

Decolonising Participatory Methodologies

Exploring Community Development to Community Empowerment Through Epistemic Liberation, Subaltern Spatialities-Temporalities, and Grassroots Autonomy in the Global South



<https://pixabay.com/illustrations/ai-generated-unity-diversity-hands-9707671>

The Political Economy of Methodology: Institutional Co-optation and Epistemic Domesticity

Participatory methodologies were birthed from radical, counter-hegemonic imperatives heavily influenced by Paulo Freire's adult literacy and conscientization practices, liberation theology, and anti-colonial adult education movements such as the Antigonish movement. These foundational frameworks posited that poor, exploited, and marginalised populations must be enabled to analyse their own material realities to dismantle structural oppression. However, over the past four decades, radical participatory tools—most notably Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Participatory Action Research (PAR), and participatory mapping—have undergone systemic co-optation, domestication, and depoliticisation.

This transformation is rooted in the political economy of international development, the modern Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) industrial complex, and the neoliberal restructuring of tertiary education. During the late 1980s and 1990s, global funding agencies and multilateral institutions, including the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organisation, adopted PRA tools¹. This transition shifted participatory approaches from qualitative research methods aimed at radical empowerment into institutionalised mechanisms for project management, policy compliance, and rapid data extraction. In this process, what was originally conceived as a transformative, ongoing dialogue among oppressed communities was flattened into a standardised "toolkit" of visual techniques—such as social mapping, transect walks, and seasonal calendars—conducted over brief field visits.

The systemic mechanism governing this co-optation aligns with what anthropologist James Ferguson conceptualised as the "anti-politics machine". By framing social misery, land dispossession, and environmental degradation as technical problems susceptible to localised, technical fixes, development institutions use domesticated participatory events to obscure macro-level political power disparities, class conflicts, and historical colonial relations. Within this bureaucratized structure, the responsibility for project success or failure is transferred onto the local community. If an intervention fails, the neoliberal institution attributes the outcome to deficient community participation or local behavioural shortcomings, allowing macro-structural causes—such as land grabbing, neoliberal austerity, and state-sanctioned resource extraction—to escape critical examination.

Concurrently, neoliberal tertiary institutions play a gatekeeping role in the political economy of knowledge production. Higher education systems in both the Global North and Global South reproduce Eurocentric epistemological hierarchies by prioritising positivist and post-positivist paradigms that demand detachment, quantification, and marketised utility. When radical participatory or Indigenous methodologies enter the university, they are frequently subjected to academic commodification⁴. Academic researchers extract local, subaltern knowledge systems, reframe them within Euro-American theoretical jargon, publish the findings behind institutional paywalls, and claim career advancement without returning tangible political power or material benefits to the originating communities.

Conversely, when subaltern communities and organic intellectuals deploy truly radical, un-domesticated methodologies that directly challenge property regimes, corporate dominance, or state authority, these methodologies are demonised, delegitimised, or explicitly excluded by academic gatekeepers as "unscientific," "biased," or "politically subversive".

Methodological Dimension	Neoliberal / Domesticated PRA	Counter-Hegemonic Decolonial Praxis
Primary Epistemic Goal	Rapid information extraction for external policy, project design, or academic publication.	Epistemic liberation, subaltern conscientization, and structural transformation.
Role of External Facilitator	Expert convener, donor representative, or professional social worker managing workshops.	Absent, or limited to an ally humbled before subaltern organic intellectuals.
Locus of Knowledge & Control	External institution/NGO; data synthesized in institutional reports.	The Gram Sabha, village Sangham, or subaltern collective; knowledge held in local archives.
View of Community	Homogenized target group, beneficiaries, or consultation subjects.	Differentiated, politically conscious agents negotiating internal class, caste, and gender power.
Treatment of Conflict	Consensus-seeking, depoliticizing, neutralizing	Confrontational, naming structural injustice,

	structural antagonisms.	challenging state and corporate capital.
Spatial/Cartographic Output	Official Cartesian maps for institutional planning and land zoning.	Counter-mapping tracing embodied spatial routines, lived heritage, and customary tenure.

Epistemic Reconstruction: Deconstructing Conventional PRA and Professional Social Work

The Structural Limits of Conventional Participatory Rural Appraisal

Conventional Participatory Rural Appraisal, as popularised by Robert Chambers and institutionalised by research bodies such as the Institute of Development Studies, operates on foundational principles including optimal ignorance, handing over the stick, and learning from the poor. While these principles historically challenged top-down, expert-driven agricultural extension and rapid research models, conventional PRA harbours intrinsic theoretical and political limitations.

First, PRA often assumes a romanticised, harmonious view of the community. By treating a village or neighbourhood as an internally cohesive unit, conventional PRA workshops frequently mask deep internal fractures shaped by caste hierarchies, patriarchal land control, class exploitation, and ethnic dominance. In practice, a standard PRA workshop led by an external facilitator often allows dominant local elites, such as male landowners or high-caste elders, to speak on behalf of the collective, thereby legitimising existing intra-community hierarchies under the guise of participatory consensus.

Second, co. These temporary visual mapping or matrix-ranking exercises raise expectations among marginalised populations. When external NGOs or state agencies use these exercises to satisfy institutional funding mandates without altering land tenure, redistribution, or structural power, local participants experience frustration and exploitation¹. The methodology becomes extractive: local labour, time, and knowledge are converted into institutional reports, while the socio-economic status of the community remains unchanged.

Mainstream Professional Social Work and Epistemic Imperialism

Mainstream professional social work, particularly as exported from Euro-American universities to the Global South during the post-colonial era, functions as an arm of state regulation and neoliberal social maintenance. Grounded in Eurocentric epistemologies, conventional social work privileges individualistic behavioural interventions, psychological pathologisation, administrative case management, and legalistic compliance. This framework treats structural poverty, landlessness, and historical trauma not as systemic crimes of capital and coloniality, but as individual deficits, family dysfunctions, or social adjustment failures.

Professional social work education establishes a paternalistic binary between the credentialed, middle-class professional (the knowing subject) and the marginalised client (the ignorant object). This dynamic reproduces what philosopher Jacques Rancière termed the "myth of pedagogy": the institutional assumption that the subaltern cannot comprehend or navigate their own socio-

political reality without the mediating explanation of a professional educator or social worker. In the Global South, professional social workers frequently operate as external gatekeepers for state distribution systems or international aid agencies, domesticating radical social movements by converting political rights-claims into administrative welfare requests.

Salvaging and Re-imagining Emancipatory Tools

To liberate participatory methodologies and social work from these institutional limitations, emancipatory tools must be salvaged and re-grounded in decolonial ontologies. Salvaging does not mean polishing conventional PRA toolkits for university or NGO use; rather, it requires an epistemological and structural rupture. Emancipatory methodologies must abandon the illusion of neutral facilitation and explicitly adopt a counter-hegemonic stance.

Re-imagined tools replace rapid appraisal with long-term, community-controlled self-investigation¹. Grounded in Indigenous Knowledge Systems—such as the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* or relational frameworks that reject the modern/colonial separation between humanity and nature—these re-imagined methodologies reframe participation as a collective exercise in political sovereignty, ecological stewardship, and epistemic re-existence.

Analytical Paradigm	Conventional Social Work & PRA	Salvaged Decolonial Praxis
Ontological Baseline	Cartesian separability, individual agency, human-nature division.	Relational entanglement, collective cohesion (<i>Ubuntu</i>), human-ecological.
Diagnostic Focus	Individual deficit, family dysfunction, local behavioural failure.	Coloniality of power, historic land dispossession, structural capital exploitation.
Pedagogical Dynamic	Pedagogue myth; professional explaining reality to passive clients.	Conscientization; subaltern organic intellectuals leading collective inquiry.
Institutional Relation	State maintenance, NGO donor compliance, depoliticised service delivery.	Grassroots self-governance, land claims, autonomous counter-institutions.

Theoretical Synthesis: Intersecting Decoloniality, Critical Pedagogy, and Spatial Phenomenology

To construct a counter-hegemonic framework for participatory mapping and research, five distinct theoretical traditions must be synthesised: decoloniality, deschooling, critical pedagogy, Gramscian political theory, and spatial phenomenology.

Decoloniality and the Critique of Colonial Epistemology

Decolonial theory—articulated by scholars such as Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Bagele Chilisa, and Ahlam Lee—posits that formal political decolonisation failed to destroy the coloniality of power and the coloniality of knowledge. Modern educational systems, development protocols, and research paradigms continue to impose Eurocentric standards of validity while suppressing,

pathologising, or delegitimising alternative ways of knowing. Decoloniality requires an intentional undoing, unlearning, and dismantling of these inherited structures, paired with positive action to validate indigenous ontologies centered on relational entanglement rather than Cartesian separability.

Deschooling and Critical Pedagogy: Unmasking Institutional Expertise

Critical pedagogy, drawing from Paulo Freire, establishes that education and research are never neutral; they either serve as instruments of conformity or become the practice of freedom. Ivan Illich's concept of deschooling extends this critique by analysing how modern institutions construct artificial monopolies over learning, social care, and knowledge production. Institutionalisation creates an ethos where communities are conditioned to believe they cannot understand their environment, manage their land, or organise their society. Illich, with Rancière's critique of intellectual instruction, reveals that true decolonisation requires deschooling and community research. Emancipatory participatory methodologies reject the professional facilitator who translates subaltern reality for the state, instead asserting the equal capacity of all minds to analyse and map their own conditions.

Gramsci's 'Organic Intellectuals' in Subaltern Struggle

Antonio Gramsci's political theory distinguishes between traditional intellectuals—who align with dominant class structures and maintain state hegemony under the guise of objective expertise—and organic intellectuals. Organic intellectuals do not emerge from elite academic institutions; rather, they develop organically from within working-class, indigenous, or caste-oppressed communities. They remain tied to their class and community origins, articulating collective experiences, organising resistance, and constructing counter-hegemonic institutions. In a decolonised participatory framework, the middle-class professional social worker or academic researcher steps aside. The design, execution, analysis, and strategic application of participatory mapping and research are assumed entirely by organic intellectuals—such as Adivasi forest dwellers, Dalit women farmers, or informal urban workers.

Phenomenological Spatialities: Body Ballet, Time-Space Routines, and Place Ballet

To prevent counter-mapping from reverting to static, Cartesian representations imposed by state survey departments, decolonial cartography must incorporate spatial phenomenology. Drawing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body-subject—which recognises bodily intentionality as a primary way of knowing—geographer David Seamon developed a phenomenological framework centered on three core concepts:

- **Body Ballet:** Integrated, habitual kinaesthetic behaviours and movements that sustain specific tasks or environmental interactions.
- **Time-Space Routine:** Sets of bodily movements and habitual behaviours bound together across time and space within specific locations.
- **Place Ballet:** The temporal convergence of individual body ballets and time-space routines within a shared physical environment, generating socio-spatial meaning, emotional attachment, and place identity.

In conventional cartography and state master planning, space is represented as an abstract, static grid of property boundaries, extractable resources, and state zones. This Cartesian approach erases subaltern life routines. Conversely, subaltern counter-mapping traces lived, embodied spatialities. When marginalised groups map their territory, they trace the rhythmic practices, micro-spatial tactics, seasonal migrations, uncultivated foraging paths, and spiritual connections that constitute their daily place ballet. Mapping these embodied spatial routines makes visible subaltern territorial claims that official state maps intentionally omit.

Phenomenological Concept	Theoretical Definition	Application in Subaltern Counter-Mapping
Body-Subject	Preconscious bodily intentionality guiding physical movement without explicit cognitive calculation.	Validating tactile, embodied land knowledge (e.g., seed handling, forest navigation) as legitimate cartographic data.
Body Ballet	Integrated, habitual kinaesthetic gestures sustaining daily tasks.	Mapping work rhythms, fuel-wood gathering paths, and customary agro-ecological tasks.
Time-Space Routine	Cyclical kinesthetics patterns anchored across specific times and physical sites.	Tracing seasonal grazing corridors, market travel routes, and uncultivated food gathering schedules.
Place Ballet	Intersecting bodily routines forming an environmental rhythm and emotional sense of place.	Counter-mapping shared commons, sacred groves, Adivasi hamlets, and collective Sangham spaces.

Empirical Praxis from the Global South: Autonomous Subaltern Mapping and Self-Governance

Case Study 1: Dalit Women's Sanghams and Agrobiodiversity Autonomy (Deccan Development Society, Telangana, India)

In the Zaheerabad region of Telangana, India, the Deccan Development Society (DDS) has spent four decades facilitating autonomous community governance among over 5,000 poor, rural Dalit women organised into village-level *Sanghams* (voluntary associations). Historically, these women faced multiple forms of marginalisation: extreme poverty, landlessness, untouchability (caste oppression), gender violence, and dryland degradation. Rejecting top-down NGO management and state welfare paternalism, the Dalit women of DDS established an integrated "Cycle of Autonomies": autonomy over food production, seeds, natural resources, local markets, and media. The Sanghams developed their own participatory tools without reliance on middle-class, external social workers.

In 2006, the Sanghams conducted autonomous hunger mapping across their villages. Rather than relying on state BPL (Below Poverty Line) surveys, Dalit women mapped their communities to

identify destitute elders, disabled individuals, and families lacking food. They then established community kitchens funded by their own pooled grain reserves, demonstrating subaltern capacity for local social safety nets.

To counter corporate seed monopolies and industrial monocultures, Sangham women systematically mapped local indigenous seed varieties. They documented over 80 uncultivated greens and 15 to 20 traditional millet varieties, establishing over 100 village-level Community Gene Banks. Knowledge regarding soil requirements, seasonal moisture, and cooking methods was archived in Telugu publications and seed catalogues compiled directly by Dalit women.

Furthermore, the Sanghams mapped degraded, fallow lands, securing access to thousands of acres²⁴. Using local organic farming methods, they cultivated millions of kilograms of traditional grains such as *jowar* (sorghum), establishing an Alternative Public Distribution System (APDS) that distributed nutritious food directly within their communities.

Recognizing that state and corporate media ignored subaltern realities, DDS established India's first community radio station and trained young Dalit women—some as young as 11 years old—in video filmmaking, camera operation, and digital editing. These filmmakers documented local agricultural knowledge, ecological practices, and seed festivals, producing media for community-to-community dialogue.

For over two decades, the Sanghams have organized annual Mobile Biodiversity Festivals (*Jatharas*). Bull-carts decorated with indigenous seeds travel from village to village, celebrating traditional dryland agrobiodiversity and fostering exchange. This practice culminated in the *Zaheerabad Agenda*, a policy declaration formulated by thousands of Dalit women farmers and endorsed by local village council presidents (*sarpanches*), challenging state policy with dryland farming models.

Case Study 2: Adivasi Counter-Cartography and Community Forest Rights under the Forest Rights Act (India)

In India's forested belts, Indigenous Adivasi communities have faced long-term territorial dispossession. British colonial forest acts of 1865 and 1878 declared forests state property, converting indigenous inhabitants into encroachers on their ancestral lands. Post-colonial legislation—such as the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 and the Forest Conservation Act of 1980—continued this exclusion under the banner of top-down conservation, creating green sacrifice zones and displacing forest-dwelling peoples.

The passage of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA) provided a statutory framework to undo these historical injustices¹⁰. The FRA recognised individual forest rights (IFR) and Community Forest Rights (CFR), empowering the *Gram Sabha* (the general assembly of all adult village residents) as the statutory authority to map, claim, protect, and manage customary forest lands.

In villages such as Mendha Lekha in the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra, Adivasi communities operationalised the slogan "*Mawa Nate Mawa Raj*" (Our Village, Our Governance). Rejecting top-down mapping by state forest departments, the Mendha Lekha Gram

Sabha organised its own counter-cartography processes. Organic intellectuals within the village walked customary forest boundaries alongside elders, mapping water bodies, sacred groves, non-timber forest produce gathering zones, and animal grazing paths. They mapped lived spatial routines and embodied environmental knowledge rather than relying solely on Cartesian state surveys.

The Gram Sabha created independent People's Biodiversity Registers (PBR), documenting medicinal plants, tree species, and ecological habitats, asserting community ownership over local biological resources. Through this self-directed mapping, Mendha Lekha became one of the first villages in India to secure legal rights over nearly 1,800 hectares of forest land. The Gram Sabha took control of bamboo harvesting and sales—historically monopolized by state forest corporations—directing revenues into local village funds, ecological restoration, and community employment, without reliance on external NGO intermediaries.

Field Context & Movement	Primary Organic Intellectuals	Participatory Methodologies Deployed	Structural & Epistemic Outcomes
Deccan Development Society (Telangana, India)	Dalit women farmers, Sangham leaders, local video producers.	Autonomous Hunger Mapping, Seed Catalogs, APDS, Mobile Biodiversity Festivals.	Local food sovereignty, 100+ seed gene banks, Dalit-controlled radio/film, Zaheerabad Agenda.
Mendha Lekha Gram Sabha (Maharashtra, India)	Adivasi village elders, Gram Sabha council members.	Customary Boundary Counter-Mapping, People's Biodiversity Registers.	Legal title to 1,800 ha forest commons, autonomous bamboo sales, "Mawa Nate Mawa Raj".
Adivasi Land Rights Alliances (Central India)	Indigenous village organizers, local forest dwelling activists.	Customary tenure mapping, boundary re-demarcation, community land registers.	Resistance to state land grabbing, formal submission of CFR claims under FRA 2006.

Operational Principles for Epistemic Re-Existence and Counter-Hegemonic Mapping

To operationalise counter-hegemonic research, mapping, and community organisation, research collectives, organic intellectuals, and allied practitioners must adopt foundational operational principles that ensure structural independence and epistemic integrity.

First, participatory tools must be designed, executed, owned, and archived directly by subaltern collectives, such as Gram Sabhas, Sanghams, or indigenous councils, rather than external development agencies. Research initiatives should require explicit community consent, co-design processes, and governance by local advisory committees to prevent extractive research dynamics.

Second, counter-mapping must extend beyond Cartesian coordinates to record the lived phenomenology of place. Mapping practices should trace body ballets, seasonal foraging paths, sacred geographies, and uncultivated resource corridors, capturing micro-spatial tactics and habitual routines that official state maps intentionally ignore.

Third, research frameworks must centre Indigenous Knowledge Systems, such as *Ubuntu* or relational entanglement paradigms, that reject the modern/colonial division between humanity and nature. This approach requires unlearning Eurocentric assumptions regarding individual pathologisation, administrative case management, and market utility.

Fourth, knowledge generated through community research must remain under local structural control. Communities should establish local archives, autonomous radio stations, video channels, and seed banks, ensuring knowledge is preserved in local languages for community education rather than extracted for academic subscription journals.

Fifth, emancipatory initiatives must avoid donor-driven project cycles that depoliticise local struggles. Methodologies should be tied directly to long-term community organising, land defence, and material self-reliance, insulating community movements from external co-optation and institutional gatekeeping.

Conclusions and Directives for Structural Transformation

Decolonising participatory methodologies requires an epistemological and political break from neoliberal institutional paradigms. The systemic co-optation of Participatory Rural Appraisal and the dominance of Eurocentric, state-sanctioned social work demonstrate that radical tools, when housed within donor agencies or neoliberal universities, are frequently neutralised into technical compliance mechanisms. This anti-politics machine preserves existing power structures while transferring responsibility for systemic failures onto marginalised communities.

Restoring the emancipatory capacity of these tools requires syntheses across theoretical disciplines and grassroots movements:

- Decolonial theory and critical pedagogy expose how Eurocentric epistemologies marginalise subaltern ways of knowing.
- Ivan Illich's deschooling framework and Jacques Rancière's critique of the pedagogue myth challenge the reliance on middle-class professional social workers, clearing the path for Gramscian organic intellectuals to lead community self-analysis.
- Spatial phenomenology enriches subaltern counter-mapping, transforming cartography from an instrument of state surveillance into a record of lived routines, embodied movements, and local territorial claims.

Empirical examples across the Global South—such as the Dalit women's Sanghams of the Deccan Development Society and Adivasi forest movements asserting Community Forest Rights under the Forest Rights Act—demonstrate that true decolonisation occurs when communities maintain direct ownership over mapping, media, seed systems, and land governance. When organic intellectuals lead these processes, participatory tools cease to be extractive surveys; they become instruments for structural transformation, territorial self-determination, and epistemic re-

existence.

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