Along the Road of Decolonization: Shared Priorities in Development Justice

A collaborative case study written by staff members from Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Guatemala and Asociación Nuevo Amanecer de Santiago Atitlán (ANADESA) Guatemala

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Decolonizing development is necessary to address the colonial legacies that contribute to injustices faced by Guatemala's Indigenous populations. Through collaborative reflection, staff members from two non-governmental organizations (NGOs) share a case study of their ongoing processes of decolonization through 17+ years of shared relief and development work among Indigenous Tz'utujil communities in Guatemala. The authors argue that implementation of a localization model has fostered an environment of mutuality and learning in which decolonization processes could take place, effectively addressing and continuing to address colonial legacies within each organization and between these two institutions. Grounded in the practical experiences of an international NGO from the Global North and a locally rooted NGO from the Global South, this article contributes to the ongoing discussions on decolonizing development.

Introduction

In the field of international development, the role of structural racism in perpetuating colonial legacies has been highlighted as a barrier to decolonization (Peace Direct 2021). The reality of structural racism is evident in the context of Guatemala, where the impacts of external colonial influences from Europe, North America, and Asia have been compounded by internal colonial dynamics in which a non-Indigenous, "Ladino," and globalized elite hold economic, political, social, and cultural power over Guatemala's Indigenous communities (Grandin 1992; Nolin 2018; Perera 1995). Decolonizing development is urgently necessary to address ongoing development injustices faced by Guatemala's Indigenous populations. This process is particularly critical for members of Indigenous communities whose marginalization is exacerbated by other demographic markers, such as being female, coming from a rural area, and/or having low educational attainment.

This article is the product of collaborative reflection on the part of two development organizations: one an international non-governmental organization (INGO), the other an Indigenous-led Guatemalan NGO supported by the INGO. Together, representatives of these organizations present a case study of their integrated and ongoing processes of decolonization in the context of 17+ years of shared relief and development work among Indigenous Tz'utujil communities in Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala. In alignment with decolonization theorists (Garreau 1998; Alatas 2016; Said 1993), this article draws on a definition of "colonization" that goes beyond the specific practices of the Colonial Era (although these are highly relevant) and includes various ways that the lives and futures of the colonized have been and continue to be constrained by unwelcome external imposition. The story and perspectives shared in this article align with framings of decolonization as a forward-moving process through which the colonized become protagonists of post-colonial identities, politics, and social organization (Fanon 1961). Most importantly, in the same way that colonialism took years, decades, even centuries to become entrenched and bear its destructive legacies, we acknowledge decolonization as a long-term process, requiring consistent effort to build relationships, organizational forms, and practices that are liberating for Indigenous Peoples and restorative of Indigenous sovereignty.

In this article, we argue that dedication to a localization model of international development has fostered an environment of mutuality and learning in which decolonization processes could take place, effectively addressing and continuing to address colonial legacies within each organization and in the relationship between these two institutions. The article begins with theoretical framing, followed by context for Indigeneity in Guatemala, an introduction to both development organizations, and an overview of the methods used for preparing the article. Next, we provide a description of the processes of decolonization carried out by each of the organizations and go on to explain how these processes were integrated and iterative. We close with some comments on both the challenges and importance of sustaining these long-term processes. This article makes an important contribution to ongoing discussions on decolonizing development by grounding these discussions in the practical experiences of an INGO from the Global North and an NGO from the Global South who, together, are navigating a localization model within the social, political, cultural, and historical legacies of colonization among--and structural racism toward--Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala.

AUTHORSHIP

Authors are introduced alphabetically by last name. Their contributions are described in the Methods section.

Carmen Lourdes Petzey Chiviliu is a Tz'utujil woman and Guatemalan citizen. Since 2018, she has worked as a teacher in the Triumphant Children and Youth Project run by ANADESA and funded by MCC. Lourdes is one of the main presenters during ANADESA's cultural nights and has participated in partner encounters on themes of decolonization, run through a collaboration between MCC and the American Friends Service Committee. She is currently completing a degree in social work at Universidad Mariano Gálvez in Guatemala.

Jacob Lesniewski is a White, male, US citizen, serving as the Co-country Director for MCC in Guatemala and El Salvador since 2017. Jack holds a PhD in Social Service Administration (University of Chicago, US 2013), a Master of Social Work (University of Chicago, US 2007), and a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science (Wheaton College, US 1999). Jacob and his partner, Sarah Lesniewski, previously served with MCC in the Q'eqchi region of Guatemala (2001-2005). Since 2017, they have worked closely with Indigenous and non-Indigenous Guatemalan organizations on agroecology, food sovereignty, solidarity economies, migration, youth organizing, and women's empowerment.

Josefa Damian Sosof is a Tz'utujil woman and Guatemalan citizen. Josefa coordinates the Proactive Women's Project run by ANADESA and funded by MCC. She has been part of ANADESA since the organization was founded in 2005, has previously served as the organization's legal representative, and continues to serve as a board member and partner of the Association. Josefa had the opportunity to study up until the third grade. She has one young child and is very involved in her community.

Mayra Magdalena Reanda Tacaxoy is a Tz'utujil woman and Guatemalan citizen who was personally impacted by Tropical Storm Stan in 2005. Mayra started working with Asociación Nuevo Amanecer de Santiago Atitlán (ANADESA) in 2015 as an office assistant, then as a teacher in the education project, after which she became the coordinator of the women's project. Since 2019, she has held the role of General Coordinator. She is the only university graduate and professional in her family of eight siblings, holds a degree in Business Administration (Universidad Mariano Gálvez 2018), and can work in Tz'utujil, Spanish, and English. Mayra has two young children.

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Methodological Lens: Colonialism, *Colonialidad*, and Decolonization

This article draws on a broad definition of colonialism as a set of external political, social, cultural, and economic interests, values, and practices that are imposed, unwelcome, upon local communities. This definition, of course, relates to the historical and ongoing processes by which nations in the Global North and their corporate proxies have imposed non-native order on territories in the Global South to transfer resources from the racialized periphery to the racialized core (Gunder-Frank 1986). Latin American scholars use the term *colonialidad* to refer to how the legacies of these political and economic processes continue to be felt and lived in the bodies, stories, relationships, and daily lives of colonized peoples (Quijano 2000). *Colonialidad* is the social, cultural, and ideological residue left behind by the identity-defining project of colonialism, a common logic that manifests itself in different aspects of social life, patterns of thinking, education systems, and race, where racialized categories of 'fully human, somewhat human, not human' (De Lima Silva 2011) take away the ability of individuals to define their own humanity.

In the context of this article, the above definition of *colonialidad* is also understood to relate to other processes that displace populations from land or affect their access to resources while devaluing existing cultural identities and imposing others. More specifically, we observe that within this case study, gender-based power differences contributed to patterns of oppression between Indigenous men and women that rearticulated colonial patterns of domination and submission. As intersectionality theory brings to light (Crenshaw 1989), the residues of colonization have differential consequences for different sectors of communities. Thus, their processes of liberation can be expected to take different forms.

While we define colonialism broadly, neither "colonization" nor "decolonization" are defined *loosely* within this article. We strongly agree with Tuck and Yang's (2012) warning that decolonization should not be treated as a metaphor or a kind of "keyword" denuded of its political and social power and import (Williams 1983). Given the fundamental injustice of colonization, and the evident and ongoing destructive legacy of *colonialidad*, it would be incomplete merely to engage in anti-racist practices, increase inclusion of women, or develop a subset of neoliberal diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and call them "decolonization." [1] We, therefore, define decolonization most basically as the opposite of colonization, proposing that it must be a reparative, restorative, and redistributive process that directly responds to the historical processes of colonialism and *colonialidad*. Decolonization, then, must seek to unmake the political power dynamics and extractive economic relations imposed by colonialism, redistribute resources and power back from the core to the periphery, and repair the economic, political, social, and cultural damages of colonialism. In this way, processes of decolonization can restore conditions that allow colonized communities to pursue collective self-determination, interdependent relationships with other communities, and a (re)definition of their post-colonial collective identities freed (to the extent possible) from the vestigial beliefs and ideologies embedded in *colonialidad*.

While decolonization seeks to "undo" and "restore," Fanon (1961) provides an important reminder that this is a forward-moving process. Decolonization cannot return the colonized to an imagined pre-colonial state, or restore the colonized to an imagined pre-colonial identity, because colonization has fundamentally and irreversibly changed the context, the colonized subjects themselves, as well as their colonizers. Therefore, just as the destructive legacies of colonization are multi-layered and ongoing, the restorative processes of decolonization must be multi-layered, ongoing, and responsive to a changing world. At their core, however, Fanon argues that these processes must create spaces in which colonized subjects can integrate their experiences in order to develop, articulate, and become protagonists of a post-colonial identity they claim as their own.

Decolonizing international development requires the redistribution, return, and restoration of resources from the Global North to the Global South so that local communities can control the use of, and the benefits generated from, those resources. It also requires a commitment to not engaging in new and complex forms of the resource extraction and cultural imperialism that characterized the colonial project. Localization strategies have been forwarded as one way of working toward these needs. Broadly, localization seeks to provide emergency and development aid through local organizations, avoiding intermediaries. The intention is that international non-governmental organizations, bilateral aid agencies, and other donor agencies provide funds to local organizations that then implement projects that these local organizations themselves have

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[1] Neoliberalism describes the resurrection of free market economic policies that have been promoted, even pushed by the Global North, in response to the debt crisis of the 1980s. It centers economic arrangements, public policy, and cultural identity around the notion of an economically rational individual subject, downloading responsibility for social welfare onto the individual and shifting questions of identity to consumable signifiers of diversity and inclusion.

developed. In other words, this method strives to shift resources and decision-making power from Global North-based development institutions to local institutions in the Global South to design, implement, and monitor development projects.

The use of localization as a strategy for decolonization has been formally articulated in various international development forums (Fine 2022; Mutimbanyoka 2022; Russu 2021), perhaps most famously in the 2016 Grand Bargain documents (Grand Bargain 2016).[2] Unfortunately, progress toward localization as described above has been miniscule compared to the ambitions set out and agreed to in the Grand Bargain documents. Instead, critics argue that many INGOs have applied a "localization spin" to their work, using the rhetoric of localization to obscure ongoing reinforcement of and commitment to systems and structures that perpetuate a colonial status quo (Peace Direct 2021). In this context, our article provides a critical case study to development agencies that sincerely strive to use localization as a strategy to move along the road of decolonization, by illustrating an experience of localization that has been mutually transformative for both institutions.

Case Study Background

Indigeneity in the Context of Relief and Development in Guatemala

Through the imposition of a racialized social and political order by colonial authorities in Guatemala, the racial category "Indigenous" became synonymous with rural, poor, uneducated, exploitable labor (Casuás Arzú 2018). Patterns of exclusion and exploitation set down during the colonial period (1524-1821) were codified during the post-independence period, especially through the liberal reforms of the 1870s (Grandin 2002). The Guatemalan state defined racial categories in the 1871 Constitution, with "liberal reforms" that eliminated collective land rights of Indigenous Peoples, led to the creation of vagrancy laws that made Indigenous Peoples economic captives of large landowners, and created a monolingual educational system. In other words, exclusion and exploitation of Indigenous Peoples were translated quite literally into structural forms of racism, the legacies of which have continued to constrain the lives and futures of Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala.

Five hundred years of racialized exclusion and colonialist exploitation of the Indigenous populations in Guatemala have had significant consequences for the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples. In 2019, approximately 56% of Guatemala's population lived below the poverty line and 27% of the population lived below the extreme poverty line. Meanwhile, among Indigenous Peoples, these rates were 79% and 40%, respectively (SDGF 2017, World Bank 2018). The World Food Programme (2018) estimates that 70% percent of the country's arable land is owned by less than 3% of the population while 90% of rural farmers (primarily Indigenous) do not have enough land to achieve subsistence. Furthermore, Guatemala's high incidence of chronic malnutrition (4th in the world according to the World Food Program 2018) is concentrated within Indigenous communities. Because of these particular vulnerabilities, many relief and development interventions in Guatemala focus on Indigenous communities (IWGIA 2023; USAID 2023).

Wide disparities in official estimates of the Indigenous population of Guatemala speak to both the social construction and the stigmatization of racialized Indigenous identity, reflecting embedded *colonialidad* (Quijano 2000). While some estimates of Guatemala's Indigenous population are as high as 60%, the 2018 government census reported that 47.1% of the Guatemalan population self-identified as Indigenous (INE 2018). In present-day Guatemala, Indigeneity is constructed by physical signs, such as wearing specific kinds of clothing, speaking one of Guatemala's twenty-three Indigenous languages, having a particular last name, and exhibiting certain speech patterns and accents when speaking in Spanish. Because of persistent racism--both overt and structural--toward Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala, some individuals and families have chosen to shed Indigenous features. While features can be borne or shed to some degree, the ability to shed one's Indigenous identity and participate more fully in Guatemalan society, politics, and economy is itself constrained by the educational, economic, and political inequalities associated with being Indigenous.

Considering the socio-economic and socio-cultural realities for Indigenous Guatemalans, development efforts that focus on the challenges faced by Indigenous communities in Guatemala require an understanding of how settler colonization, post-independence liberal reforms, and structural racism have not only shaped the circumstances in which Indigenous Peoples live, but have also shaped their identity and self-image. For Indigenous communities in Guatemala, colonialism is not merely a legacy, but is an ongoing reality, embedded in the social, political, economic, and cultural structures

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[2] The Grand Bargain is an agreement that has endeavored to improve the efficacy of humanitarian work through various commitments on the part of donors and aid agencies involved in humanitarian work. One key focus of the agreement is movement toward localization.

that shape their daily lives and possible futures. Development work that ignores or minimizes the impacts of colonialism on Indigenous communities is more than merely incomplete; it perpetuates dominant structures and patterns of interaction that limit the flourishing of Indigenous communities and prolong their status as "colonized."

Introduction to the Case Study Organizations

This case study is based on the relationship between two development organizations: Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and Asociación Nuevo Amanecer de Santiago Atitlán (ANADESA). MCC is a global development organization with a binational administrative structure governed by two administrative boards made up of representatives from Anabaptist church conferences across the US and Canada. MCC began its relief work in 1920, responding to a call for food assistance from Mennonite communities in Russia and Ukraine. The organization expanded to accompany relief, development, and peacebuilding efforts in Mennonite and non-Mennonite communities around the world, while originally also providing spaces for Mennonites from the US and Canada to serve in and with those communities (service opportunities have since expanded further, as explained by the Epp Weaver and Smith Cain article in this same issue of *CRDA*. MCC became known for its grassroots accompaniment of marginalized communities, commitment to peacebuilding and nonviolence, and simple living on the part of its international "service workers." MCC's Guatemala program launched in 1976 in the aftermath of a serious earthquake. Historically, most of MCC Guatemala's leadership staff, field workers, and service program participants came from Canada and the US. In recent decades, the leadership staff team has included workers from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Colombia, alongside an increasing number of service program participants from Central and South America.

In October 2005, Tropical Storm Stan passed through Central America and Mexico. Parts of Guatemala were affected by heavy rainfall, causing destructive and deadly mudslides. The community of Panabaj in Santiago Atitlán in the department of Sololá was buried and over 300 people were killed. With support from MCC, Mennonite churches in Guatemala City organized an emergency response. After the initial disaster response, a group of Indigenous Maya Tz'utujil women from Santiago Atitlán came together to form a local development organization that would respond to broader community needs. This organization later became known as Asociación Nuevo Amanecer de Santiago Atitlán (ANADESA): The New Dawn Association of Santiago Atitlán). With support from MCC, ANADESA currently runs an economic empowerment project for Tz'utujil women (Proactive Women) and an educational reinforcement project for Tz'utujil students (Triumphant Children and Youth).

ANADESA's unique position within MCC Guatemala's network of partners makes it a critical case study for understanding how accompaniment-based localization can contribute to decolonizing development. While MCC Guatemala's other partners exhibit one or more of the following characteristics, only ANADESA exhibits all of them: 1) Their connection to MCC started through an emergency response/relief project; 2) they have developed a long-term institutional partnership with MCC and 3) have expanded into broader community development and peace-building; 4) their staff and leaders have varying levels of formal education, but 5) most are not formally educated as development workers. In addition, MCC is ANADESA's main and, for most of its history, only funder. It is important to note that MCC Guatemala's process of implementing a localization model began around the same time it began its relationship with what would become ANADESA. Taken together, these characteristics of the relationship between MCC and ANADESA offer a rich opportunity to understand more deeply the role of accompaniment-based localization in decolonization processes within the field of development.

Methods

In October 2022, MCC was invited to contribute to *CRDA's* special issue on decolonization. MCC Guatemala staff identified ANADESA as an interesting case study. Having recently participated in a series of workshops on decolonization organized jointly by the American Friends Service Committee and MCC, ANADESA staff were eager to explore this theme more deeply in the context of their organizational history and relationship with MCC.

This article presents the reflections and perspectives of MCC and ANADESA staff through a review of 115 organizational documents (including personnel placements, internal MCC assessments, and reports on ANADESA's project and non-project activities) dated between 2010 and 2023 as well as recent discussions between staff from both organizations. Using an open-coding process (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 1995), co-authors from MCC examined how the relationship between MCC and ANADESA developed and changed over time and explored what insights these documents could provide on successes and challenges in decolonizing development. Through reflective discussions with ANADESA and MCC staff, co-authors from both organizations elaborated how these themes reflect shifting priorities and practices within each organization, where they have fallen within structural

and strategic changes across time, and current manifestations of these themes.

The development of this article was a collaborative process that occurred in stages (See Table 1). Co-authors Josefa Damian Sosof and Carmen Lourdes Petzey Chiviliu provided reflective analyses on the initial findings from the document review and broader critical analysis of ANADESA's organizational history and relationship with MCC. Co-authors Sara Wyngaarden and Jacob Lesniewski conducted in-depth analyses of documents and reflective discussions, incorporated perspectives from MCC's current and former staff, prepared the written article, and responded to feedback from the journal's editors. Co-author Mayra Magdalena Reanda Tacaxoy reviewed drafts of the written article and provided ongoing detailed feedback on the thoroughness and accuracy of content written by MCC staff, representing perspectives and experiences from ANADESA. The division of labour was based on co-authors' availability to contribute to article preparation. While MCC staff took the lead on writing, all communication with co-authors from ANADESA emphasized a desire to accurately represent their perspectives, experiences, and voices, consistently inviting their explicit and critical feedback. The process of article preparation has fostered further discussion and growth on the part of both organizations in relation to these themes.

Table 1: Overview of the Writing Process

Stage	Activity	MCC's role	ANADESA's role
1	Document review (October 2022)	Reviewed 115 documents dated between 2010 and 2022 that were present in MCC's database (project proposals, progress reports, evaluation reports, etc.).	Faithfully prepared and submitted organizational documents to MCC throughout their partnership history.
2	Initial discussion (November 2022)	Prepared questions for a semi-structured discussion with ANADESA leaders about their understanding of colonization/decolonization and how that has played out in their organizational history.	Articulated the definitions of colonization and decolonization used in this article based on recent involvement in exchanges with other Indigenous-led organizations. Shared reflections on how these definitions relate to their organizational history and ongoing work.
3	Initial article drafts (December 2022, April 2023)	Based on document review and initial discussion, prepared a draft of the article for initial review.	Reviewed the draft article and provided feedback on thoroughness of content and accuracy of interpretation.
4	Editing and preparation for publication (June-August 2023)	Worked together with ANADESA and journal editors to finalize the article for publication.	Provided ongoing feedback and final approval of the article for publication.

From Implementation to Localization: Decolonization within MCC

As noted in Vision/Mission section of the [MCC website](), MCC "envisions communities worldwide in right relationship with God, one another, and creation." The organization's partnerships and programs are all oriented by this vision and are rooted in a historic peace theology. Part of MCC's theory of change (the way it understands how sought-after change comes about) is that humans establish right relationships and build communities of peace by "Connecting Peoples"[3] across differences such as geography, language, culture, ethnicity, race, gender, faith, socio-economic status, political orientation, etc.

MCC's move from implementation to localization reflects a recognition that "Connecting Peoples" is not synonymous with "establishing right relationships" if those relationships continue to be steeped in power imbalances that reflect historical development injustices (including but not limited to colonial legacies). These

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[3] MCC's Connecting Peoples program offers various opportunities to live, serve, share, and learn with MCC teams and partners across the world.

relationships, then, are not "right" and must be critically reexamined. Throughout the years, MCC's theory of change has expanded to reflect a belief that "right relationships" require recognizing and deconstructing the privileges and power imbalances that perpetuate development injustices and building alternative forms of relating that are based on mutual learning and respect, genuine care and solidarity, and recognize and embrace interdependence.

MCC's shift from implementation to localization has been a decades-long process (described in further detail by Epp Weaver and Smith Cain 2023). Initially, most of MCC's project funding was attached to international service workers who moved from Canada or the United States to communities in the Global South, where they designed and were responsible for implementing projects that addressed development needs in those communities. By the 1970s, MCC was taking initial steps toward localization by shifting towards a partnership model, in which projects were implemented through local partner organizations rather than MCC staff. Within this model, service workers continued to play a key role on the ground as "community development workers" seconded to partner organizations. While their primary role was to provide "accompaniment" to the partner organization, project, and participating communities--a strategy rooted in decolonial concepts of local autonomy and control--service workers still tended to take on (or be given) clear leadership roles in project design and implementation. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, seconded service workers expressed increasing discomfort with the "heavy hand" of Canadian and US citizens in MCC's projects in the Global South. Additionally, concerns with the temptation to fall into clientelist dependency thinking in relationships with partner institutions emerged (Fraser and Gordon 1984; Williamson 2000). Discussions of colonial legacies and problematic power relations became prevalent, fueling MCC's deeper engagement with localization.

As MCC moved away from seconding service workers, its focus moved toward becoming more of a granting agency. In this localization model, resources are transferred from MCC to local partners who design and run the day-to-day operations of relief, development, and peacebuilding projects while providing biannual reports to MCC's in-country offices. This arrangement changes MCC's relationship with its partners to a more interdependent one, in which local partner NGOs rely on MCC for financial resources (and sometimes technical support) while MCC relies on local partners for progress reports that communicate both challenges and positive outcomes of their activities. MCC also relies on partners for the actual work of projects, including their outcomes, successes, and failures. Through reports and forms of accompaniment such as field visits, MCC staff learn how to support partners more effectively while also gathering data and stories that help MCC raise funds from donors in Canada and the US, thus continuing MCC's existence and shared relief, development, and peacebuilding work.

Today, MCC's partnership-granting localization model remains rooted in "accompaniment," but rather than seconding workers to engage in project implementation alongside partner organizations, the focus for MCC staff is on understanding, effectively supporting, and accurately representing the local work of partner institutions. For MCC, the decolonial approach of "accompaniment" focuses on minimizing external imposition on the part of MCC and maximizing opportunities for partner organizations and communities to define what development means in their context and design interventions that actualize that vision. It takes the long view, recognizing that deconstructing the legacies of colonization and the impacts of *colonialidad* takes time and concerted effort on the part of all involved parties, requiring long-term relationships that function well beyond project funding cycles. Importantly, MCC's long-term accompaniment model assumes change over time on the part of both MCC and its partners: not just changes in project activities, monitoring practices, or resource management, but also changes in institutional priorities through processes of formation, growth, and development of institutional identity. In the Guatemalan context, most of MCC Guatemala's partners are Indigenous-led organizations and/or NGOs supporting Indigenous communities (ANADESA falls into both these categories). Thus, MCC Guatemala has taken special care in creating spaces for these institutions and communities to practice self-determination and become protagonists of post-colonial identities, politics, and social organization (Fanon 1961).

Acting as a granting agency does not automatically resolve all tensions or power imbalances: MCC continues to have financial power in its relationships with partners and experiences other privileges associated with being an institution based in Canada and the US Still, through this model, MCC is able to use its privilege to redistribute resources from the Global North to the Global South--from the racialized core to the racialized periphery--thus contributing to a reversal of colonial patterns of resource extraction. This model returns power to local communities and institutions to define what meaningful change looks like in their communities and then design and implement local development initiatives that actualize that change. Additionally, this model complicates power dynamics that are typical to North-South development connections by establishing a more interdependent

relationship between this INGO and local NGO partners as well as the communities they serve. While one could argue that the use of data from development projects as a fundraising tool is simply another means of resource extraction, the intended ends of this "extraction" process are quite the opposite of the colonial agenda: the goal is to facilitate an ongoing redistributive and restorative process that returns power to marginalized populations to define, direct, and defend their own humanity and choices about their own development. In these ways, MCC strives to engage in partnership-granting localization as a form of "reparations" responding to a colonial past (Peace Direct 2021).

The transition from implementation to localization has occurred unevenly across MCC. By the mid-1980s, some country programs were almost entirely engaged in a partnership-granting model. Meanwhile, in other country programs direct implementation and/or partnership-secondment remained prominent into the 2000s. While some direct implementation and secondment-based programming continues within MCC, it is now the exception rather than the rule and is based on partner- and community-led discussions on local priorities and needs.

In the Guatemala country program, the transition from secondments to grants was underway by 2005, the same year that MCC first connected with what would become ANADESA. ANADESA has played a key role in helping MCC Guatemala learn how to engage a partnership-granting localization model well, taking their own steps along the road of decolonization throughout their partnership with MCC. In particular, we assert that MCC's commitment to localization-based accompaniment has offered ANADESA the space and freedom to define its own leadership structure and strengthen its institutional processes; to develop its own theory of change, including its specific methods of program implementation; and to tell its own story with confidence. These processes are described in the following section.

Organizational Structure, Ideology, and Identity: Decolonization in ANADESA

From Aid Recipients to Local Development Leaders

After the mudslide response in 2005, MCC Guatemala continued working alongside the Mennonite church in Guatemala City to provide relief to Santiago Atitlán and assist ANADESA in getting established as an organization. As part of this early partnership, MCC brought groups from Canada and the US as "Work Teams" to help build ANADESA's infrastructure (especially their main offices in Panabaj). These groups often raised funds for these projects before arriving. Meanwhile, as noted above, MCC

Guatemala had started implementing the institutional shift from partnership-secondment localization to partnership-granting localization. Through feedback from ANADESA staff, project participants, and "Work Team" participants, MCC Guatemala staff realized that this shift could be paralleled in the "Work Team" programming. As MCC and ANADESA continued discussing ANADESA's institutional principles and priorities, and as MCC Guatemala deepened its engagement with localization as a decolonization strategy, these groups gradually shifted from "Work Teams" to "Work and Learn Teams" to "Learning Tours" by 2016. This shift changed the focus of visits from providing material and financial assistance to ANADESA to mutual learning and developing solidarity-based relationships with ANADESA, its project participants, and their communities. In turn, ANADESA and the communities they serve shifted from being recipients of assistance from Canadian and US visitors to being experts who teach these same visitors about their culture, history, and current living situations, as well as the development interventions they actively implement within that context.

Changes in ANADESA's relationship with Canadian and US groups and institutions occurred alongside ANADESA's growth into an implementing organization for development projects. This change occurred through direct discussions between MCC Guatemala leadership and the (then-male) leadership of ANADESA. Since those first discussions, ANADESA has experienced three distinct periods of organizational development which, we argue, taken together, illustrate steps in ANADESA's own process of decolonization and liberation. The first period occurred between 2012 to 2016, when ANADESA focused on formalizing themselves as an organization and building relationships with churches, schools, and universities in Canada and the US. We observed that rhetoric used by ANADESA's then-current leadership to portray their own Indigenous Tz'utujil communities reflected the *colonialidad* embedded in ANADESA's organizational narratives at the time. For example, in organizational documents, ANADESA articulated that the purpose of their relationships with Canadian and US institutions was to generate resources and create service opportunities to "help" or "assist" "the poor, under-educated, and suffering" populations in Santiago Atitlán.

For the second period, from 2015-2018, documents show an increasing focus on education alongside ongoing embedded *colonialidad*. At the time the same documents show concerns among MCC staff over the disconnect between ANADESA's stated organizational identity as a *colectivo* (grassroots organization) of Tz'utujil women and the emphasis on the need for computer and English classes for students

in their education programs to bring children into the "modern era." Additionally, there was an articulated need for youth to develop an "entrepreneurial spirit" to overcome poverty and "backwardness." In this period, ANADESA's implicit and explicit understanding was that the Tz'utujil of Santiago Atitlán suffered from cultural deficits and that ANADESA should work to overcome these deficits through encouraging participants to become more like the dominant culture in their decision-making, values, language, and understanding of their place in the world.

ANADESA's third period of organizational development, which started in 2018 and continues to the present day, began when the women staff and women board members took over the leadership of the organization from its formerly male executive leadership. For its entire history, ANADESA's staff and board were made up almost entirely of Tz'utujil women, while executive leadership was entirely male. Much like Fanon's description of the colonial administrators (Fanon 1964, 30ff), these Indigenous Tz'utujil men acted as intermediaries between the rural Tz'utujil women that made up ANADESA's staff, board members, and project participants, and the external powers (in this case Canadian and US institutions and INGOs) that had connected with these communities. These male leaders absorbed and passed along the explicit racialized and gendered cultural critiques of the dominant Ladino elite in Santiago Atitlán and the implicit critiques of Canadian and US outsiders in ways that further marginalized the women associated with ANADESA and added to their tangible burdens of poverty and exclusion and psychosocial burdens of *colonialidad.* In other words, being *female,* Indigenous, and rural dwelling was more disadvantageous than being *male* in the same context.

One consequence of the leadership arrangement within ANADESA was that communication between women staff and women board members was largely managed and/or overseen by the male executive leadership. Both groups of women were discontented with how the organization was being led, but each group was under the impression that the other had approved these circumstances. It was only when staff members managed to communicate directly with board members, in the absence of male leaders, that they realized both groups experienced the then-current leadership style as exclusionary and exploitative of women. Both groups saw this leadership style as an unwelcome external imposition. In other words, based on the broad definition presented in this article, women staff and women board members experienced this arrangement as a form of colonialism that was impeding the development goals they had for their families and communities. In 2018, these women approached MCC Guatemala with their plan of action to remove the male intermediaries and set the stage for ANADESA to be an organization led by women.

Taking over the leadership of the organization was an act of bravery and strength on the part of ANADESA's female staff members. In a cultural context of *machismo* (a belief ascribed to Latin American cultures that women should be under the power and authority of men), this act was particularly symbolic, countercultural, and revolutionary. MCC staff stood in solidarity with the women as they identified and articulated how their intersectional identities had exacerbated their experience of marginalization, and then asserted themselves to counter the *machismo* they had identified within their own institution. Today, ANADESA staff state that the leadership takeover would not have been possible if these women had not become empowered and experienced solidarity and *concientización* (a heightened sense of critical awareness) through their own involvement in ANADESA. Furthermore, staff state that the leadership takeover would not have been possible without organization and communication between staff members and the board of directors. We suggest that it also would not have been sustainable if the women did not have a vision for their organizational identity and for how they wanted to contribute to community development. The movement of women into ANADESA's leadership has fundamentally shifted how ANADESA presents itself to outside organizations and groups. Instead of "welcome to our community, these are our needs, thank you for helping us meet them," ANADESA now communicates "welcome to our community, this is who we are and what we do, thank you for accompanying our work." In other words, they have pushed off various layers of *colonialidad,* integrated their experiences to create a new post-colonial identity (as explored below), and become protagonists of an ever-developing post-colonial identity.

ANADESA has established itself as a local development leader. While MCC remains their primary project funder, examination of project documents shows ANADESA's increasing confidence in its ability to generate resources and create networks of support with other external organizations. ANADESA also documents its successes in asserting itself in Guatemalan-Ladino contexts, a particularly challenging prospect for an organization of Indigenous women in the context of internal colonialism and structural racism in Guatemala (Grandin 2002; Tuck and Yang 2012). Today, ANADESA is recognized as a vital partner for local public schools, participates in various planning commissions of the municipality of Santiago Atitlán, and is a member of the local branch of a national non-profit network.

Promoting and Defending Local Cultural Identity

ANADESA's organizational mission is to support "[holistic] training and sustainable community development of children, adolescents, young people, and women of rural communities [in Santiago Atitlán] through education, training, and community development programs" (ANADESA).

ANADESA's organizational mission is to support "holistic training and sustainable community development," particularly among children, adolescents, and women from rural communities around Santiago Atitlán. While the organization started as a way of channeling material resources to meet material needs, ANADESA's current projects focus more on expanding and reinforcing the capabilities present among program participants so that they can be empowered through increased autonomy and use their voices to stand up for themselves and support their families and communities. In other words, ANADESA's theory of change (again, the understanding of how sought-after change comes about) shifted from the ideology that external aid will create positive change in local communities to the ideology that local people are capable of creating positive change within their own lives, families, and communities, and supportive local institutions can help them visualize and actualize that change. The shift to this theory of change--with greater focus on inclusion, accompaniment, capabilities, and empowerment--has occurred over time, as ANADESA developed a distinct understanding of the challenges facing Tz'utujil communities and defined its role in addressing those challenges.

In other words, ANADESA's theory of change (again, the understanding of how sought-after change comes about) shifted from the ideology that external aid will create positive change in local communities to the ideology that local people are capable of creating positive change within their own lives, families, and communities, and supportive local institutions can help them visualize and actualize that change.

One way that this shift is visible in project proposals and reports is that ANADESA uses less deficit language regarding the needs of their constituents and program participants. For example, rather than broadly painting Tz'utujil communities as culturally deficient, ANADESA discusses specific cultural challenges, such as how *machismo* results in the exclusion of women from decision-making spaces and creates challenges for girls in pursuing education. The interventions in their women's empowerment project then focus on the capabilities that program participants can develop and are developing through the accompaniment of ANADESA's staff team to confront these challenges in their daily lives.

Another example of this shift in ideology is the way that ANADESA talks about their integration of Tz'utujil, Spanish, and English languages in their education programming. In ANADESA's thinking, a focus on just Spanish and English would devalue Tz'utujil culture, identity, and heritage in a way that perpetuates the legacies of colonization. On the other hand, a focus only on Tz'utujil language would minimize opportunities to share cultural practices and beliefs with others and defend Tz'utujil communities in the public sphere, once again placing cultural survival at risk. Rather than continuing to see Spanish and English capacity as a way to leave behind Tz'utujil language and culture and bring children into the "modern era," ANADESA has come to see Spanish and English as tools that can enable Tz'utujil people to promote and defend their culture, including their language, to Spanish and English speakers. ANADESA's "middle ground" approach allows them not only to continue developing their cultural identity within a changing world, but also to be protagonists of that identity among external audiences. ANADESA developed this perspective based on experiences of Tz'utujil people who, during the internal armed conflict, did not have the language skills to defend themselves from the Guatemalan army and were therefore assumed to be insurgents. Thus, it represents one way that ANADESA has integrated its experiences of colonization into an emerging post-colonial identity.

Another key factor in changing organizational priorities is that ANADESA staff have integrated learning from earlier projects with their identities and experiences as Tz'utujil women. The women leaders of ANADESA know firsthand the experience of social exclusion and not having their capacities or opinions valued. ANADESA increasingly prioritizes offering inclusive opportunities through their projects, providing space for participants to share their perspectives and to affirm that each participant's opinion is valued. Additionally, ANADESA supports program participants in developing critical thinking skills and engaging in creative problem-solving to counteract a long history of lack of educational opportunities. ANADESA staff first modeled these organizational priorities by standing up to what they considered oppressive and exclusionary male leadership. Now they continue to model these priorities through collaboration and team decision-making, while looking to their board of directors--made up completely of Tz'utujil women--to guide the organization's future. MCC's accompaniment throughout these processes has consisted of *remaining faithfully present,* asking questions, listening carefully as ANADESA articulates their perspectives and approaches, and thoughtfully observing the ways they put these into action.

Owning Their Story:
Protagonists of a Post-Colonial Identity

"Measuring" identity is a challenging task; however, one can use narratives that individuals, organizations, and communities develop about themselves to reveal understandings of their identity. A post-colonial identity emerges when colonized peoples experience the freedom to tell their own stories, articulating who they are and the futures to which they aspire. ANADESA's story reveals a gradual process of integrating experiences to reach greater institutional clarity on identity, priorities, and direction, albeit with complexity and nuance. Below are three examples of how ANADESA's articulation of their identity has changed over time.

ANADESA staff and leadership have opportunities to express their understanding of their identity through presentations to "Learning Tours" and other visitors. Two of these presentations stand out in how they have changed over time. First, ANADESA's headquarters in Panabaj is located next to the Parque de Paz, a memorial to Santiago Atitlán residents who were massacred by the Guatemalan army in 1990 while protesting the actions of drunken soldiers. This massacre set off a protest movement that succeeded in non-violently and permanently expelling the army from Santiago Atitlán, an unprecedented achievement in Guatemalan history for an Indigenous community. Initially, ANADESA's presentations on what happened in 1990, what led up to the events of that night in December, and the aftermath closely matched the "between two fires" discourse of dominant political powers in Guatemala (Stoll 1993). This discourse situates Indigenous communities as passive victims of the "two fires" of Soviet-backed guerillas and the US-backed army fighting a brutal proxy war in the highlands of Guatemala. The reality of the armed internal conflict in Guatemala both generally and in Santiago Atitlán in particular is more complicated, and iterations of ANADESA's presentations between 2017 and 2022 have increasingly acknowledged that complexity; they have discarded the two-fires discourse for a more nuanced and personal understanding of their community's resistance and resilience in the context of the armed conflict, thus restoring agency to past and present residents of Santiago Atitlán.

Second, ANADESA's descriptions of the "before" and "after" of Tz'utujil cultural practice in Santiago Atitlán during their "cultural night" presentations have also changed. Whether presenting clay pots and their modern plastic equivalents, showing the male traditional clothing that is no longer commonly worn, or sharing other lost artifacts locally produced and consumed, ANADESA's cultural night presenters lament the loss of circular solidarity economies, in which collective efforts provided for the collective benefits of the people of Santiago Atitlán. Part of ANADESA's definition of their collective identity is connected to their critique of changes in the material and consumer culture of Santiago Atitlán. It is no longer consistently true that local resources are used to serve local needs, nor that the Tz'utujil people of Santiago Atitlán work together to provide for and meet the needs of all their neighbors. This is a marked change from earlier presentations, which focused on the impracticality and expense of "ancestral" artifacts and the convenience of their modern equivalents.

These presentations have allowed ANADESA to develop and refine its voice and its own understanding of the history and culture of Santiago Atitlán. The changes ANADESA has made to the narratives along the way are evidence of the process of decolonization in which the organization is immersed. Furthermore, these changes have helped decolonize the experiences of Canadian and US visitors, as ANADESA guides them in situating their learning within broader economic, social, and political structures (Villareal-Sosa and Lesniewski 2020). MCC staff have observed and taken note of these changes as they accompany groups to visit ANADESA and take part in these activities.

Third, ANADESA's gradual adoption of human rights discourses, especially in relation to its work with women, is a change from earlier deficit-centered rhetoric around their communities. Instead of presenting in project proposals, reports, and presentations a picture of a "backwards," needy people who need external uplifting to enter the modern era, ANADESA increasingly (but not exclusively) uses human rights discourses and gestures to form structural understandings of why their communities are the way they are. Their solutions and interventions focus more on individual and collective empowerment through rights education, mutual aid, and productive project activities, and less on deficit-based education and entrepreneurship models. This change can be seen as an assertion that Tz'utujil people, and women in particular, are worthy agents of change for themselves, their families, and their communities. It can also be understood as the development of a form of localized Tz'utujil "community feminism" (Latina Feminist Group 2001) that grounds the liberation of Tz'utujil women in their own experiences, history, and cultural practices.

Understanding how ANADESA talks about itself and the communities in which it is embedded and how that has changed over time helps illustrate the processes of identity formation they have engaged in during that time. These "perspectives about action" (Snow & Anderson 1991, 157) are necessarily retrospective and the product of ANADESA's own process of shaping rhetoric for external audiences; yet they can still be helpful in understanding how ANADESA's staff

members and board of directors make sense of themselves and their context. The three rhetorical shifts noted above indicate a process of ANADESA owning its own story of who they are and what it means to be an organization of Tz'utujil women serving Tz'utujil communities in Santiago Atitlan. This story is neither fully "pre-colonial" in that it acknowledges what has been lost permanently, nor is it "colonial" in that it asserts the importance of practices, beliefs, and orientations outside of dominant Guatemalan-Ladino culture. As noted throughout this paper, this emergent post-colonial identity has shaped ANADESA's approaches to its work in communities and its relationship with external actors, including MCC.

Mutual Transformation: Decolonization as an Iterative Process

We argue that MCC's partnership-granting localization and accompaniment model has created a safe, flexible, and relatively neutral space for ANADESA to experience freedom in establishing, exploring, and expanding their institutional identity in the ways described in the previous section. One of the fruits of this process has been ANADESA's growing institutional self-confidence, which MCC has seen evidenced when ANADESA pushes back on MCC staff and asserts their organizational preferences, priorities, and petitions. For example, when MCC contracted an external auditor to review ANADESA's financial systems, ANADESA staff asked for a more rigorous analysis that would essentially audit their entire organization because they wanted insight into improving their systems and programming more broadly. Furthermore, each year MCC invites partners to reflect on and adapt their projects in response to changing contexts and organizational circumstances. During these annual reflection processes, MCC staff have asked ANADESA about specific indicators; whether they are useful and informative, or whether they have become onerous and should be adapted, replaced, or even removed from the monitoring system. ANADESA has consistently affirmed that staff value the outputs from these indicators and would not like to make changes. On the other hand, ANADESA has requested adaptations to project budgets to better suit their needs and priorities for resource management.

MCC staff value these moments of "pushback." In addition to indicating a level of comfort and security that ANADESA experiences in their relationship with MCC, these moments are opportunities to learn from ANADESA and thus experience mutuality in institutional growth and transformation. As noted

previously, the assumption of change over time on the part of MCC and its partners is foundational to MCC's accompaniment model. Beyond being a realistic assumption in any relationship, we argue that holding this viewpoint in grant-based partnerships is an important way of responding to the ongoing inevitable power imbalance between granter and grantee. An expectation of constancy and uniformity can set up a system where fund acquisition is based on compliance with granter-set standards, maintaining the status quo on the granter/grantee power imbalance. This system stifles growth and learning. On the other hand, an assumption of change over time can create a safe space where partner organizations have the freedom to reflect on their work, learn, adapt, and share this iterative process with MCC so that both organizations can grow. As has occurred with MCC and ANADESA, these built-in incentives toward interdependency create a more neutral space in which both institutions can negotiate their ongoing relationship, including the standards of accountability to which they will hold one other.

Of course, "creating space for change" has not been a completely neutral process for MCC Guatemala staff. Over the years, MCC staff have held their own aspirations for ANADESA's development, many of which align with progressive ideologies that characterize MCC's own organizational identity. As detailed above, ANADESA's earlier articulation of neoliberal development discourses as well as sometimes uncomfortable rhetorical relationship with Tz'utujil identity and the story of the armed internal conflict were real challenges for MCC staff. MCC staff tended to have understandings of development rooted in progressive ideologies that critiqued the Washington Consensus,[4] which seemed inadvertently to inform so much of ANADESA's understandings of development. MCC staff also tended to have an understanding of Tz'utujil identity and Mayan identity that aligned with Mayan cultural activists in Guatemala, and an understanding of the armed internal conflict as a genocidal campaign against Guatemala's Mayan communities. Even so, MCC's focus on local autonomy and control has remained central to the Guatemalan country program strategy, reminding staff that minimizing external imposition, especially as it relates to community organization, vision, and identity, is a critical decolonial act. Progressive, purportedly "liberating" ideologies can be just as much an unwelcome external imposition as ideologies that seek to confine and constrain if they misalign with a community's current preferences and priorities.

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[4] The Washington Consensus is a term commonly used for the set of free market, neoliberal policies heavily pushed by Washington-based institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and USAID.

Following ANADESA's lead and accompanying their work through careful listening, observation, questions, and discussions has taught MCC staff that not only does ANADESA *talk about* their work in unique ways; they also *do* Indigeneity, women's empowerment, education, and economic development in ways that are their own and are radical, transformative, and impactful in their context. For example, ANADESA asserts a feminist agency by broadly valuing women's work, regardless of what that work looks like. In a context where "women's work" is assumed rather than valued, this model of feminism is empowering. It asserts that traditional "women's work" is not mere "drudgery," but is critical to the functioning of households and communities. When this work is valued, it can also be shared between household members in such a way that women are freed to dedicate time to other activities, such as participating in ANADESA's trainings and social activities, getting involved with another community organization, or working on their own income-generating projects.

In a development model that does not prioritize localization-focused accompaniment, the radical work being implemented by ANADESA might be overlooked and imposed upon. But within the space created through MCC's partnership, localization, and accompaniment strategy, MCC staff have consistently learned from and been challenged by ANADESA's team. In particular, MCC has deepened its understanding of the ways in which Indigenous communities in Guatemala navigate the challenges of adapting from their colonial past and working through ongoing colonialism and structural racism in the present, how Learning Tours and other visits fit within its theory of change and broader development work, and the importance of accompanying partners at the institutional level and not simply at the project level. Because of ANADESA's organic development of program discourses and practices, MCC Guatemala has gained a much richer understanding of the specific context in which they work and the ways they conceptualize meaningful change within that context. In this way, the environment fostered by MCC's partnership localization and accompaniment model has been mutually transformative, moving both organizations further along the road of decolonization.

Vigilance for the Road Ahead

While both MCC and ANADESA have taken many steps along the road of decolonization, each organization recognizes that its own process as well as their shared process could easily get derailed through changes in organizational leadership, shifts in strategic direction, new partnerships that work out poorly, or even burnout among organizational staff.

ANADESA continues to encounter situations in which they need to assert their organizational identity and defend their autonomy. They have recently had to explain to prospective participants how their programming differs from paternalistic initiatives found in Santiago, and they have had to distance themselves from institutions that took credit for ANADESA's work. Additionally, staff members occasionally experience tension with board members, who still struggle to trust that executive leaders have their best interests and those of their families and communities at heart. In short, ANADESA continues to grapple with the legacies of colonialism and *colonialidad.*

MCC Guatemala, in turn, occasionally faces questions around its long-term status as ANADESA's primary funding source, spurred by dominant development discourses around "dependency." From the perspective of MCC Guatemala staff, this invocation of dependency disregards the importance of long-term commitments to decolonization processes as well as institutional growth and strengthening. A parallel challenge is that MCC faces regular, planned staff transitions at all levels of its in-country staff. These transitions have implications for long-term relationship building and maintenance. While the intention among in-country staff is to build and strengthen MCC's *institutional* relationship with partners rather than have partnership strength be dependent on individual personalities, new staff still have the potential to harm previous relational work and place ongoing relational development at risk.

The process of forging a collective identity and working through the impacts of colonialism and *colonialidad* has shaped ANADESA staff into a team that strongly asserts its organizational identity, conscientiously upholds their organizational priorities, and is vigilant against external imposition. We remain hopeful that this institutional self-confidence, rooted in an ever-developing post-colonial identity, will continue to serve ANADESA well. And we are hopeful that as ANADESA negotiates its relationship with future iterations of the MCC Guatemala team, they will hold MCC accountable to its commitment to engage deeply in reparative, restorative, and redistributive processes that decolonize development.

Concluding Remarks

The process of decolonizing development is long, difficult, and non-linear. No single intervention strategy, theoretical orientation, or methodology will serve as a simply applied formula to undo the impacts of centuries of political, economic, social, and cultural violence and structural racism by redistributing political power and economic resources from the core to the periphery. This article presents a case study in which localization-based accompaniment is shown to be an effective

decolonizing mechanism in the work of, and relationship between, an INGO and a local community-based partner in Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala. We argue that a commitment to a localization approach that centers flexibility, focuses on organizational or institutional strengthening and development, and permits the local partner and INGO to learn from one another has opened space for a set of impactful decolonization processes for both MCC and ANADESA and has enabled the development of a "uniquely ANADESA" post-colonial identity.

Whether this process continues and grows depends on an overwhelming set of macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors both within and beyond the control of MCC and ANADESA. Fanon's (1961) and other decolonial theorists' pessimism about the possibilities of a peaceful and smooth transition to a more just and equitable post-colonial world reminds those involved in the world of international development that patience, flexibility, a constant and consistent commitment to mutual learning, and a long-term view are vitally important for the long struggle to decolonize the practice of international development. To these ends, we assert that a commitment to long-term localization-based accompaniment can foster greater interdependence, more mutual growth, further formed post-colonial identities, and more moments of flourishing among development institutions committed to decolonization. It is an *apuesta metodológica* (a methodological bet) and a worthwhile one.

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