

Can we talk about a 'Made in Latin America and the Caribbean' evaluation? Some food for thought



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Background: This article affirms and confirms the existence of evaluation epistemologies and methods that are unique to Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).

Objectives: Inspired by the Dr Sulley Gariba Memorial Lecture series, 'Made in Africa Evaluation', which has been hosted in various continents, Latin America has delved into the matter, setting out to explore the differences and similarities between us and our sister continent, Africa, and comparing our practice and worldviews with those of others in the Global South.

Method: The preliminary results of that research were used to spark debate and collective reflection at the 2022 LAC Evaluation Conference in Quito, Ecuador.

Results: The aim of this article is to share some key elements of evaluation from a decolonisation perspective that explains and denounces inequities while enabling us to imagine fairer democratic systems in LAC.

Conclusion: ReLAC – our own regional evaluation network – is proud to have spent the last 20 years strengthening the monitoring & evaluation (M&E) profession and sharing the distinctive ways that our evaluation communities experience, perceive and understand knowledge in highly diverse cultural, political, social and economic territories throughout the region.

Contribution: We show that evaluation theory and practice must begin with a study of the past, our ancestral and local cultures in order to learn from them and construct our present accordingly. We urge to face the challenge of working with respect, otherness and the dignity of communities, their peoples and territories as we build *horizons of meaning* for our evaluative practices.

Keywords: evaluation; epistemologies of the South; decolonisation; ancestral voices; Latin America; Caribbean.

Introduction

This article was written for this special issue in response to its invitation to address knowledge asymmetries in memory of Dr Sulley Gariba:

'[G]ariba sought to equalize power and knowledge, to shatter these asymmetries and replace them with reciprocal partnerships of respect and mutual benefit.' – Prof. Edward Jackson, Carleton University, Canada

This article seeks to honour the legacy of Dr. Sulley Gariba by contributing various ideas on what evaluation is and how it is carried out in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), with the aim that it will serve to encourage ongoing conversations about our collective evaluation culture. It may also be used in comparative studies with other regions, mutual learning with others in the Global South and in open dialogue with the Global North.

In November 2022, the evaluation community in LAC was at long last able to reconnect in person after a 5-year hiatus caused by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The conference title was 'Evaluation without barriers: Syndemic, innovation and sustainability'. As ever, it showcased a rich diversity of knowledge in order to highlight, listen to, learn from and continue exploring evaluations in our region. On this occasion, the discourse focussed on indigenous approaches to evaluation, which often differ from official standards and are therefore largely ignored in evaluation systems and the literature.

Note: Special Collection: Addressing Knowledge Asymmetries.

The conference promoted the voices of indigenous evaluators by sharing approaches that are rooted in age-old Andean-Amazonian cultures. These voices are alive and strong in their territories, and they challenge us, as evaluators, to improve conditions so that the cosmovisions of indigenous peoples can be effectively taken into account. The conference insisted on the need for their participation in evaluation processes carried out at different governmental levels, in cooperation agencies, in the education system and in society in general.

The conference also highlighted epistemological and methodological advances in evaluation topics. Discussions during round-table sessions, panels and workshops revealed a diverse Latin American South with a heterogeneous social composition, but they found that evaluation communities were formed mostly based on managerial approaches. The fact that indigenous voices speaking about evaluation were heard and considered to be relevant in a regional evaluation gathering is an important and significant ontological step forward.

Participants responded very positively to the many opportunities to learn more about specific areas of indigenous approaches to evaluation, as employed in a range of regions including the Amazon basin and the Andean highlands, and to their significance in evaluation systems and processes that are relevant to the Global South.

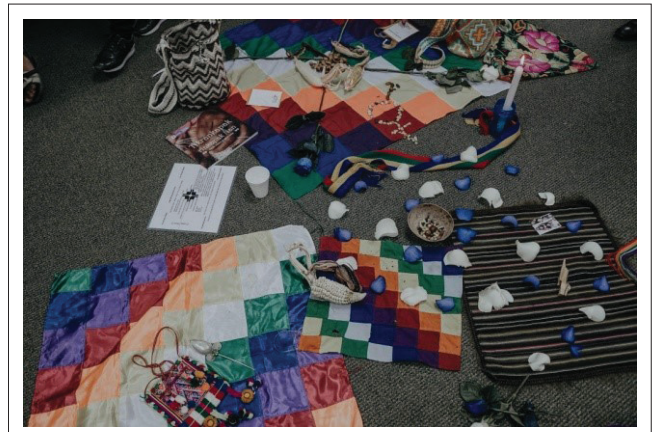
The word 'indigenous' derives from the Latin noun *inde* – *genus* implying *native*, *autochthonous*, *original*. Correspondingly, the EvalIndigenous^{1,2} community focusses on bringing ways of being, thinking and evaluating 'from people from here' into the centre of the evaluation process both in cultural and territorial terms.

This includes the cosmologies and cosmovisions of previously colonised indigenous peoples, formerly enslaved black communities, as well as social groups and movements who increasingly participate in evaluation communities and who make decisions in the public sector. This is of particular interest to those who live in multiethnic and cross-cultural regions such as the territories of the Andean-Amazonian region where the dominant culture still interprets local knowledge as 'irrational' or 'illegal'.

The presence of female indigenous evaluators was a particularly significant milestone in the 2022 Network for Latin American and the Caribbean Monitoring, Evaluation and Systematization (ReLAC) conference. These women shared their science, knowledge and rituals and challenged us to understand their logic and cosmovisions. Each of the participants spoke from perspectives influenced by their own language, culture and land, aspects that were also marked on their bodies, on their clothing and in their weavings (Figure 1 and Figure 2). These perspectives were

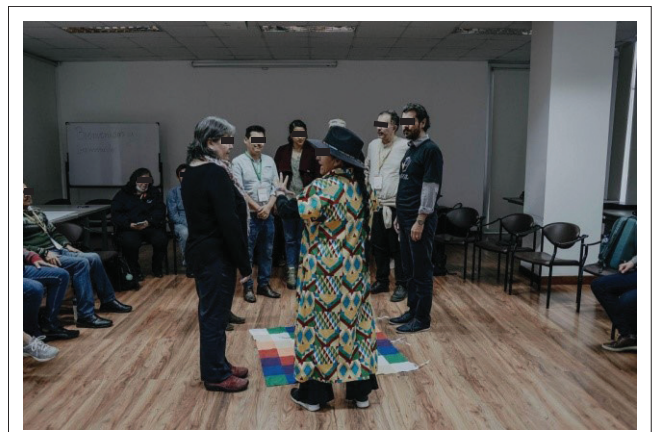
1. <https://evalpartners.org/evalnetworks/evalindigenous/>

2. <https://comm.eval.org/aeaipetig/evalindig>



Source: Salas, N., 2022, 'Minga de Pensamiento para la Evaluación hecha en LA&C: co-construyendo el concepto', in *Memorias de la Conferencia ReLAC 2022*, viewed 27 October 2023, from <https://www.cir.relac.net/>

FIGURE 1: Minga session supplies for the ceremony.



Source: Salas, N., 2022, 'Minga de Pensamiento para la Evaluación hecha en LA&C: co-construyendo el concepto', in *Memorias de la Conferencia ReLAC 2022*, viewed 27 October 2023, from <https://www.cir.relac.net/>

FIGURE 2: Minga session in progress.

integral to the way they handled community, duality, giving and receiving, as well as the way they understood the complexities involved in the methodological practice of knowing, being and experiencing and in knowledge construction. This logic can be seen in the *chakana*, which is also known as the Andean or Amazonian cross and just one example of the many practices and cosmovisions that are not written down in guidelines or handbooks. Rather, they are woven into textiles and daily routines and integrated into means of production and ways of relating with nature, the universe and other human beings.

Similarities and differences: A South–South dialogue between Africa and Latin America

The Sulley Gariba memorial lecture series, hosted in several continents, inspired EvalPartners and the World Food Program to instigate contextualised research that would enable dialogue between the 'Made in Africa Evaluation' and the LAC perspective. We therefore posited the existence of an equivalent 'Made in Latin America and the

Caribbean Evaluation'. The report prepared by the contracted researchers Amaya and Aquilino (2022) updated reflections that had been shared previously through the ReLAC *Evaluar desde y para América Latina* (Evaluate from and for Latin America) task force. These findings invited us to deliberate about the things that unite us in the field of evaluation in a territory that is highly diverse in terms of cultures, languages, histories and methods and experiences of government. They also revealed certain characteristics that align us with the African evaluation community or the 'Made in Africa Evaluation' proposed by Dr. Sulley Gariba and Dr. Bagele Chilisa (2019).

As a consequence of the original research, we could record some important findings, as follows:

1. We share a history of slavery, colonisation and unbalanced development as a consequence, as well as a culture of submission to main powers, weak democracies and great inequality between social classes.
2. We have in common a great social and cultural diversity, as a consequence of migration and a construction of plurinational territories based on very different and diverse ethnicities, religions, customs and values.
3. We share experiences of evaluations that have been carried out with a human perspective that is inclusive, critical, participatory and transformative in response to the challenge to reduce the levels of inequality that are unfortunately a universal trait throughout both continents.
4. We have in common certain evaluations that fit into a decolonisation framework, Chilisa and Bowman (2023), Chouinard and Cram (2020), aiming to explain and denounce inequalities and unbalanced power and which urges us to recognise them and confer and deliberate, as evaluators and as citizens, with other cultures, knowledge systems, cosmovisions and ways of living and feeling, as a means to enrich our evaluations with a diverse range of perspectives.
5. As a great difference, Latin America seems to be a beginner in this discussion inside our region even when we recognise the necessity from several years ago, meantime Africa seems to be clear and with a stronger position about their necessity to change epistemologies from the roots, to give birth to new methodologies.

The proposed research on exploring whether or not we can speak of an evaluation that is unique to LAC has motivated us to share existing evidence in this regard. Therefore, we wanted to go further and respond to the question: 'How has LAC evaluation and its evaluators contributed a more human, ethical, decolonial, inclusive, critical and transformative perspective to evaluation?' We started to respond to this question by simply sharing the conversations held in the ReLAC *Evaluar desde y para América Latina* task force and at the 2022 International ReLAC conference held in Quito.

Evaluating from Latin America: Other perspectives on and for the field of evaluation and first documented cases

The report echoed thinking on evaluation that had emerged from ReLAC within the contexts described above. One of these spaces was the *Evaluar desde y para América Latina* task force,³ which was created in 2015 and seeks to influence evaluation in two ways:

1. Affirming the heterogeneous ways of evaluating that exist in Latin America;
2. Divulging emerging positions in the field of evaluation.

The group believes that there is an important aspect in the field of evaluation that the most highly regarded handbooks do not make official or explicit in the definitions they offer: evaluation is an act that is closely linked to a larger set of actions that give meaning to the state and society.

Once we understand that evaluation is a complex field where different institutional actors and subjects act, interact and make decisions, we accept that different visions, agendas, interests and perceptions will be reflected in the process. We can also rightly assume that tools, techniques and methods are only one dimension of evaluation and will reflect conceptions that may be influenced by varying degrees of bias. Thus, evaluation is a political act, and as such, it is not simply and exclusively a set of processes and/or methods that can be implemented to measure dimensions and contribute to governmental decision making.

Given its strong political connection, evaluation reflects power dynamics, ideologies and conceptions about the state, about democracy, about civil, social and political rights and about citizens (the beneficiaries of public initiatives). With this in mind, we believe that emerging practices in the field of evaluation in LAC should pay particular attention to the following five aspects:

- The establishment of horizontal relationships between Global North and Global South evaluation cultures;
- The creation of new forms of institution that incorporate the participation of a diverse range of social actors in decision making;
- The affirmation and recognition of innovative evaluation epistemologies and methodologies that emerge from different ontologies that are true to local cosmovisions;
- Evaluation as a reflection of the state and public actions;
- Evaluation as an act of political emancipation, citizenship, as well as the guarantee and extension of civil, social and political rights and democratic values.

3. The ReLAC task force *Evaluar desde y para América Latina* (Evaluating from and for Latin America) aims to highlight dimensions that structure and guide the evaluation agenda while placing the political dimension at the centre. The group seeks to show the tensions that exist once we accept that evaluation should include all social subjects involved in the policies, agendas and interests. The group's agenda brings these issues to light, contributing to the understanding that evaluation should be understood based on socio-historical and cultural conditions and constructs that extrapolate objectives that are merely technical, regulatory and administrative.

We understand that these ways of looking at evaluation lead to critical – and self-critical – dialogue with liberal evaluation thought and practice that is anchored in modern positivism. This criticism is not directed at the methods and techniques, but rather at the ontological and epistemological dimensions that are rooted in colonial history.

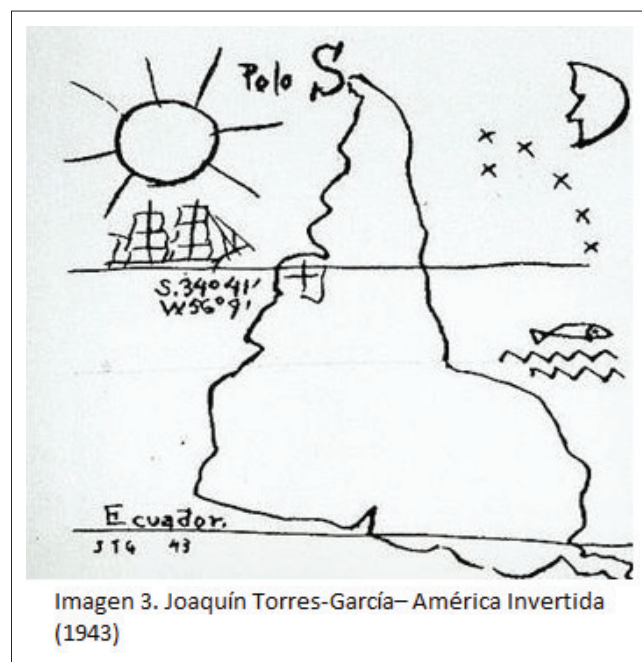
With all the aforementioned in mind, we feel compelled to offer less assertive answers to our profession and field, and instead ask many more questions with the view of generating conversation in the style of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's 'pedagogy of questions'. As a first step in engaging with these issues, we suggest that evaluators should ask themselves the following questions:

- How can evaluation address the diversity of indigenous Latin American cosmovisions, knowledge systems and practices?
- How can evaluation encourage the construction of democratic states and improve social, civil and political rights?
- How can evaluation promote social participation that leads to the emancipation of the various groups of Latin American peoples?
- How can evaluation challenge ethnic and racial inequalities that originate from the structural racism of colonialism?
- In what ways can evaluation challenge hegemonic patriarchal models and contribute to achieving gender equality and equality for sexual diversity?
- In what ways can evaluation processes incorporate the perspectives (knowledge, cultures, identities and cosmovisions) of indigenous peoples regarding relationships between humans and nature?
- Can we decolonise evaluation using new epistemologies and transform it into a political tool that promotes the construction of an emancipatory horizon for indigenous peoples?
- How can evaluation bring indigenous territories, dynamics and cultures into the centre of public policies and programmes?

These questions invite us to develop another way of looking at evaluation from a LAC perspective. Similarly to 'Inverted America' by Joaquín Torres-García (Uruguay, 1874–1949), we want to propose the construction of an 'inverted evaluation' that begins with its ontological roots (Figure 3).

Our challenge, therefore, is to use this dialogue to explore the need to move closer to decolonial epistemological evaluation matrixes that reflect the cultures and diverse territories of indigenous peoples, black people, women, workers, farm workers, urban peripheries and LGBTQIA+ communities. Only then will we be able to collectively construct decolonial epistemologies that involve us as LAC evaluators. Only then will we begin to construct 'Epistemologies of the South' (De Sousa Santos 2007, 2017).

We feel proud to have begun to document a series of own epistemologies Freire (2005), Ghiano (2020, 2021),



Source: América Invertida. Work of the Uruguayan painter Joaquín Torres García (1943)

FIGURE 3: Image of an inverted Latin America.

Ghiano et al. (2021), Ribeiro and Gasparini (2021), Salas (2022), which gives new routes to innovative methodologies such as *EvalParticipativa* community (participative evaluation cases),⁴ *Indigenous voices project LAC*,⁵ *ReLAC repository of evaluation bibliography and cases*⁶ the *Latin America & the Caribbean Evaluation Standards*⁷ or the documented cases in the *Alternative Evaluation* initiative.⁸

Conclusion

While the aim of this article was to share some key elements of evaluation from a decolonisation perspective that explains and denounces inequities while enabling us to imagine fairer democratic systems in LAC, we delved into some similarities and differences with 'Made in Africa Evaluation' perspective, to show that evaluation theory and practice must begin with a study of the past, our ancestral and local cultures in order to learn from them and construct our present accordingly. Moreover, this is a call from both continents. We urged to face the challenge of working with respect, otherness and the dignity of communities, their peoples and territories as we build *horizons of meaning* for our evaluative practices.

The invitation to think collectively – not only within our region but also together with territories and cultures that are geographically distant yet similar in terms of ideological perspectives and daily lives – is not to be perceived as a

4. <https://evalparticipativa.net/>

5. <https://www.evalindigenos.net/>

6. <https://plataforma.relac.net/contenido/27/25>

7. <https://www.relac.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2021-ESTANDARES-ENGL-V4.pdf>

8. <https://alternativeevaluation.org/>

complex challenge, but rather an epistemological strength of a community that grows from, and is nourished by, the dialogue, shared words and construction of new contextualised concepts. The hope is that this strength complements and strengthens global evaluation culture with the single aim of making it an instrument that improves the lives of people in different contexts and in line with their needs, knowledge systems and practices.

We are still faced with the challenge to develop more practices that enable us to compare evaluation exercises while acknowledging the ways they are contextualised in order to make evaluation instruments more flexible, with the conviction that evaluation should be made in, and for, the beneficiary community and its context.

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Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

M.C.G., is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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