s interpretation of the significance of the research of Niels Bohr, who won a Nobel Prize for his work on quantum physics. Barad emphasizes in her book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), that the perspective pioneered by Bohr (as she interprets him) implies that he is making claims not only about the nature of our *knowing* (that is, that we cannot know the behaviour of the world because our measurements affect what appears to us) but about the nature of *reality*, which is now seen as a process in-the-making (in which our knowing processes are implicated). The recognition from quantum physics that any “observation” is always linked to some kind of intervention in the unfolding of life, is elucidated also by Bausch (2016), Midgley (2000), and Romm (1995; 2020a,b) who point to the positive contribution that such intervention can make to the construction of natural and social realities. Ngara, for her part, also emphasizes (as does Barad, 2007) the understanding

in quantum theory that “an observer, simply by the act of observing has an effect on the system s/he observes” (2017, p. 349). Ngara argues that this is consistent with an Indigenous worldview, where it is understood that “relations always involve the observer” who necessarily impacts on/in the “complicated web of relations” (2017, p. 349).

From an Indigenous feminist perspective, Moreton-Robinson similarly criticizes “the idea that one’s values or morals contaminate the research process if one has a vested interest in the project” (2013, p. 334). She states that such thinking “presents us with a new age version of the Cartesian subject” (in terms of binaries such as subject/object, values/facts, etc., permeating Cartesian thinking). From an Indigenous perspective, values include operating in tune with concerns of historically marginalized participants, towards advancing social and ecological justice.

Hence, we follow authors who recognize that (professional) researchers have a responsibility, with others, to intervene (for example, as provocateurs) in the social world of which the research is a part. Chilisa explains this as follows:

This book [of Chilisa’s] draws your [the reader’s] attention to the emphasis on the role of the researcher as a provocateur (Mertens, 2010) and a transformative healer (Chilisa, 2009; Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Dillard, 2008; Ramsey, 2007) guided by the four Rs: accountable responsibility, respect, reciprocity, and rights and regulations of the researched (Ellis & Earley, 2006; Louis, 2007; Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2008) (Chilisa, 2012, p. 7).

The research process thus needs to be set up to facilitate dialogue around issues of concern. The setting can, for instance, be created by arranging talking circles (akin to FG sessions, where the professional researcher becomes part of the “circle,” if only through the provocative quest to stimulate dialogue). In the Ugandan research, because we expected that the FG sessions would be learning encounters for participants, we drew on Freire’s argument (1970, 1972, 1974) that the facilitation process needs to be rooted in and drawn out from discussion of the lived experiences of the participants, which is used as a basis for political consciousness-raising – as in his suggestions that through *conscientisation*, people come to see the world as an “object of ... critical reflection” (1985, p. 107). Liamputtong also indicates that FG research is in keeping with the theoretical and practical work of Freire. She notes that:

Freire strongly encourages people to recognize that we ... are fundamentally responsible for the making and transformation of our situations and realities together. This, to me [her], is what the focus group methodology is all about and what it allows us to do. (2011, p. 23)

Put differently, we can say that the facilitator’s role is to facilitate the creation of a “ceremony” for participants to reflect upon/reconsider their experiences and implications for action (to use Wilson’s 2008 terminology). Clearly, our FG questions intended to create a climate where issues of concern could be discussed, as pertaining especially to the Ugandan context. Thomas, writing in 1996 but evidently still relevant today, indicates the relevance of Freire’s ideas for Africa in particular as follows:

For instance, on sustainable development, we need to ask the simple question – sustainable for whom and in whose interests? ... At the risk of belaboring the point, we need to ask, will it ever be possible for sustainability to become more than a topical concern, when any number of transnational corporations in the business of exploiting the earth’s resources increasingly operate above the law

and are more powerful than their own governments, let alone states in the South? ... It would seem that Freire's espousal of another development based on participation, dialogue and local control seems to be as relevant today as it was two decades ago. (1996, p. 23)

Our FG questions were aimed at encouraging participants to (re)consider pathways to development in terms of relations in the community and with local and national government regarding the operation of transnational corporations across national borders. As M. Gergen reminds us (2020, p. 19), we acknowledged that our research practices (the setting up of the FGs) were “value-invested” and that certain values – such as enhanced ways of relating between all involved in the network of relations – were implied from the start.

### **Our Expression of a Sense of Community with the Participants and Our Allegiance to the Movement Towards (More) Social and Ecological Justice**

In our interactions with the study participants (that is, the interactions of Francis and the RAs with the participants), we did not regard ourselves as “outsiders” to the community; we tried to present ourselves as being part of the community of people across the globe – including the community at the center of this project – concerned with co-exploring “developments” that ride roughshod over social and ecological justice concerns. We indicated to participants that we were concerned with promoting further discussion (and learning) around this in the local community for their benefit and also for the benefit of wider audiences in Uganda and elsewhere. To build a relationship of trust, we emphasized in the research process that participants should feel free to own the discussions, since we (researchers) were there to learn from them. Since Francis and the RAs were speaking in the participants’ native language, they were able to win the confidence of the study participants. This was evident in some elderly participants calling them “my sons” during the FG sessions. Furthermore, as Wulff and St. George (2020, p. 68) also advise, the “professional” research team tried to express (in their ways of interacting with participants) a recognition that “we are all researchers.” Hence, right from the process of seeking oral consent, participants were informed of their role as co-knowledge producers in the process of collectively exploring the social, environmental, and public health issues that groomed their organic protest movement.

Instead of conceptualizing our status as “outside” researchers, we wanted to portray the idea that we were all “in it together:” all interested in exploring the questions pertaining to the protest movement and its trajectory, and all potentially learning from one another. Chilisa et al. (2017), in exploring an “African-based relational paradigm” (p. 326), explain that “a relational ethical framework invites researchers to ... feel a belongingness to the researched community without feeling ... diminished” (p. 328). In this case, we did not overstress our identities as “professional researchers,” but we informed the participants that we were teachers from the university who had come to learn from their experiences. Our emphasis that we had come to learn helped shift the power imbalance; it empowered participants to freely interact with us since they were the knowers. This display of cognitive empowerment was also manifested by their way of interacting with our report during the dissemination workshop that we later held in the community. During that workshop, participants were able to identify issues which we had not captured well and also added additional issues they felt were important. As far as our setting of the FG interview guide questions was concerned, we did take the lead in this as a stimulus for forwarding the discussion, with additional issues arising in situ. For instance, while articulating the problem of industrial waste disposal in a nearby seasonal river, a female participant was asked by the researcher how she came to know about it. She responded that the problem became apparent when they noticed a large number of fish dying. They knew

there was something wrong in the water. This led to a discussion in which various participants explained to us the importance of respecting the “web of life.” As one man indicated: “You see, everything you find in our society living or non-living depends on each other to be able to regenerate. So, when the Indians pour waste into the river, they are disrupting the web of life.” Various ways of expressing their understanding of the need to nurture reciprocal relations across the board (and their decisions to become involved in collective protest action) followed. In some of the statements made by participants during the FG sessions and also in the later workshops, they expressed gratitude that we had set up the research process as a mode of focused inquiry around pertinent questions relevant to issues of social and ecological justice, or as Wulff puts it, for the purpose of doing “research for a change” (2021, p. 1157).

As an expression of this, in FG1, some of the participants indicated that they felt the session had been beneficial when Francis asked towards the end of the session: “How did you experience your joint involvement together with each other and with us in this project as ‘co-researchers?’ – Note that we call you *co-researchers* as we are all together thinking about the way social movements can be organized to good effect.” The speakers described how learning took place and how their thoughts were expanded in regard to “the problem,” the need for collective action, and the need for clearer government policy:

*(Man speaking): It has helped us to learn what kind of problems we have been facing and the benefits of the factory and its disadvantages.*

*(Woman speaking): I think the experience has opened our eyes to learn what to do.*

*(Man speaking): It has taught us the strength and the knowledge to handle payment disparities and to ensure uniformity. Now we know that we have to stand up and defend our River Ayago because no one will do it for us. If all the fish in the river are killed by the factory, then where will our children get fish from in the future? – now we must defend the River.*

*(Man speaking:) Any investor should be investigated by the government on what they intend to do and they should stick with what they initially set out to do... . . The government needs to do a background check on any investor coming into our country so that those investors with bad records are not allowed in.*

*(Man speaking): Government should to try understanding the records of these investors from their former place. Why should they come and start doing a different thing from what the community wants?*

*(Woman speaking): Anything that is coming into the community, the government should investigate and understand what these people do and let people know.*

*(Man speaking:) I think government should come out with clear guidelines that safeguards the workers regarding payment (e.g., salary should be at the level which changes lives [referring to minimum wage]).*

In FG2, the conversation around the same question regarding their experience of the research process proceeded with the first speaker indicating his appreciation that Francis had expressed that the participants are “researchers with you” (on a par in terms of co-exploring). The next speaker offers her thoughts on how the dialogues around their experiences (which we would later summarize to share with others) might be helpful for others too (in keeping with the spirit of Ubuntu):

*(Man speaking): First thank you for making us know that we are now researchers with you. This is important because we know that our voice will be heard and will lead to some action that will improve our condition. Second, my experience talking with others and with you in this group has taught me that there are people out there who care about the sufferings of others – imagine, you came all the way from the University to listen to our problems. We often think that people who teach in the University, I hear they are called professors, don't like mixing with us who have not gone to school or went to school but drop out in primary or secondary school. So I am very happy to share my views with professors and to see that they came down to listen and also learn from a peasant farmer like me.*

*(Woman speaking): My experience sharing our problems with you from the University has given me the peace of mind that something can actually be done. I am happy my voice will go out, so others [in other settings too] who may be suffering can hear our experience and learn to do something about their own sufferings.*

We might note here that we are not sure where the villagers got the idea about the university professors “not wanting to mix” with them. But one participant brought this issue up when he was given the chance to speak about his experience of the FG session. His expressions indicate that he appreciated that we were different.

When Francis at the end of the FG sessions asked: “Are there any final thoughts or comments or questions for us?” one of the women in FG1, speaking on behalf of “the Acholi people,” stated:

*Woman speaking: For us the Acholi people, we have a saying that “be thankful to people who have helped you in your time of need.” I want to thank you, my sons, for coming here. I thank you for talking to us about our problem and helping us know that we have sons in the University who care [about issues of justice].*

And in FG2 when Francis asked this question, namely, “Are there any final thoughts or comments or questions for us?”, again one of the women chose to use the opportunity to thank him for “taking the time to talk to us:”

*(Woman speaking): I thank you for taking the time to talk to us. Please make our views to be heard by the RDC, Chairman LCV, the District Councillor and our member of Parliament. The problem we are facing – they need to come and listen to us. If possible, send our concerns to the President because he is the one who told us on the day of opening the factory that the factory will lead to job creation, market for our agricultural products to improve our living conditions. Let him know that factory has led to sufferings of people in our village.*

*(Man speaking): Yes, that is true and I agree that the President should know what is happening here.*

Also, in response to the last question, certain recommendations ensued for possible ways for this or other factories to function in terms of a justice-orientation. The point that we wish to highlight now is that the participants chose to express appreciation that the research process had been set up to speak about the felt injustices and to imagine possibilities for alteration.

### **Compliance with Participants' Requests to Speak with Local and National Government as Part of Our Obligation to Take Forward their Anguish and their Suggestions**

The quotations that we shared in the previous section in response to our final question asking if there were any final thoughts or comments show how the participants urged, in the words of one participant (speaking on behalf of the collective): "Please make our views to be heard by the RDC [Resident District Commissioner], Chairman LCV [Local Council Five] and our member of Parliament." The other participants likewise requested that the issues be made more public in local and national government circles (as well as with other audiences with whom we as researchers might wish to share their experiences and analyses). They felt that thus far their local and national leaders had remained somewhat disinterested, albeit that after the Mega radio reported on the pollution of the river, some of the local leaders had called in NEMA to investigate.

In response to the participants' request that Francis should speak to the Resident District Commissioner (RDC) specifically about what bothered them in relation to Bukona, Francis compiled a summary report for her and met with her to discuss it. During the meeting she acknowledged that some of the issues raised by the villagers during the FGs are true. Specifically, she mentioned sexual exploitation of the young ladies, environmental pollution, and low pay for local staff which she said had reached her desk. She expressed her view that the CEO of the factory is a "nice and responsible" person who may not even know that something like that is happening. She claimed that there were some Senior and Junior Officers who were reckless and tainting the company's image. She then said, "with this well written report from you, I will now arrange to meet with the CEO and present the report to him." Francis was unable to convince her that she should invite him to the meeting, but he did arrange to speak to a local diplomat running for Parliament at the time, who was very interested in the case.

Further to the dissemination workshop held with participants about eight weeks later, Francis learned that the diplomat with whom he had spoken earlier was from a neighboring constituency, so Francis arranged and met with the MP-elect of the study context. He also called the other diplomat (now MP-elect from the neighboring constituency) during the workshop with participants (held in February 2021). This diplomat assured Francis that he would work closely with the MP-elect from the study district to ensure that concerns of the locals are addressed. Francis thus tried to fulfil his obligation to render more public in local and national circles the issues that the community had raised, and to put some of their suggestions for policy on the political map.

We estimate that the study participants saw Francis as a kind of "mediator" for the community. Because he teaches at a university and comes from the city, they felt it might be easier for him to approach political leaders who seem distant and inaccessible. Moreover, for the villagers to go to those leaders to present their concerns would mean incurring financial cost, which they did not have. Nevertheless, as we explain in the next section, having notified the MPs of the issues, it would be incumbent upon the villagers through their local leaders to now try to hold the MPs accountable.

### **Our Organizing of a Dissemination Workshop with the Study Participants to Offer Our Report and Invite Further Discussion**

The dissemination workshop took place at the home of the village Chief who was also the contact person for the project. The purpose of the workshop was so that the study participants could hear Francis's way of synthesizing the four FG sessions as a whole and could make further inputs into the content (for the benefit of other audiences too). Francis's oral

reporting to the workshop participants was based largely on the same written report that he had shared with the RDC, in which he had extracted salient points to bring to her attention. At the community dissemination workshop, 33 of the original FG participants (twelve females and 21 males) attended and actively participated in sharing their views. A few participants from the community who had not been in the original FG sessions also attended.

The agenda that guided the workshop was as follows:

- a) Prayer
- b) Communication from the village Chief
- c) Communication from the Lead Investigator (Francis)
- d) Reading of research questions that were asked during the FGs
- e) Reading of the major findings (based on responses of FG participants)
- f) Participants to comment on the findings as read to them
- g) Final remarks from participants and the village Chief

The above agenda was developed at the start of the study dissemination workshop. The village Chief chaired the session and proposed some agenda items for deliberation to guide the meeting. Participants (villagers and the research team) were then given the opportunity to add or subtract any items. After a few minutes of silence, the Chief declared that agenda was confirmed since no one had contested it.

After the opening prayer and the welcoming remarks by the village Chief, Francis offered a summary of the context of the project and reminded participants of the questions that had been posed in the various FG sessions. This was followed by his summary of the main results. He then invited participants to share their views on his presentation. At this point many of the participants indicated that they appreciated the researchers (with him representing the team) for returning to share the study findings with the community. They confirmed that the major findings as read out were a true representation of the four FG discussions held in their community in 2020. However, some participants stated that certain issues were left out from the report (this stance on their part we regard as an(other) indicator of the trust and openness that the participants had with the team of researchers). The issues mentioned were:

1. Cassava diseases have been imported into the community. When the Bukona factory declined buying cassava from the villagers, they instead brought cassava stems from a distant community. These stems have imported cassava disease into their community which is destroying the local cassava variety on a large scale. "Our indigenous cassava variety is being destroyed by cassava disease brought into our community by Bukona. As a matter of good practice, Bukona should not involve themselves in cassava growing as they are now buying more land to expand cassava growth. They should leave the production of cassava to us [the peasant farmers] and then they buy the cassava from us," asserted a male participant.
2. Foreign investors should negotiate directly with the landowners: "we have scenarios in our community where foreign investors buy land from us, but they negotiate the value of our land with people in government. The problem is that when such land is finally paid for, most of the money does not reach us. We therefore prefer to negotiate directly with the buyers," stated a female participant.
3. Foreign workers who come to work in multinational corporations should be hired for positions that require expertise and leave the work that does not require experts to the locals. "For our case, there are some foreign nationals from other

countries like Kenya who compete for the lower-level jobs with us, yet the jobs are already scarce,” stated a male participant.

4. Their leaders should enforce some bylaws that require anyone [the locals] selling land to foreign investors to first inform the community so that the whole community is aware of the investors coming in their midst: “the problem with people selling off their land to foreign investors without involving the whole community makes the investors to think that they are not accountable to the community,” claimed a female participant.
5. Participants added that the factory should come up with some insurance scheme for compensating workers who get injured on the job. “I did not participate in the FGs which was held in our village last year but when I learned that you [researchers] were returning to the community, I decided to bring my concern. My son got permanent disability because of an accident he obtained at the factory during work. He has since been laid off. The young man is right there [pointing at his son] and it troubles my heart that we don’t have the money to help him either,” asserted an elderly man.
6. There is also a concern that the irresponsible dumping of industrial waste by the Bukona factory could lead to a diplomatic row with neighboring countries. A male participant, for instance, stated that “you have left out an important issue which I had raised during that group meeting when you came here in 2020. You see when Bukona dumps industrial waste in River Ayago, the waste does not end there because River Ayago’s water flows all the way to the Nile River. This means the industrial waste also flows along with the River Nile water through South Sudan, Sudan and Egypt. Now imagine the big misunderstanding Uganda will have with those countries if their citizens start getting sick due to consumption of chemical in the water.”
7. Cleaning of the contaminated river. Participants raised concern about how the contaminated water will be cleaned. They reasoned that when water is contaminated with industrial waste, it takes many years for such waste to naturally clean itself. “Given that River Ayago is now contaminated, we are requesting government to come up with clear mechanism of cleaning the industrial waste from the river. I think the cleaning responsibility should be left in the hands of the Bukona factory that deliberately disposed industrial waste in the river. They should not be left to walk away with this deliberate act of negligence,” asserted a male participant.

Finally, the Chief gave a closing statement. He thanked the research team for coming to make the community voices heard. He stated that:

It’s my humble appeal that our voices are not only heard by those in decision-making positions but that the voices should lead to actions that address all the issues of injustices [social and environmental] mentioned by my people. We have suffered a lot because of the coming of Bukona [the factory] in our community. Their coming did not bring economic development that we were promised, but rather sufferings. We don’t want them to leave our community, but we simply request that they stop exploiting our people and that they treat the environment with respect. As a matter of principle, you cannot enter someone’s home as a guest and once in, you start mistreating him as if you own the home.

The Chief then proposed that the researchers conduct similar studies in other communities in Uganda who have embraced multinational corporations to compare how those businesses are treating the locals and to feel free to share their (study community) experiences with other communities in the country. He closed by mentioning that he appreciated the soft drinks provided to the participants during the workshop, which he said is a sign that the researchers are concerned about the wellbeing of participants.

Lastly, as indicated in the previous section, because it was clear that many of the issues raised in the FG sessions and in the workshop needed wider dissemination, Francis made an appointment and met with the newly elected area Member of Parliament on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021 at his home. He handed him the written report which he had shared orally with participants at the workshop and also discussed with him what can be done to resolve the issues of environmental pollution and exploitations raised by participants. The MP-elect promised to invite other MPs from the district when they assume office in May 2021 so they can have a meeting with the CEO of the Bukona factory to discuss the concerns of the villagers (the district has two male and one female MP-elect. Two of the MPs are from the ruling party; that is, the government in power, while one is from opposition party). While these MPs promised to take action, we are aware that other interests and constituents may override the concerns of the villagers in our study. However, Francis had followed through with meeting with the MPs and notified the village Chief of these conversations. From here the villagers could work on holding the MPs accountable. While we believe our research made some contribution, the villagers need to continue on the path of social and ecological justice.

### **Ways of Developing Our Analyses for Wider Audiences, which would be Non-Deficit in Character and would Express the Contribution of Indigenous Wisdom to Discourses on “Development”**

In line with our endeavour to generate a co-production of knowledge with research participants, we asked them (in various ways) what they thought could usefully be shared with wider audiences in order to be helpful to discourses and practices concerned with issues of justice. We had various questions in the interview guide that were posed towards the end of the FG sessions (Questions 14-16), where we asked the participants: i) whether they thought their experiences in the community might be transferable to other contexts in Uganda and even in other countries; ii) what they thought others wanting to organize more justice might learn from their experiences (as shared by us through articles and book chapter writing); iii) what they suggested we should emphasize in our write ups for various audiences (inside and outside Uganda); and iv) what we should emphasize to be possibly taken up by the Ugandan government.

As seen from our account of the workshop above, further thoughts relevant to these questions also arose in the workshop. Below we offer some points of analysis which take into account what the participants suggested we should highlight (that is, what they suggested in the FG sessions as well as what they added in the workshop as important not to omit in any further reporting). Francis took their additional input into account when he further engaged with the diplomat (MP-elect) after the workshop and especially when he spoke about recommendations for policy at the national level. Interestingly, in line with principles of Ubuntu (as caring for others), the FG sessions and workshop discussions (with recommendations) drew out how participants were not only concerned about their own wellbeing, but the wellbeing of their community, other communities in Uganda, anyone wanting to organize against any form of injustice (any “oppressed poor” as one participant expressed this), and African neighbors of Uganda (e.g., those affected by the contamination of the Ayago River that passes across the borders). These details will be provided in another

article. At this point we wish to draw out the principle that theory-making in regard to possibilities of organizing for more justice is necessarily a joint endeavour between all involved in the knowing process and is not the preserve of professional theorists. Furthermore, the insights offered can (performatively) include appealing on moral (and indeed spiritual grounds) for “shaming” those who operate exploitatively without regard for human and more-than-human lives in their midst.

The flow of conversation pointed to how participants deliberated upon what could usefully be shared with wider audiences. As one example of their deliberations we offer this extract below (taken from FG2):

1. What do you think others wanting to organize for (more) justice may learn from our sharing of this experience through the articles and book chapters that we will be writing?

*(Woman speaking): I think they can learn that when you speak out on issues affecting you, you will likely be heard and some action can be taken. The other thing is that when they plan to organize against things that affect them, they should not rely on their leaders totally because leaders who love money can easily be bribed by the people mistreating you, like for our case where the leaders don't care.*

*(Man speaking): In that case, they can learn to know that they are on their own and only they can stop that thing which is affecting them. They then have to go out in full force with unity to face their tormentor. I can assure you that they will succeed when they are united.*

*(Man speaking): Others who want to organize against any form of injustice must know that their organizing can be betrayed by their own leaders who may connive with the people causing the injustice. So they should always keep checking on each and every member to make sure that they are still committed to the struggle.*

*(Woman speaking): They can learn that injustice exists in all societies and that is becoming normal since there are people who normalize the injustices. They should know that there are challenges when confronting injustices, but they must not be discouraged by the challenge. No challenge is greater than the power of the oppressed poor who have come together. They should know that by coming together, you overcome all fears and you stand to face your tormentor with boldness*

*[As she said this, there was much clapping of hands in the background and people confirming 'yes it is true'.]*

This array of responses all take up the theme that it is important to be united in struggle when faced with those who “love money” (including leaders in the society whose motives are geared to money rather than to caring for collective wellbeing). The speakers all offer variations on this theme. The final comment from the female speaker expresses her insight (adding on from the previous speakers) when she states that people “can learn that injustice exists in all societies and that is becoming normal since there are people who normalize the injustices.” This wisdom springs from what could be called “practitioner” theorizing (Wulff & St. George, 2020, p. 69) and it aligns with the work of scholarly theorists (for example, those cited by St. Pierre, 2014, 2019) who state that the “unthought” needs to become expressed and acted upon, because currently injustice seems to be taken as “normal” – including when leaders normalize the injustice, instead of trying to act against it. The female participant expresses that when the

“oppressed poor” come together, they create the collective power to make changes. This statement was endorsed as “true” by the rest of the group. It can be regarded as a performative statement in that its truth is at the same time an evocation for people to regard it as “true” for the purposes of inspiring action and thereby *forming* realities. The analysis offered by the group is thus evocative rather than being posed as a “representation” of realities existing outside of our engagement with them. As professional analysts situated in academia, but working with and alongside these participants, we clearly can learn from this way of expressing the problem of injustices being “normalized” – thus, seemingly forbidding alternative stories to be imagined or evoked, unless we begin to create/revive them.

And as another example from FG2, when we asked, “What do you suggest we should emphasize in our write up in various articles for wider audiences inside and outside Uganda and in our recommendations to the Ugandan government?”, the following flow of conversation ensued:

*(Man speaking): My recommendation is that the government should bring real investors that will bring development to our community.*

*(Woman speaking): The current factory group should be asked to leave our community and a new one that does not exploit us should be brought in.*

*(Man speaking): If a new company is coming, they should first hire the natives before they start looking for employees from distant places. If the natives are not skilled, the company should provide them with training so that they can gain knowledge and skill. In this way, the natives will have well-paying jobs to support their families, pay for their children at school. I also request the investors to sponsor our children at school so that the children can later work in the factory.*

*(Woman speaking): For me I want you to emphasize to the government that they should investigate this factory and let them face the law for mistreating people. Before they came here, we were not suffering like this. Imagine you can't even sleep in your house or work on your farm because of this terrible stench from the factory waste. Our lives have been disorganized, we cannot concentrate on the things that we do because you must worry about the smell and how it will affect your health.*

*(Woman speaking): I agree with that suggestion. The government should find out where the Bukona factory came from because they could have been chased from there. We have a saying among our people that “he who defecates by the roadside will always repeat that act until he is caught” so Bukona may be repeating what they did in other countries. If that is the case then, the government should ask them to leave.*

Notably, a male speaker began the conversation by indicating that thus far the factory clearly did not bring “development.” He suggested that “real investors” could perhaps bring development. The female speaker endorsed this, indicating that she is likewise not against foreign investors being brought into the country, as long as they *do* offer investment and not destruction of human and more-than-human worlds in their midst. The next speaker offered some detail on how the factory owners might in principle help in skilling the local people, albeit this factory clearly did not. And the next speaker added that she hoped that the government would hold this factory to account for all the damages wreaked. The final speaker agreed with this and added that the government should investigate the past practices of companies in terms of their operations in other countries, so that if they have been operating exploitatively, they should not be allowed in. This could indeed be one way of appealing, if not on moral grounds,

at least on practical grounds to foreign companies to act more responsibly – at risk of losing the possibility of moving into foreign territories to “do business.” This could be an option to ensure that business does not continue as “business as usual” (as also bemoaned by many ecological economists across the globe –Magdoff & Williams, 2017; McIntyre-Mills, 2017; Spash, 2009).

In terms of this speaker’s suggestion, the striving for maximum profit at the expense of people and the planet could then be “shamed” instead of treated as normal (in terms of mainstream economics). Ramose – a South African philosopher – in his endorsement on the front cover of the book entitled: *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary* (2018) aptly summarizes how mainstream economics perpetuates the “free market economic delusion that the natural imperative for survival demands possession and use of money, permitting injury to other human beings and the wholeness of nature in an unceasing accumulation of money. Enough pecunimania!”

### *A Note on the Principle and Practice of Relationality*

Based on our few selected quotes above from the FG conversations, we suggest that the statements/ideas proffered by the FG participants can be interpreted as giving expression to a principle of relationality. What was being advocated is a return to some of the ideals incorporated in the philosophy of relationality. The expectation is that these ideals and their radical challenge of what Ramose (2018) calls the dominant “pecunimania” offer a way forward for a more sane existence. Many authors hailing from “the West” have appreciated this contribution of Indigenous philosophies. For instance, in a chapter entitled “Transmaterial Worlding as Inquiry,” Simon and Salter (2020) lament the “binary constructions of ‘us’ and ‘them’” attendant on processes of colonization, which in effect have occasioned “an unmitigated loss of Indigenous knowledge and contextual know how” (p. 89). This, as far as they see it, has resulted in “catastrophic changes in societies and land ownership, such as loss of rainforests, sustainable communities, homelands, dunes, clean air, uncontaminated sites, the ozone layer and much, much more” (2020, p. 89). Therefore, they suggest that it is imperative to ask as researchers, “What and who are in focus? And why?” and “How can other silent voices or erased matters be animated and rendered audible through our research?” (2020, p. 90).

Adding to the choir of voices calling for the adoption of a “relational paradigm in sustainability research, practice, and education,” Walsh et al. (2020) point to the way in which “relationality has become a buzz word [in many discourses and disciplines] with many meanings” (p. 1). They set out to analyze how relational discourses “have been understood and conceptualized across a broad range of disciplines and contexts” and they attempt to “harness their connections and contributions for future sustainability-related work” (p. 1). As part of their effort, they point to publications which refer to a relational ontology, those which refer to a relational epistemology, and those which refer to relational approaches to ethics. In referring to relational ontology, they point to Indigenous discourses. They note that “unlike Western environmentalism, these [Indigenous] traditions do not relate to the environment as something ‘out there’ that needs to be protected” (2020, p. 4). Rather, they (Indigenous peoples) generally “perceive themselves and nature as part of the same family sharing origins and ancestral bonds” (p. 4). In their section on epistemology, they do not refer to Indigenous contributions to relational epistemology as such, but they do mention that “there is broad consensus that modern western epistemologies arising from the Enlightenment and scientific revolution are largely responsible for creating profound divisions and patterns of exploitation between humans and nonhumans” (p. 4), thus implying an appreciation of non-Western ways of engaging with “the world.” And under relational approaches to ethics, they mention deep ecology as an “influential

discourse, emphasizing the need to shift consciousness as a prerequisite for shifting modern industrial society toward a more sustainable paradigm” (p. 6). Again, the implication is that modern industrial society as organized by the West (and as accompanied by colonialism) needs shifting.

Overall, in their examination of literature on the relational paradigm and its relevance for sustainability research, they contend that “there exist only a few studies that explicitly take, to some extent, relational approaches to sustainability” (p. 7). While they refer to some exceptions, they aver that “relational approaches are marginalized within sustainability scholarship” (2020, p. 7). This conclusion of theirs would be consistent with Indigenous authors who argue that their specific contributions to sustainability science and sustainable ways of living have not been sufficiently influential in academic and in political discourses across the globe. It is for this reason that our article finds it important to rescue the insights of the Ugandan participants as an input into discourses towards conceiving “development” as a life-enhancing process. Actually, Kothari (2014) argues that the word “development” has been so associated with the economic growth in terms of a pecuniary model, that we might be better off constructing new concepts. He does concede, though, that in its origins, “development” implies the notion of opening up to new possibilities. He poses his deliberations as follows:

The word “development” etymologically is the contrary of envelopment, so it means opening up. And opening up opportunities for human beings is good, so in this case we should reclaim the word. But as historically it has got such a distorted meaning, maybe we should find new concepts, alternative to development. (2014, p. 3)

The Ugandan FG participants continued to use the word “development” (as translated here of course). But for them it was clearly meant to be associated with what can be called “good business” (as expressed by, for example, Arko-Achemfuor & Dzanzi, 2015). For Arko-Achemfuor and Dzanzi, “business” needs to be theorized and practiced with a view to advancing wellbeing. Our interpretation of “development” which we gathered from the FGs is that of considering the wellbeing of human and more-than-human worlds and treating these with respect. It also implies allowing for regeneration of communally owned resources such as land, water, natural vegetation etc., and appreciating reciprocal relationships.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we considered how a research approach informed through an Indigenous paradigm could take due cognisance of the contributions of Indigenous scholars, sages, and practitioners in everyday life, struggling against the continued effects of imperialist narratives and practices. We concentrated on examining how in the case of an inquiry which was set up in a community in Uganda, we became involved in co-researching with participants their protest movement in the face of the disruptive intrusion of foreign “investors” into their community.

We spelled out how the research space was used as an opportunity for participants to explore their views together (regarding their community protest) in relation to questions that we posed to stimulate their discussions. We offered some detail on how the research proceeded in the spirit of an Indigenous paradigm and we offered a glimpse of how the participant discussions generated collective insights around what they valued in their cultural heritage in the form of relational existence involving the living and the non-living. On the whole, the participants variously iterated that they could embrace foreign-owned investments/businesses coming into their community. However, such investments/businesses should respect their

environmental and human rights principles so that both parties benefit from mutual collaboration.

We pointed to how the participants drew on the cultural legacies and how they (re)interpreted them in the current era. In this way, the research became oriented to reconsidering what can be said to be valuable and worthy of nurturing, so that the statements generated (and shared here) can be seen as part of the process of participants (and we ourselves) “worlding” the world in a forward-looking direction.

What we learned from the participants is that social and ecological injustices manifest in subtle ways among rural and formally uneducated communities, and that the perpetrators of economic injustices are sometimes the very big companies that get praised by the government establishment for “creating jobs and lifting the rural people out of poverty” through economic empowerment projects. And, because of the alleged contribution to development, these companies have the upper hand to influence, in their favor, the kinds of reports/narratives that the government gets regarding their operations in rural areas. We learned that injustices defined in terms of social and ecological imbalances can all-too-easily get “normalized” by being rendered invisible. We learned that if oppressed people are united against their felt oppressors and find ways of acting in solidarity, the status quo can change for the better.

### **Appendix: Interview Guide Questions Posed to Participants in the FG Sessions**

1. There are many foreign investors in the country these days. What is your impression of foreign investors?
2. Do you know of any facility set up by foreign investors in your community?
3. If yes, how did the investor(s) acquire land on which they set up the facility/factory?
4. What is the relationship between your community and the facility?
5. What are the common socio-economic and ecological injustices (related to environmental damage) prevalent in your community?
6. Who are the perpetrators of these social and environmental issues?
7. How does the local community organically organize to resist social and social-economic-ecological issues described above?
8. Please consider in particular how you think the community created spaces for discussing the experienced injustices and to consider together ways of getting them attended to by the multinational corporations?
9. How did the community continue to think of ways forward when initial raising of the issues were not addressed?
10. How did the community members share ideas together and develop a way forward?
11. What challenges would you say the community faced in resisting issues of injustices in your community?
12. How effective is the community organizing to challenge social injustices and what are some of the reasons that you think the movement for justice becomes (more or less) effective? Please share with us some examples from experience in your village. For example, how was the local government brought into this case and what role did they play?
13. What lessons can be learnt from such organic social movement organizing?
14. Do you think this experience from your community is transferable to other contexts in Uganda and even in other countries?
15. What recommendations (if any) would you give to address the social and environmental issues identified above?

16. What do you suggest we should emphasize in our write up in various articles for wider audiences inside and outside Uganda and in our recommendations to the Ugandan government? Please mention as many ideas as come to mind!
17. Any other thoughts or comments?

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