

Perspectives on Human Development

REFRAMING DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

Perspectives From the Global South



Edited by
Mila Tuli
Nandita Chaudhary

Reframing Developmental Psychology

PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Series Editors: Isabelle Albert, Jaan Valsiner and Koji Komatsu

The *Perspectives in Human Development* series publishes innovative work on human development, taking the interdisciplinary focus of contemporary developmental science as its base. Work at the intersection of developmental psychology, sociology, history, and anthropology is welcome in the series as long as it advances the general understanding of human development in societal contexts. The series also re-publishes classic works in developmental science, furnished with up-to-date commentaries on how these contributions could further advance knowledge in the 21st century.

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Reframing Developmental Psychology

**Perspectives From the
Global South**

Edited by

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And

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SERIES EDITORS PREFACE

Reframing the Context of Developmental Psychology

**Isabelle Albert
Jaan Valsiner
Koji Komatsu**

For a long time, mainstream developmental psychology primarily focused on childhood and adolescence, adopting a rather narrow perspective on development that saw biological maturation processes as main determinants for development. Despite earlier theories considering the entire life course, the view that human development is a lifelong process only became a research paradigm in the mid-20th century. With the rise of lifespan approaches, the consideration of individual, biological, and socio-cultural factors has become standard in developmental science, making contextualism a key element of these approaches.

In parallel, cross-cultural approaches aimed to identify universals and culture-specifics by testing theories in different cultural contexts. Despite this, the perspective remained predominantly Western—context was considered mainly to transfer Western theories to other places, with underlying phenomena being less frequently studied in these strongly quantitative approaches. A leading question was how far developmental dynamics are similar or different in Western and non-Western contexts.

One solution to the problem of how we can describe universal and culture-specific phenomena has been to expect universal human developmental tasks but to look at culture-based developmental pathways, assuming that the tasks over the lifespan are the same but the solutions differ. The culturally universal basic knowledge about human life-course comes in unique personal forms not only differing between societies, but between each and every individual person. This is where cultural psychology demonstrates its advantages ahead of other domains of psychology. Each and every personal life course is uniquely meaningful—for the person—while that uniqueness is made possible by general meaning-construction principles.

The cultural-psychological approach has been very fruitful over the past three decades. Yet in the empirically dominated research a narrow, Occidental bias has continued as most of the time developmental tasks from a Euro-American perspective were still the point of reference. This equals an act of domination in the socio-political arena of developmental psychology. Cultural models that are taken for granted among middle-class while North American parents in their child-rearing become viewed as a general norm—rather than a narrow exception due to the middle-class status of the parents. Developmental science needs to learn much more from societies far away from those of the researchers themselves. Especially what is needed is understanding the worldwide variations in practices that are functionally similar. Human development succeeds along multiple parallel trajectories, rather than by a wide highway of one society's middle-class social norms or expectations.

The present volume addresses this gap by focusing on non-Western contexts, applying a cultural lens from the start that allows one to observe and describe phenomena that have been underexplored so far. Earlier approaches often missed cultural phenomena because they were not specifically looked for. This oversight is eliminated in this volume. As teaching in many parts of the world relies on Western theories, a need for culture-specific knowledge from practical experience in the respective contexts became obvious.

In this volume different authors critically explore the central frameworks and theories that underlie teaching and research in developmental psychology in many parts of the world. It questions the strong focus on Western-based theories, including assumptions about universality and culture-specifics that have been found on the basis of limited samples from different cultural contexts. The editors of this volume propose a more inclusive and interdisciplinary approach that integrates perspectives from the so-called Global South including indigenous knowledge, a large range of methodologies and collaborations between researchers and practitioners from different parts of the world.

Are we making psychology indigenous? We are not—as it has already been made so for around a century. The move of the intellectual gravity of theorizing in psychology from Europe to the United States in the 1930s created a situation where North American indigenous psychology started to guide psychological science and its applications as if that was the way science should be. Psychology has for all of its history been a socially normative science—which is a dangerous state of being if guided by any one society's implicit social norms. This has happened with the “made in USA” psychology being exported to the rest of the World. Of course, the export happens together with the eager importers who benefit from the “cargo cult” charms of the various “standardized methods” sold on global methods markets.

The present volume is a way-leading effort to provide a much-needed contribution to understanding human development across the world from different cultural perspectives. The reader can decide what is valuable—we do not prescribe anything else but an open mind to contemplate how human development could be investigated.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the culmination of countless conversations, collaborations, and reflections that span across cultures, disciplines, and generations. The search for a culturally relevant and globally recognized science of Developmental Psychology has been a long and arduous struggle. Despite increasing availability of readings, students, scholars and practitioners continue to lean heavily on international publications that seldom provide a framework and content that is culturally relatable. This volume is a small but significant effort at trying to address issues of theory, methods and interpretations that allow a scholarly dialog between local reality and global science. Following from and going beyond just ‘decolonizing Developmental Psychology,’ we believe that it is time to develop a robust dialogue to engage with the mainstream to push for a culturally relevant and internationally recognized science that is inclusive of cultural diversity both within and between cultural communities. In this endeavour, we have several scholars to acknowledge who have inspired our journey in the field from our student days through their lectures, public talks, publications and teaching. First in this list is Dr S. Anandalakshmy who was our teacher and mentor. Anandalakshmy was an exceptional scholar who was very much at ease in many academic traditions, a width of knowledge and insight that she actively introduced in her classes and supported in her students. We owe much to her.

Jaan Valsiner has been a pioneering voice in cultural psychology over the last several decades and we have been fortunate to have collaborated with him. His remarkable commitment to expanding theory, research and scholarship in psychology has been an inspiration, while his generosity and promptness in providing feedback and advancement have provided us with immense support in our work. The recent establishment of the Jaan Valsiner Foundation, University without Borders bears testimony to his support for young scholars around the world.

We owe a special thanks to Giuseppina Marsico for guiding our initial search for publication possibilities and to Isabelle Albert and Luca Tateo

who have been instrumental in providing a platform to present our work with the invitation to contribute to their book series under IAP. Thank you to the team of editors at Emerald Publishing, for ensuring a smooth transition and publication process.

The contributions of the many scholars on whose work we draw to develop our ideas cannot go unmentioned. Margaret Khalakdina, T. S. Saraswathi, Girishwar Mishra, Ashis Nandy, Sudhir Kakar, Anand Paranjpe, Alan Roland, Heidi Keller, Cigdem Kagitcibasi are some significant names that are sprinkled throughout this volume and our other publications. Their contributions to the development of the discipline of Developmental Psychology in India has been crucial to the promotion of culturally relevant scholarship.

To the communities of scholars and researchers who come together to create collaborative spaces, share ideas, debate and support each other, specifically the members of the 'Kitchen Seminars' and the more nascent 'Global South Voices'. We appreciate that the regular meetings, patient hearings and constructive critiques have given us much food for thought. We are particularly enriched by the sharing of experiences from indigenous communities.

For both of us, the academic institutions in which we work and have worked in the past have been a solid base from which our scholarship received full support in terms of academic leave and recognition. This work would not have been possible without the grant of sabbatical leave by the Institute of Home Economics, University of Delhi.

Our close collaborations, both formal and informal, in our respective places of work (Lady Irwin College and Institute of Home Economics and the Federal University of Bahia) have been noteworthy. We acknowledge their contributions with warm appreciation.

Family and community life in India is vibrant and dynamic. Intense interpersonal dynamics, multiple roles and relationships and a lively inclusion of others is a hallmark across regional, ethnic, socio-economic and ecological divides. Our work as scholars of family and society could not have been achieved without the generosity of the people, communities and institutions we have worked with. We owe a lot to the children, families, teachers, schools, and communities who have inspired us to achieve the consolidation of this compendium. They have allowed us to be part of their lives, enter their homes, and their institutions with generosity and openness. It is through individual stories that our scholarship has slowly accumulated to a point where such a volume became possible. Respect for diversity and difference, and the recognition that people have a right to live their lives as they choose, the principles of social justice and ethical engagement have become strengthened. Moving through communities also helped us realise our responsibilities, as well as those of community leaders, educators and

the State in contributing to social justice and ethical practice, not necessarily by changing how people live, but providing the resources, services and information that they would need to fulfil their aspirations.

We are both teachers by profession, who also conduct and supervise research and also publish, but our primary commitment is to the classroom. Recognizing the importance that students have had in our lives, we wish to acknowledge the numerous undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral students who we have worked with over the past several decades. Conversations, debates and discussions in the classroom have been a significant part of our academic advancement and helped us arrive at a point at which we feel ready to dialogue with a larger audience.

Along the same lines, our own family members and our friends have always been supportive and even contributed to the volume in unseen but significant ways. This book is dedicated to the life and work of Sunil Batra, a pioneering educationist who left us far too early.

Mila Tuli and Nandita Chaudhary

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While working to create gender-equitable and inclusive spaces, she has collaborated on initiatives to understand gender within the social and cultural fabric of urban India. Her current interests include reinterpreting the ethics of human research through a reflective and responsive lens. She has contributed to several edited volumes and published widely in academic journals. Her edited volume *Ethical Considerations for Research and Practice in the Human Sciences*, 2025 (IAP) is now available as part of the series on Innovations in Qualitative Research.

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INTRODUCTION

Reframing the Study of Human Developmental Processes: Traditions and Transitions

Developmental Psychology is defined as the systematic examination of growth, stability, and transformation in a developing organism, and covers the investigation of human behavior and mental processes, including physical, cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional factors from conception through life. The established framework of Developmental Psychology emerged from Western societal domination of science that resulted in the focus on outcomes rather than processes of development between a person and the environment. The attention to aggregation of descriptions and statistical analysis, and the study of variables without explicit reference to the context tended to obscure dynamic developmental processes.

Child Psychology, Child Development, Human Development and the Life-Span, and Developmental Psychology are all titles of disciplines with common concerns, but somewhat different origins and orientations. The ways in which developmental processes are understood vary significantly across different psychological traditions, even though these emerge from universal questions about life, human being and becoming. Developmental science is based on three comparative perspectives, the contrasts between ontogenetic and phylogenetic development across different species, within species variability and changes during the lifespan (Valsiner, 2006). The ways in which human life is organized socially has also had impact on the origins and preoccupations of the study of continuity and change during life based on beliefs, as different traditions about the

origin and sequence of changes were understood. Whether the child is seen as a divine gift, a close connection with ancestors, or a creature to be trained, influenced the emergence of attitudes and practices. Despite the assumed separation of philosophical beliefs and scientific study, the influence of indigenous ideas on contemporary disciplines is undeniable (Paranjpe, 2024).

By the end of the 20th Century, a new discipline of Development Science emerged transcending the boundaries of Child Psychology to address developmental processes in general, focused on specific features of human development like irreversibility of time, contextuality, complexity and coconstruction of person-environment (Valsiner, 2006). Developmental Psychology was a branch that focused on studies of different stages, although somewhat differently in Europe and North America. Also, in the field of Home Economics and Home Science, Child Development was one of the branches of study, along with Food and Nutrition, Resource Management, Textiles and Clothing and more recently, Communication and Extension.¹ The study of cognition and learning in childhood was a key topic in the field of Education, often merging with Psychology to form the field of Educational Psychology. In Anthropology, the approach to childhood has transitioned from viewing children primarily as passive recipients of culture to recognizing them as active participants in their social worlds. This shift has been informed by diverse methodologies and theoretical frameworks that emphasize the complexity and variability of childhood experiences across different cultures. Thus, developmental processes, continuity and change have been core interests in several related disciplines, with different emphases.

Despite the orientation of developmental science, Development Psychology has largely remained trapped within a Western conception and interpretation of humans has been applied to understand developmental processes universally. Western psychology (both European and American) had by the early 1900s produced several systematic procedures to investigate and explain the functioning of the human mind. By following the dominant methods in physical sciences (laboratory based experimental studies, demarcating dependent and independent variables, cause and effect hypotheses etc.) psychologists aspired to position themselves at par with other 'scientific' disciplines. Objectivity, replicability, and universality became the key principles to establish Psychology as a scientific discipline.

Child Development, on the other hand, was initially accorded a secondary status against experimental psychology on account of methodological limitations (Cairns, 2015). The emphasis on statistical analysis gained

¹Each of these fields of study have been renamed over the last two decades.

further prominence in the 1970s (McCall & Applebaum, 1973), guiding which research projects would receive funding and which would be published, thereby transforming developmental enquiry into a robust science with increased prediction and control, thus becoming dominated by non-developmental concepts like cognition, modeling, personality and psychopathology (Cairns, 2015).

From the early focus on personality and behavior to interpreting and predicting behavior, psychologists moved their attention to the study of several other human attributes (cognition, emotions, motivation, morality, cross-cultural dimensions). Child Development emerged from the parent discipline of Psychology as an approach to study the growth, developmental changes and continuities across the lifespan of an individual. The model viewed development as a linear progression with age related increments, contributing to the overall progress of the individual. Thus, Child Psychology or Child Development has not always adopted a developmental approach, as children can be studied from both nondevelopmental as well as developmental approaches (Valsiner, 2006), with different origins (in Europe and the US for instance), building on developmental biology and the social utility of studying children, respectively.

In Indian Universities, Child Development was first introduced as a component of the field of Home Science or Home Economics, and then gradually became relabeled as Developmental Psychology or Human Development. At University of Delhi, for instance, Child Development's emphasis on children was maintained by terming the course Human Development and Childhood Studies. A similar course at University of Baroda, Gujarat, was titled Human Development and Family Studies, with slightly different orientations in approach to the study of development systems and processes. At the same time, in Departments of Psychology, Developmental Psychology was taught as a branch of under the Faculty of Arts. There is a significant overlap in the curricula between Developmental Psychology and Human Development and Family Studies/Childhood Studies.

Henceforth, we will use the term Developmental Psychology to consolidate these different courses, as the interests and issues have followed the advancements in contemporary Developmental Psychology as these became reinterpreted and realigned along the shifts toward a globally recognized scientific discipline.

CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

Cultural Psychology emphasizes coconstruction and the importance of context, defining development as an ongoing interaction between individuals and their cultural environments, where development is believed

4 • Reframing Developmental Psychology

to be shaped by participation in cultural practices and by the shared meanings that guide behavior within a given context (Packer & Cole, 2020). Devoid of context, phenomena were lost in the enterprise of building norms and standards through quantification, thus obscuring fundamental properties of developmental: uniqueness, emergence, contextuality, and uncertainty (Cairns, 2015). Furthermore, the key role of the investigator became a problem to be suppressed through objective experimentation.

The ways in which the ‘subject’ is constructed greatly depends on the cultural and historic context and we find immense diversity in issues, assumptions, and classifications involved. It has been about 25 years since Danziger (1997) and even longer since Richards (1932) reported on their experiences with Indonesian and Chinese traditions in Psychology, wherein they were confronted with the mismatch in assumptions of Western psychology in establishing certain phenomena as natural and therefore universal. Describing these ‘other psychologies’, Richards wrote,

Western Psychology has unduly refrained from examining and criticizing its own basic hypotheses. The distinctions embodied in these hypotheses are based on convention, not on undistorted observation, for we can only see what our framework of conceptions allows us to see. (Richards, 1932, p. 81; Cited in Danziger, 1997, p. 3)

Over the last 50 years or so, the teaching, research and practice of Developmental Psychology across academic institutions and universities in most parts of the world (including India and other countries of the Global South) has been predominantly based on this model of mainstream psychology. Because of the ready acceptance of the superiority and accuracy of Western research and academics, the unease with intuitive ideas about the mind and behavior, epistemic exclusion, the hegemony of a well-established discourse and a paucity of ‘scientific’ contributions to the discipline from other countries. Several decades later the limitations of this predominance are being voiced by an increasing number of academicians and practitioners.

To critically examine mainstream accounts of Developmental Psychology, it is essential to explore how this field has been taught, practiced and promoted as a universal framework for understanding children, childhoods, and human social systems. It is evident that the Western model of Psychology suffers from several methodological and conceptual limitations when applied to other cultures (Arnett, 2008). In fact, the mainstream model of Euro-American psychology does not explain or address diversity even with the West. The need to interpret human behavior and motivations using a culturally grounded framework, to

make meaning from within the personal and social realities of individuals is essential. While there are some universal continuities in the sequence of development, the direction of development is essentially guided by developmental goals that are rooted in the social, cultural, ecological and economic terrain of human collectives. These are dimensions that are more effectively understood within Cultural Psychology (Packer & Cole, 2020).

It is necessary to delve into historical foundations, theoretical debates, and the implications of these perspectives on contemporary practices and beliefs for a more complete understanding. In this volume we attempt to address some of the basic ideas in Developmental Psychology that have certainly contributed to some important advancements in our understanding of human phenomena, but at the same time, the emergence, scope and reach of our understanding has been limited to a narrow section of the human population. The discourse in mainstream psychology and subsequently in Developmental Psychology has been responsible for establishing popular theoretical concepts, ideological discourse, methods of research and directions for the practice of the discipline. The rationale for the book is to address the imbalance in epistemic framing from a northern, Western centric position to an inclusive and plural worldview, adopting a framework of Cultural Psychology.

The socio-political entanglements of the Global South, where many countries have been former colonies, have created additional layers of exclusion and imbalance through the strategic and systematic silencing of local knowledge systems (Bhatia, 2017; De Sousa Santos, 2018). We emphasize the long overdue and urgent need to recognize the challenges that we face and implement changes. We live in a country that is characterized by diversity and plurality in many domains; cultural, historic, linguistic, ecological, economic, and ideological, features that have not been considered in the advancement of human development projects, except to position family life and developmental pathways as largely under the pressure of poverty, disadvantage or delay. Intervention programs focus on scarcity and the need to address this by developmental initiatives like early childhood education and family interventions (Zhang, 2022). This is not to argue against the need for support for families living with disadvantage, but the rising call for restructuring developmental initiatives toward betterment derive from a limited understanding of context (Gibbons, 2024; Singh et al., 2024).

One of the limiting features of mainstream psychology is the disconnect or disregard of culture as inherent to meaning-making. Therefore, behavior and processes of persons from select parts of the world are normalized and overgeneralized. Considering cultural factors in research is necessary to develop interpretative power and the ability

to understand individual experiences and behaviors within their cultural contexts. This is essential for accurately interpreting psychological processes and for culturally conscious research and practice (Brady et al., 2018).

The exclusion of culture and context as mediators of semiotic meaning-making has been a gross oversight of the ‘scientific’ approach to understanding human relationships, and one that has potentially hazardous consequences for communities (Singh et al., 2023). By viewing culture as ‘noise’ that contaminates the precision of scientific measurement, the multiplicity of human existence and the nuances of personal experiences are discarded in favor of universalized models. Culture is commonly seen as a noun, a thing, a collection of abstract and concrete dimensions that separate us as peoples. However, cultural psychology takes a different view of culture as an activity and a relationship between person and environment (Valsiner, 2007) and builds a frame within which culture is seen as a universal aspect of human beings, one that binds rather than separates us as people to others universally. Moving forward, we need Developmental Psychology to be positioned as a discipline that is inclusive, and universal in ways that incorporates human diversity rather than ignoring it. The ideas that are presented here are not new, but it is critical to share them repeatedly and widely. The attempt is not to simply reject existing paradigms but to suggest ones that serve to discover meaningful ways to recognize, acknowledge and integrate intercultural similarities as well as intracultural heterogeneities in ways that could expand our interpretive abilities to understand experiences and behavior.

Why the Global South Matters

In this volume we present the voices and experiences of scholars, researchers and community-level workers from countries and communities that have typically been labeled ‘developing’, ‘third world’ or more recently, the Global South. We would prefer instead to see each of these locations as regions from where voices are rarely heard, whose people do not find a mention in the ‘models’ of Developmental Psychology beyond a footnote or a textbox and are fundamentally recused because their realities are vastly different (and therefore too complex to decipher) from the typical representations. It is precisely within these ‘differences’ that we seek to find reflections of our own lives and experiences from India, South America, and other locations. The Global South includes people who bear the consequences of being labeled, mislabeled and misrepresented. The fact that most of these people experience the challenges of daily life with few resources to build up a movement for fair inclusion and representation

is another reason why scholarship from the Global South should address epistemic injustice.

Scholars of the Global South share a deep and enduring respect for Western science. This also applies to Developmental Psychology. Dominant frameworks such as those upheld by WEIRD science are reinforced through research alignments that replicate the focus of the mainstream. By embracing the ethical and moral frameworks of Western Modernism, we have inadvertently contributed to the suppression of entire knowledge systems. Through a systematic alteration of the ways in which knowledge is presented, nuanced understanding of local cultural practices and meaning systems can become obscured through what [Naidu \(2021\)](#) labels as ‘northern ventriloquism’, resulting from the pressure to be included in the international academic community. Such epistemic loss is wide-ranging and significant enough to shift our perspectives.

India is presented in the sections ahead to illustrate a trajectory of the discipline of Psychology (including Developmental Psychology) among the Global South nations. We recognize the social, political and historical origins of terms such as the Global North and Global South and the risk of further segregation and separation by aligning with such categorizations. However, the undeniable dominance of Global North epistemologies and frameworks of enquiry necessitate the reference to such terminologies. Through the course of this volume, we may just surprise ourselves with some unprecedented alternatives to framing epistemic scholarship, ideas of personhood and the practice of psychology.

Arguing that scholarship is driven by ‘imaginary maps’ that we carry in our minds ([Spivak, 1995/2017](#)), there is a need to modify our approaches to exploration of cultural, developmental phenomena. One way of achieving such a position is through intercultural and interdisciplinary collaboration that call attention to other cultural knowledge systems that are intimately connected with their respective ecologies, and from whom we can learn valuable lessons about sustainability and social justice.

THE GLOBAL SOUTH, THE THIRD AND THE ‘FOURTH WORLD’

Modernity and colonial rule have had a global influence that includes liberalization, altering socio-economic structures, work-patterns, identities, language usage, education, as well as people’s imaginations and strivings. This has also resulted in large scale domination, marginalization and silencing of cultural resources and practices worldwide. Indigenous communities around the world have experienced the greatest disadvantage through criminalization and harassment in their respective countries ([Indigenous](#)

People's Rights International, 2021). Many critical events have been disruptive, especially when facing violence (Nandy, 2009), resulting in hybridization, accommodation and assimilation, creating multilayered, complex societies (Bhabha, 1996). Stories unfold as people adjust to changes and cultures are intertwined with the flow of human endeavors, strivings, beliefs, emotions and values. These are the causes as well as consequences of the interface between persons and their context. How we make sense of these dynamics has a fundamental impact on international relations and community identity.

The Global South is an imagined space that emerged from the notion of the 'third' (poor, disadvantaged) parts of the world, but there was a problem. The category of the Global South appropriated what is now recognized as the 'Fourth world', Indigenous people, a total of around 240 million in 70 countries. This led to a profound ecological and epistemic loss on account of the complicity between the bourgeoisie of the Third world and the First (Spivak, 1995/2017). In the interplay of 'difference' between the universal to the local, the establishments of power over centuries remain largely impenetrable. In academic practice we have been unable, even unwilling, to develop paradigms for promoting social justice and democratic principles in knowledge exchange. Decolonization, developmental efforts and humanitarian aid have also largely failed to bring justice to communities living with disadvantage. Building alternative epistemologies of the South (De Sousa Santos, 2018) such that academic study can be an imaginary space for dialogue, 'intercultural translation', 'ethical singularity', sustainability and mutual exchange. When established methods and practices are reviewed and overturned, we can recognize that the 'other' is of course different, but also the same as us, that human sciences can proceed in ways that maintains the dignity of others to advance new paradigms for the study of human being and becoming (Burman, 2024; Savyasaachi, 2025).

The discussion of psychology in India is used in this volume as a specific illustration of perspectives from the Global South, a grouping of communities, not limited to geographical or political classification in international politics. Alternatively, this perspective is assumed as one in which educated middle and upper classes around the world and in this case, the Global South and India as a specific example, diverge from those who live with economic or ecological difference. The labels of traditional and indigenous frequently impose the judgment of exoticism, peculiarity and even backwardness. Although these communities are also more likely to have economic disadvantage when using the standard principle of income, they often live within sustainable ecosystems with poverty. Internal dominance is often beneficial to the wealthy from the Global South who may otherwise distance themselves from indigenous groups and the rural and urban poor populations. Using such an imaginary map would also prompt us to include