



# The Collaboration Paradox: Confronting Colonial Legacies in South-North Projects

Sarah Rüller\*  
Konstantin "Kosta" Aal\*  
sarah.rueller@uni-siegen.de  
konstantin.aal@uni-siegen.de  
University of Siegen  
Siegen, Germany

Laura Gianna Guntrum  
guntrum@peasec.tu-darmstadt.de  
Technical University of Darmstadt  
Darmstadt, Germany

Reem Talhouk  
reem.talhouk@northumbria.ac.uk  
Northumbria University  
Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom

Shaimaa Lazem  
shaimaalazem@gmail.com  
City of Scientific Research and  
Technological Applications  
Alexandria, Egypt

Volker Wulf  
volker.wulf@uni-siegen.de  
University of Siegen  
Siegen, Germany

Dave Randall  
dave.randall@uni-siegen.de  
University of Siegen  
Siegen, Germany

## ABSTRACT

This special interest group invites participants to critically examine the complex interplay between interventionist Information and Communication Technology (ICT) projects and (historical) contexts of conflict and colonialism. It aims to open conversations on the multitude of challenges, barriers, and lessons learned around South-North collaborations<sup>1</sup>, particularly in contexts with a colonial past and present, including researchers and research participants safety, data 'security', applied ethics, and methodologies. This SIG aims at jointly developing ideas on how we, as academic researchers, can navigate and reframe the power dynamics inherent in global South-North collaborations.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**;  
**Ethnographic studies**; *Computer supported cooperative work*.

## KEYWORDS

Ethnography, Collaboration, South-North, Ethics, Post-Colonial

### ACM Reference Format:

Sarah Rüller, Konstantin "Kosta" Aal, Laura Gianna Guntrum, Reem Talhouk, Shaimaa Lazem, Volker Wulf, and Dave Randall. 2024. The Collaboration Paradox: Confronting Colonial Legacies in South-North Projects. In *Companion of the 2024 Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW Companion '24)*, November 9–13, 2024, San Jose, Costa Rica. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 3 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3678884.3687138>

\*Both authors contributed equally to this research.

<sup>1</sup>We acknowledge that the term 'collaborations' may imply working on equal terms, which is not often the reality. Researchers from the Global North frequently complete their studies and leave without providing any support to local communities.

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for components of this work owned by others than the author(s) must be honored. Abstracting with credit is permitted. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee. Request permissions from [permissions@acm.org](mailto:permissions@acm.org).

CSCW Companion '24, November 9–13, 2024, San Jose, Costa Rica

© 2024 Copyright held by the owner/author(s). Publication rights licensed to ACM.

ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-1114-5/24/11

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3678884.3687138>

## 1 INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION

"We must remind ourselves that to enter another's world as a researcher is a privilege, not a right". [12]

The discourse around information and communication technology (ICT) projects in the Global South has often focused on their potential to bridge gaps and foster innovation. However, these narratives often overlook the deeply rooted historical contexts and power dynamics that shape such projects [7, 8, 16]. This workshop aims to delve into these complexities, recognizing that the legacies of colonialism continue to influence contemporary collaborations between the Global North and South.

In many cases, South-North projects related to ICT usage are embedded in frameworks that may inadvertently perpetuate colonial attitudes and power imbalances [1, 2, 13, 16, 24]. These dynamics manifest themselves in a variety of ways, from the imposition of external agendas on local communities to the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems. As a result, the true potential of these projects is often undermined by an unequal distribution of power and resources, leading to outcomes that may benefit the North more than the South [23].

Globally, more and more armed conflicts and crises arise and therefore, research has bend and is conducted in more sensitive and volatile contexts. However, questions related to the practical ethics of conducting certain types of research do not necessarily play a major role [3]. Furthermore, standardized ethical procedures often do not comply with "real world issues" [10]. Often research is extractive, increase power asymmetries and researchers often do not reflect on which information they share and which role they hold and how they share discourses [9, 17]. Therefore, there is a need to continuously reflect on research ethics and power imbalances, by taking e.g., critical theory and postcolonial perspectives into account.

Conducting research in sensitive settings carries many ethical and (post-)colonial implications, especially if we are "outsiders" and lack context-specific knowledge. We, as researchers, often uphold power dynamics (own social background, university, power to publish, research funding, having the possibility to publish on sensitive

topics, whereas some researchers from the local context might not be able to do so due to security issues, etc.) [14].

Postcolonial perspectives emphasise the importance of local knowledge and the limitations of imposing external ethical standards without adaptation [4]. Ethical standards often applied in the North, such as strict anonymity protocols, GDPR, etc., may not be universally applicable or appropriate in all contexts. For example, in some cultures anonymity may undermine the credibility or honor of participants, whereas recognition may be in line with their values and social practices. What if participants express a desire to be named and recognized for their contributions - also to reduce their potential risk of harm? From a postcolonial perspective, it is important to respect the agency and wishes of participants [6], recognizing that standard ethical practices developed in Western contexts may not always be appropriate or desired in other cultural settings [5, 25]. It is also important to consider that contexts change rapidly and that naming people may put them at risk in the future. Incorporating postcolonial perspectives [8, 15] encourages us to critically examine the power dynamics at play and to adopt more flexible, contextually aware practices in terms of methodological approaches in general and ethics and security in particular. This means actively engaging with local communities to understand their needs and preferences, and being willing to adapt our research practices accordingly.

This workshop is particularly relevant to the CSCW community as it addresses often neglected perspectives in research, emphasising the importance of local knowledge and context-specific ethical and secure standards. Traditional practices developed in Western contexts may not always be appropriate or desirable in other cultural settings. This workshop challenges the CSCW community to rethink standard methodologies (e.g., co-design workshops) and adopt more flexible, contextually aware practices. It encourages collaborative thinking about the implications of technical design and aims to ensure that research practices are both ethical and effective in different contexts. By addressing these challenges, the workshop aims to improve the CSCW community's approach to conducting research in volatile environments, ultimately contributing to more equitable and respectful partnerships in South-North collaborations.

## 2 PREVIOUS WORKSHOPS, SIGS AND OTHER FORMATS

Building on the foundation established by previous events that have explored various aspects of conducting ethnographic fieldwork [18, 20–22], this workshop introduces a contemporary perspective by focusing specifically on the particular challenges and complexities of interventionist ICT projects in historical contexts of conflict and colonialism. In doing so, it enriches the discourse with new insights and experiences, shedding light on the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of such projects in challenging and sensitive environments. The aim is to broaden the understanding of collaborative practices and methodologies when applied to these critical and often overlooked settings, thus making a valuable contribution to the field. The first workshop at the 2020 ECSCW conference [21] focused on methods, ethics, and participation. Ethnography, often termed a 'messy' methodology by Nimmo ([19]), relies on

researchers' interpretative skills in complex social settings. This inductive approach emphasizes the phenomenological experiences of subjects over predefined analytic categories and has been integral to HCI and CSCW research for over 30 years [11]. The CHI 2021 workshop [18] explored the integration of ethnography into HCI and technology design. This approach is valued for its ability to provide a deep understanding of diverse local contexts. The workshop addressed the challenges of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in non-Western settings, focusing on the researcher's immersion in cultural contexts. This process requires a balance between critical reflection and the avoidance of bias, raising questions about the role of the researcher, their influence and the nature of the data collected. At the annual meeting of the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) in November 20–23<sup>2</sup>. During this panel, participants presented and discussed their experiences of the challenges of identifying and gaining access to research sites, as well as establishing trust and accountability after prolonged engagement in the field. The Special Interest Group (SIG) at the CHI 2024 [20] explored the complexities of conducting ethnographic research in settings affected by political unrest, conflict, economic instability or natural disaster. It aimed to promote discussion of the ethical, methodological and psychological challenges faced in these volatile settings. Key topics include adapting methods to prioritise safety, ethical considerations in unstable environments, the impact of the presence of researchers, and strategies for building resilience to secondary trauma.

## 3 IDENTIFIED AREAS FOR DISCUSSION

The following subsections explore key areas for discussion in South-North ICT projects and collaborations, focusing on security, (de-)colonialism, and sustainability. These themes encompass several pressing issues that need to be addressed to ensure the ethical and effective implementation of such collaborations. By examining security concerns, the influence of colonial legacies and the importance of sustainability, we aim to foster a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in projects.

### 3.1 Security

Security concerns in North-South ICT projects include both data security and the personal security of researchers and participants. Security is defined and understood differently in different cultural and geopolitical landscapes. Participants are invited to discuss divergent expectations and the ethics of consent in international collaborations. Ensuring the secure handling of data is crucial, especially given the different levels of technological infrastructure and data protection regulations in different regions. Participant safety is another critical issue, particularly in politically unstable or sensitive areas where the risk of harm can be significant. Addressing digital privacy is also challenging and requires careful consideration of the local context and regulatory environment to effectively protect individuals' information.

### 3.2 (Post-)Colonialism

Understanding the historical contexts of colonialism is essential to grasping the current dynamics of South-North ICT collaborations.

<sup>2</sup>[https://4sonline.org/news\\_manager.php?page=31492](https://4sonline.org/news_manager.php?page=31492)

Colonial legacies continue to shape the political, economic and social structures within which these projects are implemented. Power imbalances established during the colonial era often persist and influence the relationships and expectations between North and South collaborators. Ethical considerations are paramount when engaging in research and project implementation in post-colonial contexts, as there is a need to be critically aware of the potential for reinforcing existing inequalities and biases.

### 3.3 Sustainability

Sustainability is a key consideration in ensuring the long-term impact of ICT projects. This includes not only the continuation of project activities but also the ongoing benefits to the communities involved. Sustainable projects require the active involvement and ownership of local communities to foster a sense of ownership and continuity. Effective resource allocation and management are essential to support the maintenance and development of project initiatives over time. By prioritizing sustainability, projects can avoid the pitfalls of short-term interventions and create lasting positive change.

## 4 SIG NEXT STEPS

As we look to the future of this SIG, our next steps are focused on maintaining and expanding the dialogue initiated during our meetings. The starting point for ongoing discussions will be the establishment of a dedicated online community using tools such as a Miro Board and PubPub. These platforms will serve as a hub for ongoing interaction, allowing members to share insights, resources and updates, fostering a collaborative and supportive environment. In addition to these online tools, we plan to organize events at various conferences in the future. These events will not only provide opportunities to engage with new researchers and expand our network but will also ensure that our discussions remain dynamic and evolving. To reach a wider audience and cement the importance of our work, we are also considering the publication of a special issue in a relevant academic journal. This special issue will encapsulate the key findings and discussions of our SIG, extend the conversation to a wider academic community, and invite contributions that reflect the diverse and multifaceted nature of conducting research in the Global South to foster more equitable and ethical ICT collaborations between the Global North and South. Through these initiatives, we aim to maintain the momentum of our SIG and make a lasting impact in the field, especially by including early career researchers.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Konstantin Aal. 2024. *Influence of Social Media in a Changing Landscape of Crisis: Insights into the Digital Dynamics of Conflict and Activism in the Middle Eastern and North African Region*. Springer Nature. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-45517-0>
- [2] Konstantin Aal, Sarah Rüller, Simon Holdermann, Peter Tolmie, Markus Rohde, Martin Zillinger, and Volker Wulf. 2018. Challenges of an educational ICT intervention: The establishment of a MediaSpace in the High Atlas. *International Reports on Socio-Informatics* 15, 2 (2018), 1–20.
- [3] Ebtsam Alabdulqader, Shaimaa Lazem, Mohamed Khamis, and Susan M Dray. 2018. Exploring participatory design methods to engage with Arab communities. In *Extended Abstracts of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 1–8.
- [4] Syed Mustafa Ali. 2016. A brief introduction to decolonial computing. *XRDS: Crossroads, The ACM Magazine for Students* 22, 4 (2016), 16–21.
- [5] Sima Amirkhani. 2023. Taking Ethics Seriously. In *Torn Many Ways: Politics, Conflict and Emotion in Research*. Springer, 105–119.
- [6] Russell Bishop. 2011. Freeing ourselves from neo-colonial dominance in research: A Kaupapa Māori approach to creating knowledge. In *Freeing ourselves*. Brill, 1–30.
- [7] Seth B Cohen. 2014. The challenging dynamics of global North-South peacebuilding partnerships: practitioner stories from the field. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 9, 3 (2014), 65–81.
- [8] Dipto Das and Bryan Semaan. 2022. Decolonial and Postcolonial Computing Research: A Scientometric Exploration. In *Companion Publication of the 2022 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing*. 168–174.
- [9] Ranjan Datta. 2018. Decolonizing both researcher and research and its effectiveness in Indigenous research. *Research Ethics* 14, 2 (2018), 1–24.
- [10] Matthew Doyle. 2020. The role of descriptive ethics in the design of research ethics procedures in the social sciences. *Sentio* 2020, 2 (2020), 10–14.
- [11] Mark-Anthony Falzon. 2016. *Multi-sited ethnography: Theory, praxis and locality in contemporary research*. Routledge.
- [12] Lee Ann Fujii. 2012. Research ethics 101: Dilemmas and responsibilities. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45, 4 (2012), 717–723.
- [13] Margarita Grinko, Tanja Aal, Konstantin Aal, Helmut Hauptmeier, and Volker Wulf. 2023. Lions out of Bounds? Reflections on Digital Technology and Matristic Design to address Human-Wildlife Conflict. In *Proceedings of the 4th African Human Computer Interaction Conference*. 19–23.
- [14] Laura Gianna Guntrum. 2024. Keyboard Fighters: The Use of ICTs by Activists in Times of Military Coup in Myanmar. In *Proceedings of the CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 1–19.
- [15] Lilly Irani, Janet Vertesi, Paul Dourish, Kavita Philip, and Rebecca E Grinter. 2010. Postcolonial computing: a lens on design and development. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on human factors in computing systems*. 1311–1320.
- [16] Shaimaa Lazem, Danilo Giglito, Makuochi Samuel Nkwo, Hafeni Mthoko, Jessica Upani, and Anicia Peters. 2021. Challenges and paradoxes in decolonising HCI: A critical discussion. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)* (2021), 1–38.
- [17] Walter D Mignolo. 2009. Epistemic disobedience, independent thought and decolonial freedom. *Theory, culture & society* 26, 7-8 (2009), 159–181.
- [18] Marios Mouratidis, Sarah Rüller, Konstantin Aal, Shaimaa Lazem, Anicia Peters, Nina Boulus-Rødje, Simon Holdermann, Vasilis Vlachokyriakos, Ann Light, Dave Randall, et al. 2021. Coping with Messiness in Ethnography: Authority, Bias and Immersion in ethnographic Fieldwork in the non-Western World. In *Extended Abstracts of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 1–5.
- [19] Richie Nimmo. 2011. Actor-network theory and methodology: Social research in a more-than-human world. *Methodological Innovations Online* 6, 3 (2011), 108–119.
- [20] Sarah Rüller, Konstantin Aal, Norah Abokhodair, Houda Elmimouni, Yarden Skop, Dave Randall, Nina Boulus-Rødje, Alan Borning, and Volker Wulf. 2024. Ethnography at the Edge: Exploring Research Dynamics in Crisis and Conflict Areas. In *Extended Abstracts of the CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 1–4.
- [21] Sarah Rüller, Konstantin Aal, Marios Mouratidis, Dave Randall, Volker Wulf, Nina Boulus-Rødje, and Bryan Semaan. 2020. (Coping with) Messiness in Ethnography—Methods, Ethics and Participation in ethnographic Field Work in the non-Western World. (2020).
- [22] Sarah Rüller, Konstantin Aal, Marios Mouratidis, and Volker Wulf. 2020. Messy Fieldwork: A Natural Necessity or a Result of Western Origins and Perspectives?. In *Companion Publication of the 2020 ACM Designing Interactive Systems Conference*. 185–190.
- [23] Sarah Rüller. 2024. *Moving Beyond the WEIRD: Lessons from an Amazigh Community in Shaping Pluralistic Digital Futures*. PhD Thesis. University of Siegen, Siegen, Germany.
- [24] Volker Wulf, Kaoru Misaki, Meryem Atam, David Randall, and Markus Rohde. 2013. 'On the ground' in Sidi Bouzid: investigating social media use during the tunisian revolution. ACM Press, 1409. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2441776.2441935>
- [25] JJ Zhang. 2017. Research ethics and ethical research: some observations from the Global South. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 41, 1 (2017), 147–154.