Abundant Community Theology: A Case Study in Decolonial Theological Research

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In 2018, Tearfund embarked on an exploration of "Economic and Environmental Sustainability" (EES) theology, seeking to adopt unconventional research methods shaped by Latin American decolonial thought. The approach sought to amplify marginalised voices, embrace non-English perspectives, and acknowledge the significance of oral traditions. The journey unfolded through regional "missional listening," collective discernment, and intercultural synthesis. Challenges included the significant time and financial investment, holding space for diverse ideas, and transitioning from collating global perspectives to articulating Tearfund's perspectives on the subject matter. The resulting "Abundant Community Theology" offers an alternative anthropology rooted in interconnectedness, challenging the historical legacy of dominion theology. This report reflects on the importance and value of the consultative, collaborative journey and the nuanced role of language in fostering ongoing conversations for social and environmental justice.

An Invitation to Challenge and Grow

Allow us to begin with a confession: this theological research project did not start because of decolonial *theories,* but rather because of decolonial *intuitions*. Latin American liberation theology proposes a theological and pastoral method with three stages—"see-judge-act"—as a way of emphasising that reason is always a "second step," as experience comes first. Somehow, this is what happened with our theological research on economic and environmental sustainability: when we decided to undertake it, we did not have complete theoretical and methodological clarity, but we knew that we needed to build a process that could allow us to listen, honour, and learn from some of the voices that are usually left behind in the mainstream theological space.[1] Once we had done this, decolonial thinking helped us make sense of our initial intuitions and provided us with a good theoretical framework to organise our findings. We also knew that this choice required an attitude of humility, a spirit of curiosity, and a dose of stubbornness, as the mainstream academic space is usually dominated by Cartesian rationality—"I think, therefore I exist"—which would not easily accept the lack of precision and control that we had at that point. On the other hand, we were fortunate that Tearfund was open to support this innovative theological research process, with the promise of deeper, richer and more relevant outcomes.

Now, before moving forward, we want to state our place of enunciation: where we write from. This is important, because it helps the reader understand where our comments and arguments come from. One of the authors of this paper, Maria Ale, comes from Latin America and has been part of this research process from its very beginning, which partly explains the bias in this article toward Latin American decolonial perspectives, theories, and authors.[2] The other author, Clark, comes from South Africa but has lived in the UK for several years; he became involved in the project while the second report was being drafted and then co-led the remainder of the project.

[1] Here we use "mainstream" to refer to the part of society which is relatively more powerful (like the main part of a river). We use "margins" to refer to the part of society with less power; that is, those who tend to be excluded and left behind: "The mainstream are the ones who decide the rules of society, what is and is not acceptable, and how people should and should not behave. The mainstream sets the culture while the [margins] are those who have to abide by the rules that have been set for them" (Tearfund 2020).

[2] Note the use of "decolonial", proposed by Latin American scholars, instead of "postcolonial." which was proposed first by scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Frantz Fanon, among others.

Tearfund, where the authors serve, is a Christian Non-Governmental Organisation born and established in the United Kingdom; it partners with churches on issues related to development, advocacy for justice, and humanitarian response. Tearfund's Christian identity has been affirmed and reaffirmed throughout its more than fifty years of existence and is foundational to the organisation's why, how, and with whom. This is why the organisation has, historically, actively invested time and energy in reflecting theologically around its main areas of ministry, including issues related to poverty, church and community-led development, gender, disability, peace and reconciliation, migration, economic and environmental justice, among many others. As an organisation, our desire is to allow ourselves to be shaped—and when necessary shaken—by the scriptures. One of the concrete ways we do this is through conducting theological research, aiming to deepen and enrich our understanding on these topics as well as to contribute to the public theological discourse on them among policymakers, civil society movements, programmes, churches, and supporters. The process of undertaking theological research within Tearfund has taken different forms throughout the organisation's history, but for the most part it has been permeated by a Global North perspective, expressed through the identity of the researcher(s), the language of the research, the methodologies used, the format of the outputs, and the use of the findings as true and valid to every context in which Tearfund works.[3] One of the problems with this approach is the false assumption of "universality" that is subtle but quite common in mainstream spaces, keeping non-mainstream groups in the margins, invisible, and in silence. Today, we recognize that there are ways of approaching theology that can contribute to legitimising power systems that perpetuate injustice; therefore, as a team, we have made a commitment to undertake theological research processes that, intentionally, contribute to challenge unjust structures and promote power-sharing dynamics. Because we have been so accustomed to using certain research methods, we have had to be particularly creative, humble, and curious to learn from other epistemologies and approaches, and we have found decolonial thinking to be particularly insightful in putting together and reflecting on these types of "upside down" research processes.

This paper assesses a concrete theological research process on the intersection of environmental and economic sustainability through the lens of decolonial theories in theological research. The first section explores the concepts of decoloniality of "power," "being," "knowledge," and "belief," proposed by Latin American decolonial scholars, which provide a theoretical framework for assessing our research effort. The second section provides a quick overview of the process itself, highlighting those aspects that decolonial theory brings to light, as well as the phases of the research process. Section three explains the essence of the theological proposal that arose as a result of this research process—which we have called "Abundant Community Theology." The fourth section addresses the positive impact that our decolonial intuitions made to the paper, both for the paper itself and for our own team. Finally, section five of this paper acknowledges some of the challenges and limitations of our quest.

Decoloniality of "Power," "Being," "Knowledge," and "Belief," in Latin American Decolonial Thought

Scholars and researchers from different disciplines and parts of the world have proposed diverse ways to approach culture and power. In the '80s and '90s, the "postcolonial theories" academic stream emerged with thinkers from India, the Middle East, and the United States, such as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak and Edward Said, who reflected on the heritage of British colonisation in the 19th and 20th centuries, but also on issues related to civil and political struggles (Instituto de Estudios Sociales Contemporáneos 2018). In Latin America, these "subaltern" theories took their own essence and shape. They were called "decolonial theories" and reflected on the heritage of the Spanish colonisation that took place between the 16th and the 20th centuries, that was sustained through exploitation, domination, and conflict, and that is still present today in different forms. For Latin American decolonial thinkers, modernity and coloniality are two phenomena that emerged at the same time; they are connected and depend on each other, like the two faces of the same coin (Instituto de Estudios Sociales Contemporáneos 2018). Decolonial theories conceive race as a central issue, because it is the first form of modern "otherness" connected to coloniality. As "colonisation" evolved into the ideological system of "coloniality," it uses disciplines like history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and theology to build its case and justify the logic of domination of some peoples over others. Latin American subaltern scholars conceive coloniality as being multi-faceted and identify different dimensions of it: "coloniality of power," of "being," of "knowledge," and, more recently, of "belief."

"Coloniality of power" denounces the living legacy of European colonialism in Latin America, which is reflected in racial, political, and social structures.

[3] In this paper, terms such as "Global North," "Global South," and "West" refer to ideological and geopolitical constructs, not only geographic boundaries.

According to Quijano, the relationships of dominion that took place during the European conquest were built on a false idea of racial superiority; that is, a supposed "biological" difference—with theological and political motivations—that situated the European conquerors over all non-European populations (2014, 778). As a result, conquered peoples were treated as "naturally" inferior, along with their phenotypic traits, their cultures and traditions, their ancestral wisdom, and their thinking (Ibid., 780).

That sense of inferiority is what anthropologist Walter Mignolo calls "coloniality of being" (Mújica García and Fabelo Corzo 2019, 1-9), which began when colonised individuals were defined through the logic and lenses of the colonisers, and which led to the denial of their human condition, identity, autonomy, culture, and faculties. It affects individual self-identity. Following Frantz Fanon's thinking (Ibid.), the colonised individual, dispossessed of their humanity, is also stripped of their capacity to practise the privilege of sharing their gifts. Without the possibility to contribute to others, the colonised being was nullified and became a "condemned" being (Ibid.).

Closely connected to the denial of the human condition is "coloniality of knowledge," which refers to the denial of the presence and construction of authentic and "true" knowledge among colonised populations. Portuguese anthropologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls this process "epistemicide," the silencing, replacement, and killing of ancestral knowledge, wisdom, stories, and memories in the name of European rationality, which became the only valid and true parameter (as cited in Gómez Quintero 2010, 87). As a result, most of the cosmogonies, worldviews, healing practices, and education rhythms already present among Indigenous communities were either missed and neglected or demonised and prohibited. This perspective deeply affects today's educational, cultural, and religious systems, with some small counter-cultural attempts to recognize, learn from, make visible, and revindicate ancestral identity and wisdom.

Finally, and more recently, other decolonial and postcolonial thinkers explored ways to name forms of coloniality that undermine worldviews, philosophies, religiosities, principles, and systems of life that reflect a way of life different from Western constructs. Ecuadorian sociologist and educator Catherine Walsh proposes the term "cosmogonic coloniality" to refer to this intercultural aspect (2009, 3). Others, like theologian and anthropologist Nicolás Panotto, explores postcolonial theologies and talks about the need to dismantle the "coloniality of belief," because the systems of belief, and religions in general have, historically, played a role of social, cultural, and spiritual control, which has been largely acknowledged and used by empires throughout history, including during the European conquest (2014, 144). In Latin American decolonial thinking, these reflections invite us to consider the ways in which the spread of the gospel was experienced by colonised populations—Indigenous Peoples—as part of the whole colonial project. It also challenges the assumption that expressions of Christianity brought by Northern missionaries are the only possible way of experiencing "true" faith in the "true" triune God (Ibid., 146). In fact, "decolonising belief" leads one to think critically about traditional methods of exegesis and hermeneutics because, as with every other science, they embody and respond to particular interests and parameters that have not always been those of the people left outside of the mainstream theological space. Finally, an effort to "decolonise belief" is an invitation to pluralise theological subjects and identities, giving legitimate space to those faces and voices that have been, historically, in the margins of theological debates.

This discriminatory system based on power, being, knowledge, and belief did not end with the abolition of slavery and the fights for independence around the world, but is still reflected in discourses, attitudes, behaviours, and decision-making at individual, social, and political levels. Thinkers of subaltern and decolonial studies affirm that, as difficult as it can be to believe, after many centuries, the effects of colonialism persist in today's world; in people's mindsets, educational and health systems, geo-political relationships, and systems of beliefs. Dismantling this type of imperialism, one that permeates most of today's modern world's structures, requires an intentional choice for decolonization. This choice, for Boaventura de Sousa Santos, needs to be made through listening to the "epistemologies of the South," understood as multilocal ways to identify and validate knowledge born from the struggles against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy, produced by social groups and classes that have suffered most from the injustices caused by such systems (2020, 118). The "epistemologies of the South" that de Sousa Santos refers to are the wisdom and knowledge coming from historically excluded groups in Latin America, including Indigenous communities (the direct descendants of the communities subdued by the Spanish Empire), Afro-descendant peoples (whose ancestors were brought to the Americas as slaves), women (who are still oppressed by our patriarchal systems), and other human groups excluded by capitalism and colonisation.

de Sousa Santos' (Ibid.) concept of "epistemologies of the South" is neither finite nor geographically localised (as if "South" were a geographic place); it rather has three premises: 1) the world is much broader than the Western understanding of the world; 2) the world's diversity is infinite, in terms

of the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, as well as relating; 3) the world's great diversity cannot be monopolised by one general theory, which is why it is necessary to find plural ways of knowledge (as cited in Infante 2013, 406). In that sense, there should exist as many epistemologies as systems of thoughts or philosophies, which are expressed in the diversities of peoples (Ibid., 404). In a similar vein, some philosophers, social scientists, and theologians have coined the concept of "epistemic justice/injustice." Philosopher Miranda Fricker, for example, defines "epistemic injustice" as "a wrong done to some in their capacity as a knower," which prevents people in the margins from being heard and understood by others, as well as contributing to broader and deeper social understandings (Fricker 2007, 1). To seek "epistemic justice" or to listen to the "epistemologies of the South" does not mean to replace or invalidate modern Western knowledge; the aim is rather to question its claim to be the only valid epistemology and to advocate for the equal validity of other epistemologies. In that sense, we endorse de Sousa Santos' affirmation that "there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice" (2020, 118).

These critical reflections make us more aware of our own identity and the power that we, intrinsically, carry as a Christian organisation that raises funds in the Global North to support development, advocacy, and humanitarian response initiatives in the Global South. It is through this lens of Latin American decolonial thought that we will introduce and assess our theological research process. At the outset of the research, we were inspired to engage the Sacred Scriptures with curiosity, commitment, and intentionality, in order to enrich our understanding of the triune God and his presence in the world, through discovering God in some of the faces and voices that we felt have traditionally been absent in theological debates. We thought this approach could contribute to a broader power shift (or power share) in the theological space.

An "Upside-Down" Process

In 2018, "Economic and Environmental Sustainability" (EES) was identified as a corporate priority for Tearfund and we began working towards a "global theological framework" on the topic. Historically, the typical research methodology for Tearfund has been for someone to conduct systematic research on a given topic and to produce a report out of that research. Such research might include a literature review and consultations of some form. Typically, the researcher is based in a Global North context and research material is largely written in English, published in the Global North, and expected to be globally relevant. In fact, we used to call our frameworks "global," not because they were built from listening to global voices but because they were meant to be used by audiences across the globe. This methodology creates a self-generating bias towards certain material and routinely overlooks, ignores, or is oblivious to many important ideas and theological conversations that exist in different forms and contexts. As a result, such theological frameworks are radically impoverished by exploring only this limited space of theological ideas and expressions.

With our growing desire to contribute to shifting and sharing power in and through our work, we sought an approach that embraces a more decolonial spirit and allows us to engage in an honest, "missional listening" exercise.[4] We looked for a "contextual theology," that, as Anderson and McGeoch suggest,

> speaks from and to the lived-realities of people, it speaks to the church and the academy, it involves dialogue and critique, it enters into a global conversation, and it is "performed"—that is, it is lived out, not simply written about. Contextual theology does not start with theory or philosophical ideas which are then applied onto society. Contextual theology develops and evolves through continuous conversation and expression. It is theology in motion (Anderson and McGeoch 2020, 6).

A Decolonial Approach

There were four key aspects of outworking this contextuality in our methodology that align with Latin American decolonial thought. First, we needed to incorporate theology not just from academic theologians from all over the world, but also from practitioners. We wanted to bring perspectives from theory and practise together into dialogue. This approach to theology has been referred to in South Africa as "people's theology," where "theology is not the exclusive preserve of professional theologians, ministers, and priests. Ordinary Christians can participate in theological reflection and should be encouraged to do so." This includes women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, and other communities often left in the margins of theological spaces (Kairos Theologians (Group) 1986, 34-35). The choice of the voices to which we wanted to listen was made in each region and therefore varied; however, women, young people, non-academic theologians, Indigenous

[4] A "Missional listening" spirit has been embraced by diverse Christian ministries. It speaks about listening to people to discern what God is already doing and joining God in mission. Baptists Together UK defines it as having "one ear to God and one ear to the community" (Lucas 2022).

communities, and people who embody ancestral wisdom were identified across many regions as being those that this research needed to include.

Second, we sought to incorporate theological perspectives from non-English material. Not all important and legitimate theology is written in English and the English language ought not hold in our minds and practise any hegemonic, neo-colonial restrictions over the scope of our theological exploration. That is, we should not expect all theology to be written in or translated into English in order to be incorporated into research like this.

Third, not only does theology exist outside English writing, but much theology is not necessarily even written at all, especially among non-Western communities where knowledge, tradition, and culture are built and passed on orally. If our theology is "performed" and "lived out," then we must explore and incorporate other forms of theology. Jean-Marc Ela refers to this as "shade tree theology,"

> a theology that, far from libraries and the offices, develops among brothers and sisters...We must discover the oral dimension of theology, which is no less important than the *summae* and the great treatises. Christian theology must be liberated from a cultural system that sometimes conveys the false impression that the Word has been made text. Why can't the language of faith also portray song, game, art, [and] dance...? (Ela 1986, 180-181).

And finally, we sought for our theology to first be shaped and informed by perspectives from the Global South and only then to bring that thinking into dialogue with perspectives from the Global North. This "Global South-first" approach was important for at least three key reasons. First, in order to shift power. Of course, one hopes that research like this contributes to change in the world through new policies, changes to action and behaviour, new narratives, and altered discourse, yet when the research is biased towards particular contexts, it is likely that the resulting change in the world will not best serve those who have been marginalised through the research. To keep our research centred on a Global North perspective is to keep power centralised in that context. It is to keep perpetuating a *status quo* that disproportionately serves the relatively powerful Global North contexts. It reinforces the unjust legacies of colonialism and perpetuates a form of neo-colonialism. On the other hand, to adopt a "Global South-first" approach is to shift power in ways that will hopefully lead to more equitable and fairer change in the world.

A second reason for this "Global South-first" approach to contextual theology is that there is a global asymmetry in "economic and environmental sustainability," in that very often those geographic regions that have done the least to contribute towards climate change experience a disproportionate amount of its destructive effect. As we sought to theologically explore the intersections of economics and environment, it was important to hear first from those who tend to experience more of these harmful effects before hearing from those in Global North contexts who typically experience more of the benefits of our current systems.

The third reason relates to the other two, but emphasises and acknowledges the destructive role the Global North has played in the environment, especially since the beginning of industrialization. In fact, Indigenous communities from the Global South claim that it is not "humans" who have destroyed the rest of God's creation, precisely because many of these ancestral human communities have coexisted with other living beings for thousands of years without creating the same level of damage that the Global North has created in a few centuries (Naknanuk 2022). Being responsible for so much environmental and social destruction, the Global North may have more to learn from Global South communities around the world than to teach on this topic.

The Phases of the Research

There were three phases to the research: regional "missional listening," collective discernment, and intercultural processing. In the first phase—regional "missional listening" —we set out with plans to conduct distinct research in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and then finally in the Global North, with each region in dialogue with the research in subsequent regions, and each culminating in a regional paper that would reflect particular voices, values, priorities, emphases, and contexts in each region. Unsurprisingly, the research in each region looked different.

Missional Listening: In Latin America, Tearfund worked with an external consultant from the region who designed a mixed and participatory methodology with an intentional desire to go beyond what has already been said about environmental and economic sustainability in the region. A literature review from key influential theologians and writers from the region yielded four key themes that seemed to require further exploration: creation and redemption, women and ecology, ancestral worldviews, and sustainability.

In turning first to the 'key influential theologians and writers' from the Global South context, we were subverting Global North/South power dynamics, but arguably this initial reliance on contributors who were considered to be "key" and "influential" did not take into account the power dynamics within the Global South. We were still gravitating to the mainstream

voices, albeit within the context of the Global South. However, the consultations that followed were more in line with Latin American decolonial thought as they incorporated an intentionally diverse group with many more contributors from the margins.

A diverse group of academic theologians, activists, musicians, pastors, youth, women, Indigenous Peoples, and ecological programme practitioners were invited into an online participatory process exploring these four themes in greater depth. This process lasted eight months, with a final physical gathering that produced a regional paper that was the first concrete contribution to Tearfund's research process and that set the tone in terms of research that contextualised and reflected local issues and concerns.

The focus then turned to Africa, where Tearfund hosted three face-to-face consultations, again with a range of participants including grassroots practitioners and influential theological voices in the region. Once again, a contextual participatory methodology was adopted by the external research consultants. A major methodological focus in the Africa regional report was to present the research in an "emancipatory form." As Anderson and McGeoch note,

> ...the research is led by the voices of grassroots practitioners and disciples of Jesus, presented in a way that keeps those voices front and center without re-interpreting them, and understands that people read scripture in countless different ways. No single hermeneutic is placed above another" (2020, 6).

In the African research, the broader literature review followed reports from the physical consultations. This was in line with Latin American decolonial thought as it prioritised the consultations, which included many marginalised voices, and allowed the relatively diverse group of contributors to influence the selection of input from broader literature.

It was at this point in the research that we were hit with the global COVID pandemic, which significantly altered (along with so much else in the world) the degree to which the research could include in-person consultations. This was a major loss, as the group gatherings had significantly contributed to the richness of the research, creating rare spaces where various perspectives came together in one room for dialogue, debate, and discussion. Very often, the value of theology is not only the final product, but the very process of grappling with different ideas together. As we discovered, the process was transformative for us as an organisation, and also for many individual participants.

But we pressed on within the new emerging horizons of possibility. Working with a consultant in Asia, we adjusted the methodology to include a desk-based literature review of key works from the region, and several online, one-on-one interviews with key influential regional voices. Limiting this research to deeper dives with fewer key influential people in the region reduced the scope of the research, but still offered vibrant and valuable research.

This methodological shift meant that we were more reliant on published materials and contributors who were already well known. While we sought to ensure that the research still incorporated contributions not only from the mainstream but also the margins, this shift moved us further away from the ideals of Latin American decolonial thinking. This new methodology was more reliant on key influential people who often were people speaking from the mainstream contexts. As such, this research was arguably less shaped by the margins in ways that align with Latin American decolonial thought.

Sadly, after much effort and exploration, we were unable to find a suitable consultant for the planned research in the Middle East. Fortunately, some key Middle Eastern literature had already been identified and reviewed earlier in the process by consultants for the Africa research. We were able to incorporate this albeit truncated contribution into the global framework.

With this regional work completed in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, we brought these regional papers—with their ideas, challenges, and distinct emphases—into dialogue with theological perspectives from the Global North. Working with consultants from the THEOS think tank in the UK, the methodology was similar to that of the Asia research in that it included a literature review and interviews with key influential voices from the Global North and culminated in a regional written report. Once again, the reliance on respected theologians meant a bias towards the mainstream that was arguably incongruent with Latin American decolonial thought.

Retrospectively, we refer to this first phase of research as regional missional listening, meaning that in this research we were seeking to learn and listen from these various contexts. We were not initially trying to work out what we as Tearfund could or should be saying in those regions, but rather listening to what was emerging in them, and we were intentionally seeking not only to listen to contributors who might be seen as mainstream, but also to voices from the margins. We see "missional listening" as recognising that our presence is never neutral and that we hope to host, facilitate, and steward these conversations in such a way that the Spirit of God is at work and leading us all through kingdom transformation.

Discerning Collectively: With the regional phase completed, we shifted gears into the internal dialogue phase of the research. This step meant bringing into

dialogue this new regional research with Tearfund's existing published literature, as well as with Tearfund staff who have experience or expertise in the topic. We wanted the opportunity to consider everything we heard and captured in the regional reports through the lenses of Tearfund's core beliefs and identity, especially around some complex and controversial theological issues. It was a process of collective discernment. For instance, we created a reference group made up of Tearfund staff from the different contexts we work in. It included staff with theological, programmatic, and advocacy-focussed roles. We shared with them the regional research, as well as some preliminary summaries. We facilitated discussions around key topics, primarily centering around those for which we had noticed tensions, especially between various regional papers or between the regional research and Tearfund's historical publications. This process allowed us to reconsider, revisit, and grapple with various theological ideas and their implications for our various areas of work. It also helped add nuance and complexity to our thinking.

It was in this process of bringing various ideas into the reference group dialogue spaces that we transitioned from talking about what we had heard others (outside Tearfund) say, to what we felt we as Tearfund wanted to say. As the Tearfund staff overseeing this research process, we sensed a growing conviction that we have a valuable and meaningful contribution to public theological discourse on this topic.

Intercultural Synthesis: The final phase was one of "intercultural synthesis," in which we sought to bring all of the diversity of the research into one coherent framework. The goal was not to capture everything that we had heard, nor was it to say everything that is important to say about economic and environmental sustainability as a "final word" in the conversation. It was definitely not to summarise, compile, or synthesise the different regional reports, as each of them was unique and different from the others both in form and in content.

Rather, as the Tearfund staff overseeing this research process, we sought to craft a framework that had "space" to incorporate much of the antecedent diverse thought, a framework that honoured the journey, the spirit of the whole process, and the content that had emerged so far. We sought a framework that reflected the heart of Tearfund's theology and corporate ethos, but was also coherent enough as an idea to be impactful and able to take a few steps to forward the public theological conversation on this topic. Considering the years of research and the hundreds of pages of material we had gathered, this process of synthesis was no small feat!

We worked closely with a consultant who produced a number of drafts leading to a final paper that centred around the idea that we have titled "abundant community." Our final paper, "Abundant Community Theology: Working towards environmental and economic sustainability (EES)" (Thacker 2022),[5] is understandably a lengthy affair. The benefit of this being a long report was that it allowed for detailed engagement with the research and ideas proposed, while the downside was that the length (seventy-six pages) was a barrier to engagement for many people. Moreover, the paper was written in English. The ethos of our approach led us to first transpose the ideas into a short version (twenty pages) and a summary version (four pages). Then, at significant cost (time and finances), we invested in translating these versions into Tearfund's core languages: French, Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese, and African Portuguese. We hope this not only increases engagement with the ideas and proposals, but also does some measure of justice to our desire to shift power and carry out theological research differently.

The Abundant Community theology

In the final "Abundant Community" paper we recognise that the way one conceives of humanity--what one believes about what it means to be human in this world--has huge implications for how we relate to one another and the wider creation. Sadly, Christianity's legacy of "dominion theology" and the belief in human right to exploit and dominate our planet lies at the root of many of our environmental and economic challenges.

The report outlines two alternative anthropologies. First, one can hold a theology, or mindset, of scarcity. This mindset fosters a sense of competition among life on earth. It means we view "individuals and the goods of the world as resources for us to exploit rather than as neighbours and friends whom we are called to love" (Thacker 2022, 2). An anthropology founded on scarcity leads to a lifestyle that is consumeristic, individualistic, selfish, and exploitative.

An alternative paradigm is proposed and championed as the heart of this paper: "abundant community." This idea draws from ideas prevalent in Global South communities, for example the African Bantu notion of "Ubuntu," which is the idea that "a

[5] Thacker, Justin. 2022. *Abundant Community Theology: Working towards environmental and economic sustainability* (EES). Full Version. https://learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/research-report/abundant-community-theology-working-towards-environmental-and-economic-sustainability.

person is a person through other people" (Giljam et al. 2021, 20). Ubuntu emphasises our interdependence as humans and as life on earth. There is a sense that being human means to belong to and participate in a shared society.

Building on this, "abundant community" is a way of understanding our anthropology whereby we see ourselves not as individuals in competition living in a scarce environment, but rather as fundamentally relational beings created by God, living as members of a common humanity in a world of abundance:

> Such communities believe that their identity is formed in relation to God, and this in turn defines their relationships with self, one another and the rest of creation. This represents a relational dynamic in which what matters is not just how we relate, but who we are in relating. It is about a different understanding of me, an expanded version of us, that leads me to conduct myself within our shared planetary home according to a household, rather than competitive market, mindset. This means we share and care abundantly, not just our wealth, but also our power, voices and lives, for we store our riches in the lives and wellbeing of our global neighbour and the world which God has provided (Thacker 2022, 10).

This idea of "abundant communities" forms the foundation of several challenges and proposals for different people and contexts. For example, when we really believe we are members of one household, sharing one common home with everything that God has created, then we view our wealth and resources as fundamentally belonging to this abundant community. This reframes the traditional donor-beneficiary dynamic. As the report states:

> It also helps us to recognise that the problem is not poverty over there to which the wealthy Global North have the solution. Rather the problem is the mindset of greed that bedevils many of us across the globe and to which a solution can be found in the Ubuntu-like anthropology that is embodied in numerous communities in the Global South (Thacker 2022, 8).

Being Transformed by the Journey

As we mentioned before, part of the uniqueness of this upside-down research process was that the "journey" (the different phases that include the regional consultations, the collective discernment and the intercultural processing) turned out to be as important as the "product" (the Environmental and Economic Sustainability theological paper). In fact, there were at least two aspects in which this whole process enriched us; first, the theological content itself and second, Tearfund as an organisation.

In terms of the content, we realise that while some ideas are repeated in various regional papers, each paper raises distinct emphases and proposals. For example, the Latin America paper offers a scathing critique of capitalism and emphasises the relationship between violence against women and against creation, as well as the unique contribution of Indigenous communities. In the Africa paper, there is a resounding call to reclaim the notions of "abundance" and "prosperity," which have been considerably misused and have gained a quite negative connotation in the last decades in many religious spaces. The Asia paper brought to the table interfaith dialogue and considered the impacts of "divination of nature," arguing that such worship of nature itself has caused, in that region, harm and destruction to the wide creation, and suggesting that we should direct our worship only to the Creator of this sacred world. The Global North paper embodies an appropriately different tone, unique to all the other papers; it offers sober calls for lament and repentance, which are found to be pertinent and necessary in embracing the cause of caring for the wide creation.

At the same time, the decolonial spirit underlying this research process brought unexpected lessons for us as an organisation. From the very beginning, we had clarity of the spirit and the intention with which we were entering into this task, but we did not have all the clarity of every aspect of the steps we needed to take and the challenges we were going to face. In a way, entering with such a spirit allowed us to grant ourselves the chance to build the process as we walked (as we mentioned earlier, not everything was completely defined from the very beginning, which was frustrating at times), and to be open to changes. These types of approaches have been explored by scholars such as Elise Rockwell (2009, 48) who argues that social anthropology is not an exact science, with exact methods that can be replicated anywhere, anytime; it is rather an attitude toward the research, an attitude towards the investigation, and not a gathering tool. The advantage of this flexible approach, which sometimes seems to lack rigour to the point that it can be considered to have a "methodological gap," is that it allows the articulation between theory and research in a way that gives space for new discoveries to emerge. In that sense, ambiguity can become a strength. This is precisely what we experienced in our research; the attitude made the way. Retrospectively, we realise that if we had wanted to design the whole process from the very beginning, without considering the different context, stakeholders, and realities, we would probably have replicated the same process in every region and would probably have

chosen to impose a standardised format for every regional report, which would have killed the decolonial spirit of the attempt. In the same way, if we had not allowed the preliminary findings to inform the next steps, we would not have been able to incorporate new stages that happened to be very important to build ownership among key stakeholders, as in the collective discernment process. Similarly with the language, we were not fully aware of the monopoly of English or even of the written language until we were challenged by the working groups. Or with the format: we did not realise how important it was to honour the different ways of expressing knowledge and ideas beyond the Western academic argumentative style; deep wisdom was shared through liturgies, songs, and stories, even if some people considered them an "unfinished" work. An intentional choice for a decolonial approach requires intentional flexibility and openness to the unexpected. For organisations like Tearfund, which operates with a mostly Westernised mindset, the "decolonial outcome" is seen as more important than the "decolonial journey," even though in the long term, the latter can be even more important than the former.

Challenges and Limitations

While there were many benefits from the approach we took to this work, it was not without its challenges. One of the most significant challenges we faced throughout this project was how costly it was in terms of both time and money. For example, in-person gatherings were a major investment that included travel, visas, accommodation, and food for participants. Undoubtedly, we could have chosen a much simpler, cheaper, and quicker route. We could have skipped many of the in-person consultations. We could have spent less time and money exploring the various Global South contexts. We could have placed more emphasis on written texts that were easier to access. Part of this challenge was navigating the environmental cost of the flights and other travel. Not only does Tearfund seek to reduce our flights, but we were wary about ironically contributing carbon emissions as part of our research into environmental sustainability! While navigating these costs and tensions was challenging, the research was certainly enriched by this process and much of the content in the final EES paper would never have existed were it not for the costly process we adopted. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, we recognise that doing theology is not just about the final paper, but about the journey—of discussions, of grappling with different ideas. There was immense value in bringing people together to listen to one another, to grow, and to be transformed through these encounters.

A second challenge we faced through this process was holding space for diverse ideas. As we brought many people together, we intentionally wanted to listen to different, sometimes opposing or contradicting perspectives. This occasionally put pressure on relationships at times when we incorporated into the regional reports some ideas or proposals that other participants strongly disagreed with, especially when the divergent ideas came from marginalised theological voices. This issue became even more tense when "new" ideas expressed in the regional reports confronted those holding a certain level of power (often implicit), which required additional levels of dialogue and, at times, the recognition that, sometimes, creating space for "new thinking" makes some people uncomfortable. In the future, perhaps we could help contributors by being more explicit about our intent to hear from and incorporate various perspectives in our "missional listening," and to distinguish more clearly between what we heard from others and what we said/proposed ourselves.

And this is linked to a third challenge, which was possibly the trickiest. After conducting all the regional research, we had the mammoth task of processing all those ideas and arguments into what would be "Tearfund's theological framework on the topic." This stage meant a big shift in the process of moving from what we had heard to what we want to say as Tearfund. That is, it was a shift from collating and presenting ideas we had heard from many around the world to articulating in "Tearfund's own voice" what we wanted to propose and advocate. As mentioned above, working with an internal reference group in an interactive, participatory way helped us make this shift. It helped us discuss new or challenging ideas and proposals, digest them, and eventually rearticulate them in our own voice while, as best we could, still honouring the original input from communities and theologians around the world.

Finally, in terms of analysing this research process through the lens of Latin American decolonial thought, it is worth noting the challenge we experienced in identifying who and what literature should be included or excluded from the research. As already mentioned, we set out intentionally with Latin American decolonial intuitions, which included a desire to incorporate a diversity of voices within the research, particularly voices from the margins as well as more mainstream voices. But the process of identifying such voices revealed further complex challenges. Who gets to decide which people are appropriately "marginalised" or "respected" in a field of research? What specific criteria should we have in view when delineating between mainstream and marginalised voices? Who sets those criteria? How should we approach voices who might be marginalised from a global perspective but might be considered more mainstream in local contexts? We recognise that as much as we were seeking something of a power shift in this work, we still wielded power (and along with that, our own biases) in

the process of drawing lines of inclusion and exclusion within the research (even if those lines sought to be wider and more inclusive than Tearfund's previous research). In this we were faced with our own (conscious and subconscious) biases and the limitations of our knowledge, networks, and connections as we sought to identify appropriate voices to include in the research. To mitigate this somewhat, we worked closely with our local staff living in the regions of the regional consultations, and we leant heavily on the consultants for broader perspective and expertise. In the Asia and Global North papers, we asked the consultants to review a wide range of literature in the local context on the topic(s) and from that to identify some important voices with whom to do deeper research. This process meant that while the research remained undeniably coloured by our own biases, perspectives and limitations, it was at least a process that was stretching us to hear from a diversity of ideas and it incorporated voices that we would easily have excluded in a more traditional methodology.

Conclusion

We are deeply grateful to God and every single person who participated in this broad process. We recognise that we had a unique opportunity to put together a process that allowed us to grow as a team and an organisation, as well as to produce a solid theological paper that makes a humble contribution toward meeting two of the major challenges of our time: social and environmental justice. We acknowledge that the challenges we faced in terms of time and funding resources may not allow this journey to be easily replicable, but we do believe we can learn from the spirit that guided us throughout the whole process, and that we can apply it in different forms and contexts, as it has proven to be incredibly enriching. Engaging in this type of quest seems particularly important for organisations like Tearfund that want to serve God and join in God's mission to restore and reconcile the world in ways that honour life in its different forms and create less harm.

As we closed this research, we realised how important language is, and how much words weigh in the way we move forward. As we have described and promoted the paper, we have sought to do so in ways that offer it as a theological proposal rather than the final word on the topic(s). Our hope is that the paper becomes a catalyst of new conversations with other peoples and networks in the different regions of the world, toward a common goal; to worship our Creator with the way in which we care for, protect, and nurture what our Creator cares for.

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