At the Intersection of Instrumentalism, Understanding, and Critique: Reflections on Development Research on Citizenship in Uganda

Henni Alava
Gender Studies, Tampere University, Finland
*henni.alava@tuni.fi*

Tiina Kontinen
Development Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland
tiina.t.kontinen@jyu.fi

About the authors

Henni Alava's post-doctoral research in Development Studies at the University of Jyväskylä concerned the interrelations of citizenship and gender in Uganda. Her book *Christianity, Politics and the Afterlives of War in Uganda: "There is Confusion"* was published in 2022 by Bloomsbury Academic. Currently she is conducting ethnographic research on pediatric persistent pain in Finland, as a member of the discipline of Gender Studies at Tampere University.

Tiina Kontinen is an Associate Professor in International Development Studies at the University of Jyväskylä (Finland), where she leads a research group on Citizenship and Civil Society in Development. She has published on civil society, NGOs, and North-South partnership, and has led various projects with global research teams.
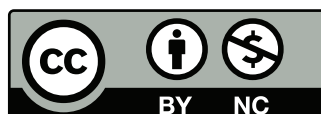
Introduction

This special issue showcases four analyses of lived citizenship in Uganda – a country previously known as a donor darling but, recently, better known for its steady slide towards authoritarian rule (Ssentongo 2021, Tapscott 2021, Wilkins et. al. 2021, Wiegratz et. al. 2018). Individually, the articles draw on and contribute to diverse strands of debate within the field of citizenship studies. As a collection, however, they serve to illustrate a space characterized by three different knowledge interests in development-related research on African societies. A central contention is that the very notion of 'development-related research' requires definition; as a field, it is constituted and its boundaries are defined by different actors' considerations of what is relevant for either the policy, practice, critique, or the very definition of 'development'. When conducted on societies in Africa, it intersects with African studies and anthropological contributions.

The special issue is motivated by a total of seven years of collaboration between Makerere University (Uganda), the University of Dodoma (Tanzania), and the Universities of Oulu and Jyväskylä (Finland) (see Holma and Kontinen 2020; 2022). The research was funded under the Development Research Programme of the Academy of Finland (DEVELOP[1]), which is partially funded by the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The project explicitly sought to advance the co-creation of knowledge by European and African researchers and has brought together scholars with backgrounds in development studies, adult education, educational philosophy,

citizenship studies, and anthropology. During our collaboration, we have continuously had to reflect on, and justify to each other, our different views on the forms and nature of knowledge production, and on the anticipated uses of our research outcomes. Likewise, in reporting to our funders, we have been asked about the impact of our research, and about the lessons we have learned through it that could be of relevance for development policy makers and practitioners.

We suggest that these discussions reflect the space between three different expectations of knowledge production in Africa-focused development research, which we schematize by building loosely on a Habermasian division between technical, practical, and emancipatory knowledge interests (Habermas 1987), and the related aims of producing analytic-empirical, hermeneutic, and critical knowledge. Here, we talk about instrumentalist, descriptive, and critical approaches to knowledge production in development research. Essentially, our project has grappled with the question of the aim of research on Africa which is partly funded from the Official Development Assistance (ODA) budgets of Nordic European governments, positing three potential goals: informing Nordic development policies and interventions by contributing to the design of 'better development'; increasing understanding and theorization of social realities; or providing transformative critique of the global and local injustices in societies we study and, further, that research itself can perpetuate.

Reflecting on these themes, this special issue contributes to what Amanda Hammar has described as the contemporary task of African Studies, that is, "engaging openly with a range of different perspectives and with dynamic shifts in the politics of knowledge over time" (2021: 2). Here we offer a perspective on this discussion from development research, by which we refer to the wide variety of research on societies in the global South – including African societies – revolving around the notion of 'development' or its critique (Baud

et al. 2019; Sims et al. 2022; Sumner 2022; Veltmeyer and Bowles 2018); such work is often based on normative ideas about social change, and conducted in close collaboration with international development cooperation institutions and foreign ministries. Drawing from our own discussions and the extant literature, we distinguish the above-mentioned three broad approaches and styles of research within the intellectual, institutional, and funding space of development-related research on Africa. These categories are non-exclusive and, as we show, the boundaries between them are porous, but, by explicating 'caricatures' of these approaches, we aim to foster conversation about the politics of knowledge production among researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners. After illustrating the three approaches, we turn to analysing how tensions between them shaped negotiations within our own research project. We end by outlining the contributions of the individual articles in this issue.

Three approaches to knowledge production in development-related research on African societies

First, the *instrumentalist approach* to research is predicated on continuous interaction between development research, policies, and practices, while 'good research' is measured by notions such as 'policy relevance' and 'impact'. Historically, development researchers have both insisted on the policy relevance of their field and struggled with demands made of it. With the increasing importance of evidence-based decision making – at least in rhetoric – expectations for policy relevance and societal impact have grown in many fields, including development.[2] There remain, however, notable differences in knowledge work geared towards policy relevance, and knowledge work

that is a 'purely' academic endeavour (Green 2012). Research that seeks to be relevant for development policy or practice (Kingsbury et al. 2012; Sumner and Tribe 2008) is often accused of being overly simplistic, of being constrained by pre-given logics (Mosse 2004), of being shaped by dominant normative frameworks, or of recycling development buzzwords (Cornwall and Eade 2010). Meanwhile policy makers can consider 'academic' research too complicated and, therefore, not useful for their purposes (Green 2012).

Second, the *descriptive approach* seeks to describe and understand socio-cultural realities. In this approach, the relevance of research is not measured by its applicability to development policy or practice, or on the basis of its contribution to and usefulness for the fulfilment of donor priorities. Neither does it take its starting point from a pre-given normative and political framework. Rather, the validity and worth of research is assessed against varying discipline-specific criteria, while providing knowledge about social realities in Africa is seen as valuable in itself. At times, such studies can expand prevailing knowledge in ways that challenge dominant development policy and practice, yet this is not necessarily their motivating aim; such scholarship can also take deliberate critical distance from the field of 'development' (Grillo and Stirrat 1997; Jones 2009, Parikh 2004). That said, Afrocentric (Asante 1988; Oyebade 1990) and decolonial (Underhill-Sem 2022) scholars have rightly questioned the very notion of 'understanding' when attached to contemporary global academic research. They have called for critical reflection on how it is preconditioned by and contributes to epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), and epistemic violence, as well as global inequalities in North-South knowledge production and theorizing patterns (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; 2018; Tamale 2020).

Third, the *critical approach* to research on Africa can in fact be seen as encompassing different types of critique which share a grounding in different conceptualizations

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[2] See for recent discussions: https://www.swedev.dev/five-actions-to-promote-research-in-policy-and-practice/

of power, whether inspired by classics like Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Paolo Freire, or Michel Foucault, or contemporaries like Judith Butler, Uma Kothari, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, or Sylvia Tamale, to mention a few. On the one hand, critical scholarship has sought to provoke or contribute to social transformation through analysis of global and societal power structures, promoting critical consciousness, and mobilizing action (Freire 2007); on the other, it has sought to unpack development discourses and practices (Grillo and Stirrat 1997; Marglin and Marglin 1990; Ferguson 1990) – thus demonstrating their complicity in perpetuating structures of injustice – and envision alternatives to 'development' beyond the colonial project (Escobar 1995; Gudynas 2018; Ziai 2007). Recent critiques in the field draw particularly from critical race theory (see e.g. Crenshaw et. al. 1995, Mills 1997) and decolonial thought (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; 2018; Táíwò 2022), and are often spear-headed jointly by scholars and activists within movements such as 'Rhodes must fall' (Nyamnjoh 2016) and 'Black Lives Matter' (Adomako Ampofo 2016). Important calls are being made for decolonizing development as well as research on Africa, and for laying bare the racialized and colonial structures engrained in academic structures, practices, and social theories (Bhambra et al. 2018, Mohammed et al. 2022).

At the intersection of instrumentalism, understanding, and critique

The approaches we have identified above are all applied – although not always separately – in the field of development-related research on Africa, where there is constant movement of concepts, of people, and of money. Formed through the dynamic interaction between these diverse approaches, we suggest that an intellectual, institutional, and funding space can be identified in their intersection, in which the movement of concepts occurs in multiple di-

rections. Intellectually, scholars can contribute to providing critical, empirically grounded, and in-depth elaboration of the terminologies used in policy making and the design of interventions. Conversely, development policies and practitioners can adopt new concepts from scholarship for their own purposes. Some of these end up as 'buzzwords' (Cornwall and Eade 2010), terminologies that circulate in policy discourses, detached from their theoretical origins and even used in ways that contradict their original purpose, as in the case of 'participation' (Cooke and Kothari 2001).

Likewise, people move in many directions: they can shift from critical to policy-relevant research institutions or move from academia to policy making and development practice, or vice versa (Lewis 2009). Traditionally, academic research has been one of the institutional cornerstones of universities, policy making the mandate of government bodies, and development interventions the job of aid agencies, consultants, and NGOs. Yet, in practice, the institutional boundaries between such actors are flexible and often fluid, as when development scholars engage in consultancy and commissioned studies, or government officers or development practitioners enter academia.

Like people and ideas, funding, too, is on the move. Development research is often partially funded by development aid budgets, which often centre on the development policy priorities and normative frameworks of the funders who typically demand that research be policy relevant, with clear societal impact. In such a resource environment, the instrumental approach to research is typically stressed, yet studies focused on adding to understanding and critique may also gain funding on the grounds of academic evaluation criteria. Even if the primary aim of research is 'understanding', without a pre-given policy framework or normative agenda, it can (and often does) still lead to critical observations, and form part of a broader critical agenda (Hammar 2021).

Having identified the movement of people, concepts, and money, we must ask:

who occupies this space, who determines the research agendas and concepts, and who governs the resources that make research possible? Most importantly, the question concerns, first, the imbalance between African researchers and those from the global North in global academic fora, and, second, the relationship between academic interests and the priorities of the people participating in research projects. In development research, African scholars have often occupied the role of data collectors rather than determining research agendas or being primary authors in academic publications (Carbonnier and Kontinen 2015; Eriksson Baaz and Utas 2019; Mwambari 2019); indeed, the limited role of African scholars in African studies is constantly discussed (Arowosegbe 2016; Olukoshi 2006), despite gradual changes in the balance in authorship. The question of what research offers participants is continuously being asked, giving rise to ongoing conversation about the relationships between the researchers' and participants' interests (Ogora 2013). Seriously centring on the priorities of research participants would unavoidably challenge research in possibly unpredictable ways: for instance, interlocutors might not see the value or be interested in the same kind of research as scholars. Yet following participants' priorities alone might lead to research that some academic audiences do not find interesting or appropriate.

Ultimately, we suggest that by perceiving development-related research on African societies as a space where different actors constantly negotiate the aims, relevance, and appropriateness of research, we might better recognize and tackle the tensions within research collaborations.

Citizenship in Uganda as an example of engaging with different perspectives

Our work on citizenship in Uganda (this issue; Alava 2021: Ahimbisibwe and Kontinen 2021; see also chapters in Holma and Kontinen 2020; 2022) has engaged with recent debates calling for multi-level and multi-scalar conceptualizations of citizenship: as political agency, belonging, identity, and participation vis-á-vis communities including but not limited to the state. Our focus has been on how citizenship is enacted in different arenas and spaces, and what kinds of diverse aspects are prioritized and held significant by our interlocutors. While the research projects covered cases both from Uganda and Tanzania, the contributions in the special issue focus on Uganda. The project provides an example of how different perspectives on the purpose and relevance of Africa-related development research are engaged with and worked out in practice.

The individual articles in this special issue illustrate the ways in which our project researchers have navigated between these different and sometimes incompatible goals. Read side by side, they enable us to reflect on broader questions of knowledge production. Essentially, our collaborative research has balanced between partially contradictory aims: rather than offering direct prescriptions for better development interventions, we offer views that can inspire non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to reconsider their approaches; rather than advocating a particular theoretical lens on citizenship, we seek to understand our interlocutors' lives and views, and to use this understanding as grounds for exploring the limitations of existing theoretical notions; rather than encouraging direct transformative action by our research participants, we bring critical debates into discussion with empirical material and listen carefully to the critiques presented by our interlocutors.

These tensions and contradictory aims

were discussed within our research team, giving rise, for example, to different ideas concerning the role of development NGOs in the generation of research material. Collaboration with Ugandan NGOs resulted in negotiations between the organizations' more instrumentalist aim to evaluate and improve their programmes and the aim of understanding community members' ideas unlimited by the interventions. Similarly, our team members' perspectives on citizenship and social change differed and also transformed over time, with the three approaches to research that we have described above remaining very identifiable in our debates. Intermeshed were 'critical' views emphasizing the role of authoritarian states, formal politics, and the transformative role of activism; suggestions that we seek to 'understand' the grassroots processes of incremental change; and attempts to improve NGO interventions to initiate change more 'instrumentally'.

Some tensions also became apparent when presenting our work to audiences representing different research approaches. For instance, while we considered NGOs part and parcel of the existing social fabric, some review statements called for a more explicitly critical approach towards them. Similarly, many commentators have been wary of the way in which we have prioritized our participants' own understandings over pre-given theoretical or programmatic views on citizenship. Additionally, among the other DEVELOP-programme researchers, we have been invited to events arranged by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs to present on the societal impacts and potential policy implications of our research projects at the stage where, in academic terms, knowledge production was still ongoing. Nevertheless, we were able to identify emerging impacts on understanding of daily lives to facilitate project designs, on the research participants who were engaged in the analysis of their own citizenship, and the impacts on the research partnerships between academics from global South and North emerged out of

the joint endeavours of analysis and writing in a way that would fulfil the academic criteria but at the same time, be approachable for actors other than academics. The articles in this special issue show some of the outcomes of our endeavours.

Articles in this issue

Laura Del Castillo Munera and *Alice Ndidd*e, in their article, "Women's Multifaceted Citizenship: Identity, Belonging and Spaces of Participation in Rural Uganda", suggest the concept of multifaceted citizenship to explore the ways in which gendered citizenship arises in multiple spaces of participation in women's everyday lives rather than in legislation and policies. Based on interviews with women in the rural districts of Kiboga and Namutumba, they identify five main identities: active resident, member, role model, leader, and wife. They suggest that exploring citizenship through women's own experiences in spaces of meaningful participation provides a fruitful approach to understanding the dynamics of gendered citizenship at the grassroots level.

Karembe F Ahimbisibwe's article "Exploring *Obutyamye* as Material Citizenship in Busoga Subregion, Uganda" analyses citizenship from a material perspective. Drawing on the ideas of Kabeer (2006) and Baglioni (2016), he contends that although the concept of 'citizenship' may appear abstract, citizenship is, in fact, a deeply material phenomenon. On the basis of empirical research of an NGO's livelihood improvement project in rural Uganda, Ahimbisibwe adopts the notion of *obutyamye*, the local nomenclature for citizenship, to illustrate how people's description of a citizen is tied up with what people have and draw on to eke a living. He contends that this localised experience of citizenship connotes both equality and inequality of gender and material possessions. From this, he illustrates how NGO antipoverty interventions that go through grassroots associations can challenge

and reinforce local power asymmetries, thereby producing different citizenship trajectories. He concludes the article with an emphasis on the instrumental role NGOs' livelihood efforts play in strengthening material conditions of the poor and as a result, their citizenship agency and status.

Tiina Kontinen and *Twine H Bananuka*, in their article, "NGO Legitimacy with an Example of Interventions Fostering Citizenship", discuss an example of a Ugandan NGO with an explicit philosophy of combining livelihood support with civic education. They analyse the multiple negotiations with which the NGO needs to engage in order to be perceived as legitimate, and thus, as able to act. They focus on civic education initiatives and provide an analysis of different normative perspectives and definitions of 'good citizenship' held by international partners, community members, and local government, and how the NGO needs to balance between them in its activities. Their contribution increases understanding of diverse citizenship ideals, and NGOs as part of the long-standing social fabric in Uganda, and also the increasingly authoritarian state's imposition of restrictive measures on civil society.

Henni Alava's contribution, "Tiny Citizenship, Twisted Politics, and Christian Love in a Ugandan Church Choir", combines 'critical' analysis of the state with a focus on empirical findings of what people actually do when the state fails them. Alava draws on long-term ethnographic research with an Anglican church choir in northern Uganda to provide an analysis of the choir's everyday interactions, and of its encounter with the Ugandan state at the national commemoration of the choir's namesake, Archbishop Janani Luwum. The article contrasts Hannah Arendt's notion of 'authentic politics' with Gary Alan Fine's notion of 'tiny publics' to advance the notion of 'tiny citizenship'. It suggests that small groups like a church choir are fundamental to how politics emerges in a totalitarian context.

In conclusion, our introduction and the individual contributions in this special issue show how different aims of knowledge production are intertwined, and how an extensively researched notion of citizenship can receive novel definitions in dialogue with diverse empirical locations and the understandings articulated by interlocutors. Further, our dissemination events have shown the findings to be at least partly relevant for community members, local government, Ugandan NGOs, Finnish development policymakers, and academic audiences from different disciplines. However, as we have suggested, the field of research in which we are engaged is in constant flux; even since we received our funding, priorities within development policies, within African societies, and within the academic circles concerned with them have changed and are often the subjects of fierce debate. It is our hope that the contributions presented here can inspire further reflection on what the aims and priorities in development-related research on Africa should be, and how these aims can be reached in space characterized by different ideas of relevance.

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