



DECOLONISING

AFRICAN CITIES
RESEARCH CONSORTIUM

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Disclaimer

This report has been prepared by Kibui Edwin Rwigi in response to a commission received from the University of Manchester through the African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) project. The opinions, findings, and recommendations expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or official position of the ACRC secretariat or the University of Manchester. The report represents an independent analysis based on the information and data gathered by the author.



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Executive Summary

As part of ACRC's decolonisation agenda, the consortium commissioned the qualitative study presented in this report to explore ways of implementing its work in a more just, dignified, and equitable manner. The qualitative process particularly sought to understand the findings of a Temperature Check Survey that invited reflections on various (de)colonial concerns in the project. From a pool of over 150 researchers and practitioners, 18 participants were interviewed between May and October 2023. The interviews explored perceptions of colonial attitudes, power, and rewards in the ACRC project.

Participants generally appreciated the various efforts that have been undertaken as part of the decolonisation agenda. However, concerns were raised about the timing, with some participants questioning why it started so late in the project. Many agreed that it was a positive step but insufficient on its own.

The findings uncovered a range of perspectives on decolonisation within the consortium. Some respondents also questioned the role of FCDO and British interests in funding research on African cities, suggesting that this involvement might perpetuate colonial power dynamics. On the other hand, some saw the potential for a positive impact.

Regarding priority complex problems (PCPs), respondents expressed concerns about the lack of clarity in the PCP identification process, leading to questions about fairness and inclusivity.

Moreover, many interviewees expressed their concerns over ACRC's research methodology, particularly the use of predetermined and standardised analytical frameworks. Despite these concerns, respondents were hopeful for more innovative participatory and grounded approaches in knowledge production going forward.

The report also provides the following recommendations for ACRC's consideration:

1. Define a concise decolonisation agenda for Phase 2, addressing practical limitations and offering clear direction.
2. Involve an external diversity and inclusion consultant to maintain project focus and objectivity in the decolonisation process.
3. Address concerns over transparency in selecting priority complex problems (PCPs) by sharing evaluation criteria and outcomes used for this exercise.
4. Clarify decentralisation objectives and structures involving city coordinators for inclusive decision-making.
5. Enhance internal communication through onboarding for new members and accessible channels for project updates.
6. Phase 2 should adopt a more bottom-up approach, balancing structured and contextual considerations based on Phase 1 lessons.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACRC	African Cities Research Consortium
BLM	Black Lives Matter
DFID	Department for International Development
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
INT	Interviewee
PCPs	Priority Complex Problems
SAG	Strategic Alignment Group
SMT	Senior Management Team
UK	United Kingdom

Section 1: Introduction

Amid the ongoing discourse and efforts focused on 'decolonising development' in the aid sector, the African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) took proactive measures to explore ways of implementing its work in a more just, dignified, and equitable manner. During the consortium-wide meeting in Nairobi in May of 2022, an initial discussion on decolonising ACRC took place, where a working paper was presented and deliberated upon.

Subsequently, ACRC conducted a Temperature Check Survey to assess opinions about coloniality and decoloniality within the consortium and the broader development industry. The survey garnered responses from 56 participants, with 39 identifying as Black Africans (35 residing in Africa) and 13 as non-African (all residing outside Africa).

The survey consisted of 28 questions grouped into four categories: i) Colonial Attitudes, ii) Knowledge and Power, iii) Rewards and Benefits, and iv) Looking Forward. Distinctions were made between 'Africans' and 'people from outside Africa', with the latter defined as individuals of non-African heritage, especially from former colonial powers.

Overall, as per the survey results, ACRC generally performed better than the development industry as a whole, though on certain issues, a significant minority judged ACRC unfavourably. ACRC's weakest area was perceived to be imbalances of power over strategic decision-making. Additionally, African respondents tended to have less favourable views of both the development industry and ACRC compared to non-Africans. However, ACRC received relatively positive feedback regarding 'dignity and respect', 'partnership', and 'authority being justified by skills and knowledge'. Nonetheless, the survey clearly indicated a majority in favour of reform for ACRC in its next phase.

To better understand these results, ACRC commissioned this qualitative study to take a deeper dive into concerns captured through the Temperature Check Survey. The objective of this exercise was to assess and gauge perceptions of coloniality and decoloniality within the operations of the ACRC. I was attentive to the nuanced difference between conducting a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) assessment of the project and delving deeply into ACRC's decolonisation agenda. Admittedly, there was overlap where some aspects that respondents identified as pertinent to the decolonial agenda may arguably lean more towards being programmatic in nature, but they are undeniably essential in the larger context.

This report comprises four main sections. The first section introduces the study's purpose and objectives, providing an overview of the process and its context. The second section outlines the methodology employed, describing the data collection process and analysis techniques. In the third section, the findings and results of the study are presented, supported by relevant data and analysis. Finally, the fourth section concludes the report, summarising key findings and insights, and offering recommendations based on the study's outcomes.

Section 2: Research Methodology

2.1 Research methods

Study participants were purposively selected from a pool of over 150 researchers and practitioners. The sample comprised a diverse mix of senior and junior researchers or practitioners. Invitations were extended to 36 individuals working in various capacities across all the cities and domains involved in the ACRC project. In total, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted between 3rd May and 5th October 2023 (see annex 2). The interviewees consisted of nine women and nine men. Among them, 14 participants were Africans, while four participants were non-African.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide (see annex 1) designed to explore participants' perceptions of colonial attitudes, power and decision-making, and rewards and benefits within the context of the ACRC project. A conversation approach was employed in conducting the interviews, allowing for open and in-depth discussions with the participants. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, providing ample time to gather detailed information.

The data collected from the interviews was thematically analysed using a combination of deductive and inductive coding approaches. Deductive coding involved applying codes directly related to prompts in the Temperature Check Survey, while inductive coding allowed for the emergence of new themes directly from the data. This mixed approach facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the data and enabled the identification of both expected and novel patterns and insights.

2.2A note on the researcher's positionality

As the primary researcher conducting the qualitative component of ACRC temperature check interrogating perceptions of coloniality and decoloniality in its own operations, without a doubt my positionality, shaped by my social identities, experiences and even disciplinary background (possibly baggage) influenced the research process and consequently may have impacted the interpretations and findings presented in this report. I am a Nairobi-based social science researcher-cum-development practitioner with nearly a decade of experience implementing and managing donor-funded projects with non-profit and civil society organisations. For my undergraduate I trained in Sociology and Philosophy and hold a graduate degree in Development Studies, both qualifications were earned from an African university. I am a black African male.

Early in my career, I worked for a self-styled social justice organisation whose mission was to strengthen and nurture social justice movements primarily by generating knowledge to serve activism. It was commonplace to have debates across our open-plan office and hear a colleague invoke the names of Walter Rodney, Amilcar Cabral, Issa Shivji and their contemporaries in an argument. It was while at this organisation that I first encountered ideas that at the time were too foreign even for a university graduate, ideas such as conscientisation, groundation and also decolonisation. Suffice it to say, my colleagues and I did also closely follow the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student movements in 2005 in South Africa, with the former momentarily culminating in the removal of the Cecil Rhodes monument at the University of Cape Town as part of students' efforts to decolonise the university. Closer home, at about the same time, the statue of Queen Victoria, which had been

standing in Jeevanjee Gardens in Nairobi for over a century, was 'vandalised'. Within Nairobi's activist circles, it was suspected that a member of the Bunge La Mwananchi¹ social movement (which, interestingly, also goes by BLM), that frequently gathers at Jeevanjee Gardens, might have been responsible.

I have since worked in various donor-funded projects and apolitical non-profit organisations and also been part of a north-south research consortium that made its own modest attempts at decolonising itself (you can read about it [here](#)). Consequently, I have over the years developed an intellectual curiosity in how decolonisation is philosophised, articulated and performed in the public square. I have been particularly fascinated in how complex ideas and concepts in social sciences and humanities are transmitted giving rise to new vocabulary in public discourse often as short hands mediated by social media and the nuance 144 alpha-numeric characters can afford.

These personal characteristics and professional experiences have shaped my evolving worldview and likely influenced my perspectives in this undertaking. Hence, at every stage, I adopted a reflexive stance, critically examining how I frame my questions, follow-up inquiries, interpret data, and other aspects in this assignment. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that complete objectivity is unattainable. As a qualitative researcher, I have presented a narrative based on the data I collected, recognising that the process of crafting this narrative inherently involves privileging and deprivileging certain ideas. I do not claim expertise in the subject matter, but rather approach this report with humility and care, understanding that the way conversations are conducted can serve as either a barrier or catalyst for meaningful, albeit challenging discussions.

2.3A note to the reader

This report gathers the subjective perceptions and opinions of respondents concerning ACRC's (de)coloniality in relation to the project's operations. Throughout this report, the reader will observe that discussions and quotes are footnoted to reference anonymised respondents, along with their respective race and gender markers. In providing this information, the intention is to demonstrate the diversity of voices and opinions within this conversation. In this regard, readers are encouraged to approach this report with an open mind and not use these or any other identity markers in the report as a basis for evaluating the validity or worth of a respondent's views. Readers are also encouraged to critically engage with the report, considering its strengths and limitations in furthering ACRC's understanding of the subject matter.

¹ Swahili for the People's Parliament

Section 3: Key Emerging Themes

Sentiments on decolonisation did not neatly align or coalesce around specific identity categories such as race, gender, residence, or professional seniority. As a result, this report does not present the study's findings based on particular identity groups and their beliefs, nor does it emphasise conflicting sentiments between different groups. Race did nonetheless feature in the data often through subtle discursive short hands such as Manchester, UK, FCDO, African and non-African, global south/north, we/us, and they/them. It is also pertinent to mention that despite deliberate efforts to involve a significant number of women in the interviews, a distinct gendered perspective did not strongly emerge. While some discussions touched upon issues of representation in city teams and experiences of misogyny in the industry, interviewees did not extensively explore gender-related angles in the context of decolonising ACRC.

While the report does not explicitly organise findings into broad sections covering colonial attitudes, knowledge and power, rewards and benefits, etc., akin to the Temperature Check Survey, these themes are addressed within the emerging themes presented in the report, which cover: the perceived value of the decolonisation process, an understanding of what decolonisation is or is not, ACRC's position in the international development industry, issues in project management, and challenges in knowledge production.

3.1 Reflections on ACRC's efforts thus far

ACRC outlines its commitment to being "shaped by African-based researchers and practitioners" in every aspect of the project's management and implementation right at the introduction of the inception report. The concept of decolonisation is explicitly introduced later in the report, specifically within the context of the project's capacity development strategy. It emphasises the need to foreground African scholars and scholarship as a contribution to the broader discourse on structural inequalities and social justice.

The scope of ACRC's decolonisation agenda was opened up for discussion with the presentation of the Decolonisation Note at the Nairobi meeting. The authors of the Note identified three key entry points for further conversation related to: 1) structural asymmetries in the leadership and management of the project; 2) communication practices and unconscious bias; and 3) methodological practices and co-production of knowledge. The points were prefaced with the commentary below:

We realise that in today's world there remain significant structural inequalities in the conduct of research and consultancy in the "global south". Thus, whilst ACRC as a project cannot address all issues it is important however to highlight these, which we suggest might fall under three key categories: those related to privileged characteristics across race, class, gender and other categories and or their intersectionality. Secondly the nature of language, actions, and performance, in which aspects of the latter are projected through various forms of public communication. Finally, and most importantly, issues related to agency and co-production within collaborative processes, which seek to be equal and not asymmetric.

Subsequently, the consortium conducted the Temperature Check Survey as an extension of this discussion. The findings from this survey serve as the foundation for the qualitative study presented in this report. Interviewees who had the opportunity to review the results of the Temperature Check

Survey were pleased to learn that ACRC was doing relatively better than the development industry in various aspects. Interviewees further commended ACRC's leadership for commissioning this exercise and providing a platform for engaging in challenging and meaningful discussions, a crucial aspect often overlooked in other north-south research collaborations. Remarkably, several interviewees reported working in numerous research consortia prior to ACRC but had never been invited to participate in such a reflexive process, which they commended ACRC for. Respondents thought that this initiative was timely and much-needed, particularly in the wake of the racial reckoning that ensued during the summer of 2020, triggered by the infamous demise of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. "The world to a larger extent changed,"² an interviewee reflected on these events, while another described ACRC's involvement in the decolonisation conversation as a critical "coming to terms".³ Across board it was felt that it was important to interrogate the narratives that are animating how the project is designed and implemented as is illustrated in the comments below:

I think it's definitely a needed conversation. It's always good to be reflective about how particular kinds of power imbalances manifest themselves in any kind of research project, but particularly when the attempt is to try to make these kinds of collaborative relationships with institutions on the continent. I think it's always very critical to kind of have a sense of how those relationships are being navigated, and how researchers and people who are in the project in all kinds of different forms understand their role in the project and how they feel throughout it. [Int 11, African Female]

It's very important for me, because it's one of the limitations that I think is overlooked in most research processes. You take ideas... even the selection of the consortium, and the frameworks are all kind of very heavily loaded with northern narratives. So, how then do we contextualise it to make sure it's reflective of us. [Int 10, African Male]

Overall, the exercise was seen as a sincere effort at and desire to make ACRC as a collective not only be self-aware but also create conditions where colleagues "work in a fair manner" with each other.⁴ Many respondents considered this qualitative process a significant step in advancing the project's decolonisation agenda. However, concerns were raised regarding the timing of the process with some respondents wondering why it was initiated this late in the project. In sum, it was widely acknowledged that it, by itself, was not sufficient, and there remained more that ACRC could do. For instance, one interviewee⁵ believed that the decolonisation agenda seemed like an afterthought. They felt that ACRC "always was in a sense running to catch up to be more inclusive, to having more distribution of power, more distribution in decision-making" after the more administrative and programmatic elements had been put in place. It was also felt that the initiative was so far "a trial-and-error"⁶ learning process with some respondents expressing a desire for clearer defined goals and objectives.

² Int 4, African Female

³ Int 10, African Male

⁴ Int 8, non-African Male

⁵ Int 3, non-African Male

⁶ Int 15, non-African Female

3.2 What is decolonisation?

Despite it being an old concept possibly dating back to the 1930s and finding currency with post-colonial thinkers like Frantz Fanon⁷ in the 1960s and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o⁸ in the 1980s, decolonisation has in recent years enjoyed a resurgence particularly among social justice activists and scholars, and in progressive politics in general. As is to be expected, the word has also been (mis)appropriated in the ever-widening lexicon of buzz-fuzz-word-laden development-speak.⁹ Consequently, the word has become both vague and ambiguous in its usage in the industry, which also includes ACRC judging by data collected from interview participants. The term is relatively new to some and there seems to be no consensus in the consortium, from top to bottom, on what decolonisation is or is not. It is worth noting that ACRC's Decolonisation Note does not provide a definitive definition of the concept. However, it does draw attention to the ambiguity surrounding the debate, describing it as convoluted. The note further proposes that "a starting point could be to clarify what decolonising means for ACRC and what aspects of it the consortium would like to pursue." Based on the interviews conducted, it would appear that a working definition was never settled on. For this study, interviewees articulated diverse visions of what decolonisation entails which in turn informed their equally diverse ideas of what ACRC should aspire to as the comment below illustrates:

It's not easy to just describe the conversation because a lot of people feel differently, people feel strongly that this is the important part or that's the important part of the survey, of the decolonisation agenda. I guess that's what I would say, it appears there is no single standpoint even within SMT. There is a general agreement that we all want to work in a fair manner with colleagues, right, but there is no general agreement on what's the best way to do that, what's the best way to measure this, what can we do and all sorts of other questions. [Int 8, non-African Male]

When asked about their thoughts about the Temperature Check Survey, an interview participant¹⁰ would, for example, admit to not being a "fan of the decolonisation conversation" on account of not quite understanding what it was all about, further saying, "I just started hearing about it quite recently, not more than four or five years ago. Interestingly, the interviewee further associated decolonisation with debates on twitter. "It has already become a fashionable word," another interviewee¹¹ would say in frustration. "When you're talking about decolonising 'x' and decolonising 'y', which is good in of itself, but if you don't have a clear understanding of it, you may end up somehow reinforcing the existing unequal power relations," the respondent added. This view was echoed by another interviewee who felt that the "word should be used far more carefully and more specifically."¹² This interviewee was particularly concerned in how decolonisation has become a catch-all term lumping together many different issues saying, "we just dump it there thinking that it is just going to work and solve the issue," which, in the respondent's consideration, only muddles and confuses the process. Similarly, another interviewee felt that the word was "a bit vague and a bit empty" as different and

⁷ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

⁸ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*.

⁹ See Cornwall and Eade's *Deconstructing Development Discourse: Buzzwords and Fuzzwords*. This edited volume explores the various ways development-speak is employed to shape our understanding of the world and justify interventions.

¹⁰ Int 9, African Female

¹¹ Int 14, African Male

¹² Int 8, non-African Male

seemingly unrelated grievances are grouped together, thereby, in the interviewee's evaluation, making decolonisation impossible to implement in ACRC.¹³ For the most part, this respondent did not seem to overtly support ACRC's decolonisation agenda. However, it is intriguing to note that during the interview the respondent lamented the extractive way research is typically conducted in Africa in past projects, which the respondent referred to as a "hop on and hop off" method. Interestingly, the respondent seemed unaware that this description inadvertently aligns with certain aspects of the decolonisation discourse. This observation sheds light on the general lack of clarity surrounding the concept within the consortium, as it appears to encompass a range of ideas and interpretations.

What follows is a non-exhaustive summary of broad conceptualisations of decolonisation emerging from an analysis of interview data.

Decolonisation as a moral imperative

A common view amongst interviewees was that decolonisation was concerned with the moral questions around the colonial legacy in Africa. For some, this meant taking a social justice stance with an orientation towards the dismantling of enduring signs and symbols of colonialism in the consortium in such things as SMT representation, use of indigenous African languages in conducting project business or disseminating findings, and the geographical location of power. Some interviewees did however feel that there was a degree of moral posturing when talking about decolonisation in this context with a respondent, for example, taking issue with what they described as "very populist" ideas, the kind that "are nice to say but which may not be very practical."¹⁴ Another respondent was concerned, considering its very loose definition in the consortium, that the decolonisation agenda could be used as a "justification for people to do what they want to do" without any accountability.¹⁵ At the bare minimum, this respondent felt, despite the different meanings of the word, people should rally behind the idea of "an honest attempt by people who want to run a project fairly and it's a way to establish feedback loops" to continually assess "the way that things are going."

Decolonisation as relinquishment

There was a sense of understanding decolonisation as a form of relinquishing power, redistributing rewards and benefits, and foregrounding¹⁶ and platforming African and junior researchers in the project. Interviewees referenced examples such as decentralising decision-making power from Manchester to the city teams; non-Africans recommending Africa-based experts for leadership roles offered to them in the project (two respondents did report doing this); possessing and exercising the self-awareness to allow others to talk and not "take out all the air in the room"¹⁷ and to creatively elicit the views and voices of quiet individuals around the table; and placing "the African junior researcher" as first author in joint publications. In this regard, decolonisation is seen as a conscientious act of ceding power and the benefits it accrues.

¹³ Int 7, African Male

¹⁴ Int 2, African Male

¹⁵ Int 8, non-African Male

¹⁶ This appears to align with the ACRC's commitment to support junior researchers, such as encouraging single-authored publications, as outlined in the consortium's Inception Report.

¹⁷ Int 1, African Female

Decolonisation as an emancipatory psychological project

This conceptualisation of decolonisation imagines colonisation as the existential act of alienating Africans from their indigenous cultures, identities, and knowledge systems – an orientation towards values espoused in notions of western civilisation even in seemingly benign ideas like development, enlightenment, and democracy. Decolonisation is therefore in this sense understood to be an act of conscientisation, using a Freirean term,¹⁸ which entails awakening one's critical awareness of one's psychological, social and political conditions and thereby undoing, correcting, or repairing this outward orientation which, according to an interviewee entail:

[the] acknowledgment of what you've evolved to become (false identity) as an individual removed from your environment to reflect something that is not you... an understanding of that removal, and that process of being aware is the decolonisation process. [Int 10, African Male]

Decolonisation as theory and practice

This conceptualisation imagines decolonisation in a Foucauldian¹⁹ sense as an epistemic project examining the origins of dominant ideas in development and uncovering their "lineages and histories," as one respondent²⁰ put it. This view was echoed by another interviewee who went on to add that decolonisation is about:

Decentring euro-centric perspectives and opening up the epistemic space for pluriversal perspectives so that we can see from different perspectives... not just accepting that whatever happens in Europe as the universal and not particularizing and provincializing whatever kind of knowledge, or perspective, or relations or practices in other parts of the world. So, the reversing or challenging that power relation within the epistemic sphere, is for me, the most essential element of decolonisation, otherwise we will end up just simply fixing things at the cosmetic level only on the outer layers of power relations and power imbalances. [Int 14, African Male]

From this foundational understanding, the idea of decolonial practice emerges, which, according to respondents, allows us to effectively address a range of epistemological and practical questions. These encompass matters concerning research agenda-setting, use of theoretical frameworks and methodologies, fieldwork planning and management, risk management in fieldwork, equitably defining roles and responsibilities within the research team, and distribution of rewards and benefits resulting from the research. The participants that articulated this notion of decolonisation were keen to point out that decolonial practice is meaningless without decolonial epistemics. An interviewee²¹ would for example suggest that merely having people of colour access exclusive decision-making spaces is not decolonisation but just "simply diversifying the people on the platform." The respondent further elaborated this by saying:

You may have multiple Kenyans, Ethiopians, Zimbabweans or whatever on the table, wherever they are, whether they do it in Australia or Zimbabwe or in Nairobi or in London, but if they are sipping from the same euro-centric epistemic orientation you cannot call their inclusion an act of decolonisation. You may have people of colour, but their epistemic location is much more important than their social-

¹⁸ See Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition*.

¹⁹ See Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*.

²⁰ Int 11, African Female

²¹ Int 14, African Female

cultural location. People usually conflate diversity with decolonisation, which is a completely wrong understanding of decolonising research or academia.

All these interpretations underlie the discussion in the following sections on the development sector, project management and research approaches.

3.3 ACRC and international development

‘Elephant in the room’ – British interests

Some respondents had reservations regarding the consortium's capacity for decolonisation, considering that the ACRC is a large-scale development research project funded by the British government through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The apprehension stemmed from Britain's colonial past and neo-colonial present, which includes its role in the broader international development²² ecosystem. Several interviewees problematised what they perceived to be the British government's interests in funding research on African cities, with one interviewee²³ suggesting that FCDO is the “elephant in the room” in as far as the ongoing decolonisation conversation is concerned. Another interviewee²⁴ would further opine that the project appears to be “fundamentally modelled to reflect extractive and dependent north-south arrangements.” Even so, two, not necessarily mutually exclusive perspectives on this matter emerged in the interviews with views ranging between critical and pragmatic as the comment below illustrates:

So, you could take a more benign view and a more cynical view. The benign view is FCDO has realised that urban is a big issue, they need to know more about cities. The more sceptical view is that FCDO is looking at urbanization going like, ‘these African countries are becoming even more ungovernable, and a bunch of those people might try to cross the Mediterranean, we are not sure if Suella Braverman and Priti Patel have enough guns to keep them out of England.’ The more benign view, which represents the more professional staff who are actually involved and concerned about poverty, economic development, climate change... they want to know more for that reason. It's often not ‘either-or’, but ‘both-and’. [Int 3, non-African Male]

The more critical respondents felt that FCDO's agenda in Africa is not altruistic, with one interviewee²⁵ particularly questioning whether ACRC, like many other international research collaborations was “reaffirming, re-endorsing or re-confirming colonial asymmetrical power relations.” Commenting on the British government's interests in African cities, another interviewee²⁶ believed a large study like ACRC allows FCDO to derive critical insights about African cities relevant to the British government's foreign policy agenda on the continent. These insights would then allow FCDO to formulate a developmental agenda that ultimately yields economic and financial benefits for British citizens. According to this and a few other respondents, FCDO's primary interest lies in these gains rather than a “benevolent effort to try to understand where our problems are”. The less critical respondents, on

²² See Kothari, “From Colonial Administration to Development Studies: A Post-Colonial Critique of the History of Development Studies.” In this work, Kothari traces colonial genealogies of development theory and practice to demonstrate continuities that persist to the present day.

²³ Int 10, African Male

²⁴ Int 14, African Male

²⁵ Int 14, African Male

²⁶ Int 2, African Male

the other hand, while granting Britain's colonial past, what one respondent²⁷ referred to as "the accident of history", and present economic and foreign policy interests, felt that there is much to be gained for Africa from ACRC despite FCDO link. A respondent²⁸ would for example emphasise the value of the project by noting that "the last major city study in Africa was (conducted) more than 20 years ago."

'The goat is not yours' - funding, project design and governance

When asked to talk about the roles of Africans in shaping ACRC's research agenda, an interviewee²⁹ responded by saying, "You cannot cut the head of the goat when the goat is not yours," implying that whoever is providing the funding ultimately has the right to determine how their resources are spent, "or should they give you the head?" the respondent further remarked. Most respondents believed by virtue of FCDO funding ACRC, FCDO's priorities and agendas hold sway in how the project is designed and implemented. A respondent,³⁰ being tongue-in-cheek, described this as the "golden rule," which holds that, "those who have the gold make the rules." By just responding to an FCDO request for proposals, it was thought, ACRC's 'DNA' was set from then onwards. It was, for example, implied that FCDO might have influenced, either directly or indirectly, ACRC's selection of analytical frameworks. One respondent, for instance, mentioned that political settlements analysis, a central component of ACRC's theoretical framework, appears to be "integrated into a lot of their (FCDO's) Africa work."³¹ This sentiment is particularly relevant as it suggests varying awareness levels regarding critical project aspects, especially those that had been settled upon during the bidding and early stages of the project. It would seem that some city teams and partners were onboarded much later than others, potentially leaving them feeling as though they were entering a project with a predetermined agenda.³² This could explain some of the concerns over the rigidity of project structures and objectives, with a respondent³³ asking "are they cast in stone?" and further added, "we are joining the party late, we were not there when the proposals were being done." Taking this into account, as some respondents reflected on their absence during the bidding and project design phase, it's only natural that they would raise questions about ACRC's ability to genuinely adopt a decolonial orientation.³⁴

Participants also emphasised the prevailing perception that funding institutions, such as FCDO, might harbour doubts about Africans' capacity to effectively manage funds and projects. Several respondents speculated on the likelihood of FCDO providing financial support to ACRC if it were an African-led consortium, both institutionally and individually. The consensus among these respondents was that it would be very unlikely. The University of Manchester was imagined having the sort of brand credibility that inspired FCDO's confidence in the project, a credibility that African institutions, like

²⁷ Int 7, African Male

²⁸ Int 4, African Female

²⁹ Int 7, African Male

³⁰ Int 3, non-African Male

³¹ Int 11, African Female

³² The University of Manchester organised a project design workshop at the project's bidding stage, which involved representatives from three African networks as essential contributors to the team responsible for formulating the ACRC expression of interest in response to FCDO's funding call. Surprisingly, this fact was not widely known among the respondents.

³³ Int 2, African Male

³⁴ Int 13, African Female

universities lack.³⁵ As the interviewee recounted their experience of becoming part of ACRC, they offered a valuable perspective on the bidding process for project funding, which exemplifies the notion of funding trustworthy institutions:

I was one of the people that was here that was part of the bid, I think that was not because of my research, it was mainly because I was here. And to be quite honest, when you respond to FCDO, they have certain demands for the responses. So, some of that I think is about kind of knowing who will be involved. So, you need to build the team and that doesn't necessarily mean the team is the most appropriate. I think perhaps with FCDO they appreciated knowing who was going to be involved and then they said, 'okay, these people are from the University of Manchester, it's a safe pair of hands.' I don't think I would have been invited to play this sort of a senior role if it was a project that we just designed independently and then sought funding from a funding agency for example. So, I've been involved from the very beginning but that was partly serendipitous about where I happened to be at the time. [Int 8, non-African Male]

Acknowledging the numerous conditions imposed by FCDO, with one respondent³⁶ hyperbolically estimating them to be as many as "97.3 requirements," some participants understood the rationale behind the University of Manchester taking the lead due to practical considerations. Despite being sympathetic in tone and appreciating how bidding processes tend to work, where projects are often nearly fully thought out by the time resources are released, a respondent wondered whether ACRC could have done more to make "people on the ground" feel better included in the project through co-creation, collaboration and cooperation, in line with development best practice.³⁷

It was suggested that ACRC, as part of its efforts to decentralise some leadership functions to the city teams, should also consider reconstituting the SMT and the strategic alignment group (SAG) to ensure that all the cities are represented and meaningfully included in decision making processes. Moreover, it was stressed that decentralisation should be done carefully in a manner that will empower colleagues to effectively and efficiently run their affairs at the city level without overburdening or distracting them from the core duties as researchers and practitioners.³⁸

Overall, respondents were nonetheless hopeful that going forward, particularly in Phase 2 of the project, ACRC will better address these concerns.

3.4 ACRC and project management

Interests, power, and trust networks

The issue of power and interests, particularly in the context of priority complex problems (PCPs) emerged as a matter of great concern for many respondents. While it was widely understood that the second phase would focus more on action research and involve a reduction in the number of participating cities and, by extension, city researchers or collaborators, there remained a genuine interest among researchers to continue their participation in the project. Each city team was expected to identify PCPs through a comprehensive analytical process, utilising political settlements and city

³⁵ Int 4, African Female

³⁶ Int 3, non-African Male

³⁷ Int 4, African Female

³⁸ Int 13, African Female

systems as diagnostic frameworks. Subsequently, cities would be assessed based on the strength of their identified PCPs, serving as a key criterion for advancing to the second phase of the project.

Participants acknowledged that all individuals or organisations within the consortium are motivated by their respective interests in pursuing project objectives, which is neither inherently good nor bad. "Everybody has an agenda. My institution has its own agenda... and there is nothing wrong with agendas if we're speaking very objectively," a respondent³⁹ would for example declare. While this may be the case, some respondents did however express their concerns about what they perceived as the unfair influence of certain individuals or groups or even cities in steering the PCP identification process to align with their agendas thereby positioning themselves favourably for roles in the next phase of the project. In discussing the importance of the PCPs identification process, an interviewee remarked that:

Defining a problem is very important component of this project. If you define something as a problem then immediately, you're going to start looking for a solution that can justify an intervention which justifies resource expenditure and justifies all sorts of other chain reactions. I think that's really the important point where power is exercised. [Int 8, non-African Male]

There were diverging views on what was thought transpired in the PCP identification process. "People feel like they're not being listened to, and they are not being heard," a respondent⁴⁰ said while reflecting on the grievances expressed by some people in the project. This respondent thought that a mix of how well a PCP was defined and "old-fashioned hard-nosed resource politics" might have influenced the shortlisting of PCPs for Phase 2. Another interviewee⁴¹ alluded to the idea of 'skewed power relations' within the consortium shaping the outcomes of this process. On this account, the respondent therefore felt that PCPs were very relevant when discussing how to decolonise ACRC saying, "You cannot dissociate the conversation around decolonisation from the conversation around power." This respondent stressed that everyone "experienced" the consortium in a distinct way, which was shaped by how they navigated ACRC dynamics and interacted with leadership at different levels. According to the respondent, these factors could potentially influence the favourability of outcomes in the PCPs process for the individuals involved. This view was echoed by some city researchers who suggested that pre-existing working relations, though not inherently negative, provided certain individuals or organisations with an advantage in the project. One respondent in particular, strongly believed that a partner organisation, situated in the same city as them, was gaining advantages through privileged access to the SMT, which seemed to come at the detriment of the respondent's own organisation, "they have champions in the SMT," the respondent stressed. Furthermore, this respondent perceived themselves as being marginalised and situated on the periphery of an exclusive in-group. This sentiment is depicted in the following comment:

It did seem there was a practice of picking winners and losers. That was basically there from the onset. Maybe it's just us feeling small or treated unequally as a domain compared to our city counterparts. As an institution and as researchers, sometimes you do get the sense that you are being treated almost as a junior partner... I can tell you almost all these responsibilities in my city were resident in one organisation. Outside of the domain work we were leading, the city of systems is that other organisation,

³⁹ Int 13, African Female

⁴⁰ Int 8, non-African Male

⁴¹ Int 13, African Female

the city lead is from that organisation, uptake from the same organisation. I am not even sure who is leading safeguarding, but I know it is not us... It seems to tell a story of some sort, what is happening here, is there favouritism? Sometimes it also impacts the way that we even contribute and commit to the project. [Int 2, African Male]

It would further appear that ACRC recruited city researchers and uptake leads from mostly UK-linked trust-based networks that lead back to the University of Manchester at the centre. While this is a reasonable strategy of ensuring that competent individuals with proven track records are onboarded to the project, it might have meant that different individuals or even cities had varying informal access to the centre as is discussed above. This perceived "proximity to power"⁴² coupled with guidance coming from Manchester on how to frame PCPs in a way that is "palatable for the requirements of the project,"⁴³ could arguably have meant that some individuals or city teams had better chances of advancing to the next phase. Additionally, a city coordinator's "convening power"⁴⁴ and drive, qualities that arguably might have resulted in what a respondent described as "the coherence of the city teams"⁴⁵ were understood as factors that contributed to certain cities emerging as strong contenders for Phase 2, as detailed below:

Seeing the convening power that the city coordinators had and understanding that different city coordinators had different convening paths and looking at how that played out in terms of how the city research itself emerged was quite interesting. So, I think that there was the aspect of personalities that played into that, if I'm being very fair. But there was also the aspect of agency and how much the city coordinators felt they had agency without having to circle back for every decision to ACRC. Our experience was that certain city coordinators felt they had the agency or whatever reason to make on-the-spot decisions. (As uptake lead) we had conversations with some city coordinators who were able to say, 'yes I will call everybody around, I will do this, I will do that,' as against some other city coordinators who for every decision even as little as when we asked, 'hey, can you get together your researchers, we need to be able to speak to them.' 'Okay, but first I need to speak to the SMT leader in charge, or first I need to...' it varied per city. [Int 13, African Female]

Experts, expats, communities and incentives

Overall, interview participants were pleased with the makeup of city teams which consisted of mostly Africans, "people that are from those cities" with a track record of doing research in those specific things in those cities," as a respondent⁴⁶ put it. When asked whether African expertise was valued in the consortium, a respondent⁴⁷ expressed the belief that it was indeed valued. This perception is based on the observation of critical roles assigned to Africans, particularly in leadership positions at the city level. The respondent however also felt that African expertise was valued at the city-level but wondered whether that was the case "higher up the chain" noting that most domain leads and SMT members were non-Africans. It did however also emerge that most interview participants obtained their graduate degrees from European universities, particularly in the United Kingdom, which could be an added layer to the practice of recruiting from trust-based networks as previously discussed. A British qualification could be perceived as an implicit indicator of competence within the consortium,

⁴² Int 13, African Female

⁴³ Int 4, African Female

⁴⁴ Int 13, African Female

⁴⁵ Int 16, African Male

⁴⁶ Int 9, African Female

⁴⁷ Int 2, African Male

assuming interview respondents are representative of the wider consortium. Perhaps this could also have something to do with the overall research approach of the project and preferred frameworks of analysis which, according to a respondent⁴⁸ are “skewed towards researchers that have been at least educated in the west or global north.” “My colleagues at the main university in this city do not teach political settlement analysis,” the respondent would further elaborate with an example. “So if you're looking for a political settlement expert, you will most likely contact someone from abroad,” the respondent also added.

The idea of experts and expertise was also explored in the context of race and class, revealing interesting insights. Among the African city researchers who participated in the study, no instances were reported where they felt their expertise or competencies were not valued by non-African colleagues. However, a small number of African respondents did share experiences, both within the industry and the ACRC project, where they felt that fellow Africans readily acknowledged the expertise of non-Africans but had doubts about the competence of their African peers.

Regarding the aspect of class, a respondent described a form of ‘elite capture’⁴⁹ whereby certain African researchers and practitioners claim expertise in matters concerning local communities solely on the basis of their ‘Africanness’. This is despite them not being part of these communities or demonstrating any genuine and sustained engagement with them. A respondent's perspective on this issue is exemplified in the following comment:

[T]here is also elitism around knowledge within our own African scholarship and how we interact with communities. Like because I am black then I should know how it feels to live in an informal settlement although I have never lived there. In my experience, I have found that people coming from the global north that come to research the work we do [with communities] demonstrate self-awareness, acknowledging that they are here to learn about something they know nothing about because they have never lived this life. Whereas someone who also kind of grew-up in the same city and went to the university, got a PhD from some university comes and they assume they understand what is going on. [Int 1, African Female]

Some other respondents expressed disappointment in the way community practitioners and researchers were integrated into city research processes. They had envisioned that across city and domain teams, researchers would embrace creative and innovative participatory approaches, engaging in research alongside local communities rather than researching them. They observed that city researchers typically adhered to non-inclusive traditional methodologies. In cases where community practitioners were engaged, they were expected to work with peculiar and complex conceptual frameworks, which placed a burden on them to produce outputs a respondent described as “otherworldly”.⁵⁰ Interviews, do however also indicate that certain domain and city teams fared better in this respect. For instance, the Informal Settlement and Housing domains were unsurprisingly noted for their inclusion of community practitioners and researchers in their work. Similarly, cities with

⁴⁸ Int 12, non-African Female

⁴⁹ See Táíwò, “Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference.” In this essay, the author argues that the representation of minority voices can be susceptible to elite capture. For instance, in this case, the concern arises when a local researcher is unquestioningly presumed to be a representative of a community despite having limited shared lived experiences with that community.

⁵⁰ Int 1, African Female

strong SDI affiliates seemed to prioritise community involvement in their research processes. According to one respondent, both domain and city teams were given the autonomy to execute their research work as they deemed appropriate, which also meant, that it was “dependent on the understanding of the researchers on what inclusion of communities means.” The respondent further added that “some people just say, ‘as long as I’ve done a focus group discussion, as long as I’ve asked people in this community, then I am inclusive.’”⁵¹

Regarding compensation, some African respondents presumed that their non-African counterparts were better compensated for comparable roles and responsibilities in the consortium. However, the information collected from domain leads and SMT members participating in this exercise did not substantiate this speculation. Nonetheless, it was generally felt that the amount of work that both city-researchers and uptake teams were required to put into the project was not commensurate to the remuneration received with a respondent⁵² describing ACRC’s ten-day contracts as “piecemeal”. From the gathered responses, it would seem that many people did not have a fair estimation of what working with ACRC would entail and the effort that it would require. A few respondents did report holding back on submitting some of their outputs, opting to share only those outputs that were contractually required and compensated by the ACRC on account of the unfair working terms. An interviewee had the following to say about it:

I didn't quite grasp the dimension of the project. I'm supposed to invest like ten days' worth of work - that means eight hours in a day, which is about 8 times, that is about 80 hours. That is what is being paid and that is how I have been valued, but I can tell you I have invested more than maybe 400 hours into the work. So, I have not been properly valued. [Int 5, African Male]

A few interviewees also explored the practice of subcontracting or using 'local research brokers' by researchers operating in particularly fragile contexts. These respondents queried whether such fieldwork arrangements fairly compensated and acknowledged the contributions of these local actors, who are arguably the invisible cogs that facilitate ACRC's research in these cities.

3.5 ACRC and knowledge production

Extraversion and extraction

Several respondents raised concerns about the research approach employed by ACRC, characterising it as extraverted⁵³ or externally oriented. This perspective sees Africa primarily as a supplier of raw data and empirical evidence, while the global north assumes the role of processing this information through the lens of its own theories and concepts, thereby controlling the trajectory of knowledge exchange. Consequently, African knowledge actors and researchers often find themselves relegated to mere data collectors, potentially diminishing their substantive contributions to the global knowledge landscape. Interestingly, a respondent drew a thought-provoking parallel between Africa's historical colonial economic relations with Europe and the current state of knowledge production on the continent, asserting that ACRC is, in a way, perpetuating this dynamic. In the past, Africa provided

⁵¹ Int 18, African Male

⁵² Int 10, African Male

⁵³ Paulin Hountondji, “Scientific Dependence in Africa Today.” Interviewee 14 referenced this work while describing how international research collaborations tend to perpetuate Africa’s epistemic dependency on the global north.

primary goods while Europe produced high-value manufactured goods. Today, this pattern appears to manifest in the form of Africa serving as a data source to validate European theories and ideas. When asked whether they thought that the ACRC project was decolonial in its outlook, the respondent had the following to say:

Big no and I'm not surprised. So ACRC is part of this – producing knowledge for Africa. We use concepts and ideas designed and developed in Europe exported to the continent and the continent serving as a field site of producing empirical evidence and Europe as the site of theory and conceptualization... research in the African continent is essentially shaped and dominated by international collaborations; it is also directly linked to so-called development assistance. So, this idea of the developing and developed world, is essentially shaping knowledge production in Africa. ACRC got its funding from formerly DfID now FCDO... that development orientation that Africa is a place of deficiency and lack or a place of underdevelopment is what is informing the entire notion of studying cities in Africa. [Int 14, African Male]

While acknowledging this dynamic, where ACRC is working with frameworks that require one to “look for the local knowledge to support it,” another respondent did suppose that having a strong uptake component in the project remedied this uncritical dependence on global north theorising. The respondent did however also admit to there being tenuous and even non-existent linkages between the ‘theoretical group’ and the ‘uptake group’ who appeared to be working in silos within ACRC.⁵⁴

Other respondents also viewed the scientific process as an internal dialectical mechanism, which guarantees the ongoing relevance of analytical frameworks in various contexts, regardless of their original conceptualisation. According to this viewpoint, researchers utilise these frameworks to generate findings that contribute to their expansion or refinement, thereby building upon existing knowledge despite any limitations the frameworks may have. Rather than outrightly dismissing the frameworks, these respondents suggested using them as a foundation and then enriching and developing them further based on newly acquired findings and contextual factors.⁵⁵

Templates and frameworks

Researchers acknowledged the importance of employing tools that facilitate the generation of generalisable and comparative findings across ACRC cities. However, they expressed concerns regarding the utilisation of unsuitable and inflexible analytical frameworks and concepts, which a respondent described as “very restrictive and difficult to work with.”⁵⁶ It is also important to highlight that ACRC has greatly benefited from a wide-ranging group of researchers, each bringing their unique disciplinary backgrounds into the mix. This diversity within the research team may have introduced an additional dimension that potentially influenced the varying levels of comfort among researchers when implementing the framework in their work.

In some contexts, some researchers found it challenging to grasp how these frameworks could be practically utilised, as they did not seem to align with the unique characteristics of certain cities. Consequently, they felt pressured to adapt these concepts to fit the context, seeking ways to make them relevant and applicable with an interviewee saying the following:

⁵⁴ Int 4, African Female

⁵⁵ Int 5, African Male

⁵⁶ Int 11, African Female

[...] it's a framework that's quite static and it's asking us to try and squeeze data that does not necessarily fit into the framework... we are being pushed quite hard to use a framework with very little ability to question its suitability... In many instances we had to explain the framework to research participants and they had really interesting reflections. When they were asked to categorize, for example political settlements, they were laughing. It's like none of the proposed categories are actually accurate... they came up with their own categories. [Int 12, non-African Female]

Even though feedback was offered to and acknowledged by domain leads regarding contextual misalignment, a respondent still felt that they were encouraged to adhere to the prescribed framework. Another respondent suggested that it would have been more appropriate if ACRC had used a "city-by-city approach, a city-by-city design processes, a city-by-city methodology, city-by-city timelines, that reflects different city dynamics".⁵⁷ However, it remains unclear whether this was a domain-specific challenge. It is also worth noting that some city researchers reported that their domain leads granted them the flexibility to review, offer feedback, and explore ways to adapt frameworks to better align with on-the-ground realities. The land and connectivity domain, for example, customised their analysis template such that it "answered all the questions of SMT" but also allowed for deep dives into other interesting aspects of land and connectivity in the respective cities.⁵⁸ The housing team on the other hand first conducted case studies which allowed them to do much more contextual work, according to a respondent.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Int 10, African Male

⁵⁸ Int 11, African Female

⁵⁹ Int 12, non-African Female

Section 4: Reflections

4.1 A summary of the findings

Overall, the results suggest that ACRC's Temperature Check Survey and qualitative interview exercise were well-received, and interviewees appreciated the meaningful discussions they sparked. However, there was a consensus that more progress was needed in decolonising practices. Concerns were raised about the timing of the process and the project's capacity to be decolonial, given its link to FCDO. Overall, the exercise was valued, but respondents expressed a desire for clear objectives for ACRC's decolonisation agenda.

The study revealed a diverse range of perspectives on the concept of decolonisation with four overarching and interconnected themes emerging from the data: 1) decolonisation as a moral obligation to confront Europe's colonial legacy in Africa; 2) decolonisation as a means to foreground African and junior researchers in knowledge production; 3) decolonisation as a psychological undertaking aimed at reconnecting individuals with indigenous cultures and identities; and, 4) decolonisation as an epistemic undertaking that challenges Euro-centric grand narratives and advocates for alternative paradigms in knowledge production.

Respondents were concerned about the role of FCDO and British interests in funding research on African cities. Some respondents viewed FCDO's involvement as potentially perpetuating colonial power dynamics, while others saw opportunities for positive impact despite acknowledging Britain's colonial legacy in Africa. Concerns regarding inclusive representation within ACRC's senior management team were also raised. Despite these challenges, respondents remained hopeful that ACRC would address these issues in Phase 2 of the project.

Results also indicate that the issue of power, interests, and trust networks in the context of PCPs was a concern among respondents. There were perceptions of certain individuals or cities influencing the PCP identification process to align with their agendas, raising questions about fairness and inclusivity.

Compensation was a contentious matter, with some feeling that the workload and remuneration were disproportionate. Though not widely reported, the use of 'local research brokers' in fragile contexts sparked concerns about fair compensation and recognition of their contributions.

The findings regarding ACRC and knowledge production revealed concerns about ACRC's research approach, which some thought was externally oriented, whereby Africa primarily provides raw data while the global north controls the trajectory of knowledge exchange. Some respondents expressed disappointment in how community practitioners were integrated in the project and hoped for more innovative participatory approaches going forward. The use of analytical frameworks was viewed as both valuable for generalisability and limiting due to inflexibility in certain contexts. Researchers grappled with adapting frameworks to fit unique city characteristics, and some suggested a more city-specific approach. Overall, there were calls for a more critical and reflexive engagement with knowledge production in the project.

4.2 What could ACRC do better?

While ACRC has made commendable efforts in addressing decolonisation, there are areas that can be improved to ensure the consortium operates with fairness, transparency, and inclusivity. By implementing these measures, ACRC can pave the way for a more impactful and inclusive Phase 2 of the project. The following recommendations encompass key aspects that warrant attention for ACRC's continued progress and success:

- i. **Define a clear decolonisation agenda:** ACRC needs to acknowledge the practical limitations of achieving all diverse visions of decolonisation. Going forward, the consortium should work towards building a working definition on what decolonisation means for the project and determine a clear decolonisation agenda or action plan for Phase 2. This will provide a focused direction for the consortium's decolonisation efforts.
- ii. **Engage a diversity and inclusion consultant:** As part of enhancing the clarity and effectiveness of ACRC's decolonisation agenda, the consortium should consider engaging a diversity and inclusion consultant. Entrusting an external expert with this role offers two key advantages. Firstly, it safeguards the primary project objectives by preventing the decolonisation process from overshadowing them. This external involvement ensures that the decolonisation agenda runs alongside, rather than interfering with, the core project activities. This approach also introduces a valuable layer of objectivity and professional distance. Secondly, relieving ACRC members of the responsibility for managing this process is especially beneficial, considering that many of them already have multiple demanding commitments.
- iii. **Enhance transparency in PCPs selection:** ACRC should address concerns about the lack of clarity in the selection process for priority complex problems (PCPs). Making the process transparent, such as sharing the evaluation criteria and outcomes, will dispel any suspicion among consortium members and colleagues. This transparency will build trust and confidence in the decision-making process as the project transitions to Phase 2.
- iv. **Establish clarity on decentralisation:** ACRC should ensure clarity and build consensus on the objectives and structure of decentralisation. This will be crucial in determining the appropriate balance of administrative and project management duties to be devolved to the city teams. Reconstituting the SMT to include representation from all cities, potentially through involving all city coordinators, can enhance inclusivity, particularly in decision-making.
- v. **Internal communication:** It appears that many of the misunderstandings within the consortium stem from information disparities among project members. Additionally, the fact that various city teams and partners were onboarded at different times means that some researchers and practitioners may never have achieved the same level of understanding regarding project details. To address this issue, implementing an onboarding induction process for all new team members is recommended. Furthermore, if it is not already in place, there should be easily accessible internal communication channels dedicated to providing project progress and rationale. It is imperative that every effort is made to ensure that all consortium members stay well-informed about critical project information.

vi. Adopt city-specific approaches: The researcher believes that Phase 2, which centres on action research, will take a more bottom-up or grounded approach. This approach may help alleviate concerns about the standardised theoretical framework or templates used in Phase 1 of the project. Nevertheless, the researcher also assumes that ACRC will offer some degree of guidance to researchers and practitioners on how to formulate proposed interventions and frame uptake and impact pathways concerning identified PCPs. Drawing on the lessons from Phase 1, the consortium should aim for a balance between a more structured, programmatic approach and one that is sensitive to the unique contextual factors.

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Annex 1: Interview Guide

DECOLONISING DEVELOPMENT: QUALITATIVE QUESTIONS

The aim is to obtain views from the most salient categories within ACRC and as far as possible to have enough diversity within each category to allow for some differences in lived experience to be captured.

Preamble

As you know, ACRC is interested in exploring issues around decolonisation in its own work and has taken the temperature of these issues in a recent survey. The results of the survey have now come back, and ACRC wants to dig into them a bit more via qualitative research. As such, we would like to ask you a few questions about the survey. Please be assured that although a transcript of the interview will be shared with the ACRC leadership and excerpts may be used in our analysis, your identity will be protected. On the basis of that information, are you happy to proceed?

Preliminary Questions

1. Please tell me a bit about your background and your role in and experience with ACRC thus far (e.g., researcher/practitioner, senior/junior researcher, etc).
2. Please tell me how you felt about completing the survey? (Good initiative, inappropriate, insufficient, etc)
3. Did any of the results strike you as particularly salient, interesting, or surprising? Would you say you were generally on the left (more critical side of the scale) or generally on the right (more favourable side of the scale) of the average score on most questions? (Please expound)

Colonial Attitudes

4. What are your thoughts on the finding that a small majority of interviewees thought that most people from outside Africa 'assumed' they were more knowledgeable and skilled than Africans in ACRC? Do you think this perception is accurate?
5. What are your thoughts on the finding that a small majority of interviewees felt that non-Africans in ACRC were on a mission to "save" Africans? Do you think this perception is accurate?
6. One result the ACRC leadership was particularly concerned about was the answers on 'dignity and respect'. While most interviewees felt that most non-Africans in ACRC treated Africans with dignity and respect, a small minority, about 10%, thought otherwise, and another 8% scored ACRC in the 'middle' of the scale. What has been your experience as an individual?
 - Can you share an example of where you feel you have been treated with dignity and respect in ACRC?
 - Can you share an example of where you feel you haven't?
 - Have you observed other people in ACRC not being treated with dignity and respect?
7. Please react to this quote, "ACRC may have tried, but the design of the project and probably the Request for Proposal means it is already skewed to what the people outside of Africa and mainly the funders (FCDO) want to see. The saviour complex is evident."

Power and Decision Making (Knowledge and Power)

8. What are your thoughts on the finding that a significant minority of interviewees felt that ACRC compels Africans to do things they would not otherwise do? Have you observed any instances of this in your work with ACRC?
9. In your experience working with ACRC, do you feel that African expertise is valued and incorporated into decision-making processes?
10. According to the 'Temperature Check' survey, most of the interviewees thought that the authority non-Africans have in ACRC was justified by their expertise. With this context in mind, please react to this quote, *"The role of black Africans in shaping the research agenda of ACRC needs to be reviewed as well as composition of key positions in the ACRC. For instance, why is the ACRC team more black at the bottom than the top?"*

Rewards and Benefits

11. In your opinion, does ACRC work to create genuine partnerships with African organisations and individuals? In your experience, have these partnerships been successful so far?
12. Please react to this quote, *"Although I don't know what those outside Africa were paid for the work in phase 1, it does feel like ACRC got a lot more than it paid for from the African consultants. The demands on time and reports were astronomical especially given the number of meetings held, different documents required and so on."*

Looking Forward

13. What practices do you believe need to be changed during the implementation phase of ACRC, and explain how you think all actors can contribute to these changes in terms of decentralization, inclusivity, equity, and valuing diverse knowledge systems?

Annex 2: Interview List

Respondent	Date
Int 1 (African Female)	3 May 2023
Int 2 (African Male)	5 May 2023
Int 3 (non-African Male)	5 May 2023
Int 4 (African Female)	6 May 2023
Int 5 (African Male)	9 May 2023
Int 6 (African Female)	9 May 2023
Int 7 (African Male)	10 May 2023
Int 8 (non-African Male)	10 May 2023
Int 9 (African Female)	10 May 2023
Int 10 (African Male)	12 May 2023
Int 11 (African Female)	12 May 2023
Int 12 (non-African Female)	12 May 2023
Int 13 (African Female)	15 May 2023
Int 14 (African Male)	19 May 2023
Int 15 (non-African Female)	22 May 2023
Int 16 (African Male)	2 October 2023
Int 17 (African Male)	5 October 2023
Int 18 (African Female)	5 October 2023

Annex 3: SMT response to the recommendations

The ACRC senior management team (SMT) would like to thank Kibui Edwin Rwigi for producing an insightful and useful report on decolonisation and ACRC. We would also like to extend our thanks to the consortium members who gave their time to be interviewed for this report.

From the outset of ACRC, we have recognised the essential contribution of diverse African researchers including those based in the global North and South. We have also recognised the importance of working with knowledge-rich, city-specific research agencies and other local knowledge leaders. We believe that it is only through working closely with African expertise in research and action research that we can secure these ambitions.

Below we set out our response to each of the recommendations, and also to some of the broader issues highlighted in the report.

Recommendation 1: Define a clear decolonisation agenda

ACRC needs to acknowledge the practical limitations of achieving all diverse visions of decolonisation. Going forward, the Consortium should work towards building a working definition on what decolonisation means for the project and determine a clear decolonisation agenda or action plan for Phase 2. This will provide a focused direction for the Consortium's decolonisation efforts.

Response

SMT established a group to develop an ACRC approach to decolonisation. This was developed in 2021, discussed with SMT and other colleagues over several months and finalised in 2022 following discussion at the Consortium-wide workshop in May 2022. The paper was co-authored by two SMT members (Martin Atela and Beth Chitekwe Biti) and Professor Ola Nduku, a staff member of the Manchester Architecture Research Centre and Manchester School of Architecture (now at Liverpool University). The paper summarises our approach to decolonisation and identifies a threefold approach including structural issues (fair and equitable engagement with African researchers), methodological diversity (and a shift away from European epistemologies), and communication practices. That approach guided our work in the Foundation Phase.

For ACRC, the decolonisation agenda does not only involve issues related to colonisation (UK and Africa) but also the manifestation of unequal power relations and their consequences in other dimensions including those related to gender, age and class. This is a difficult balance – we do not want to diminish the impacts of colonisation, but we do not want other dimensions of adverse power relations to be overlooked. Hence, in addition to a session on ACRC attitudes to decolonisation at the Consortium-wide meeting in May 2022, there was also a session on community knowledge.

We recognise the importance of a continuing conversation underpinning efforts to structure and support equity. We are keen to revisit the ACRC approach to decolonising research processes once the city-based research teams are in place for the Implementation Phase. This is likely to be in the

second half of 2024, when there will be meetings of both the complete set of city managers and in-city researchers in all five cities.

To develop and enhance the contribution of community researchers, we have initiated a process for this group to set the agenda for this component in the Implementation Phase. A meeting of community researchers from three cities with particularly strong contributions to this work in the Foundation Phase took place in February 2024. This meeting was tasked with developing an agenda which will be considered first by SMT and then by the first city managers meeting (with SMT participation) in April 2024.

We have agreed to have a page on our website to give direction to our efforts. This will include: our approach to inclusion, our approach to decolonisation, this report, and the report from the survey that was completed. When ready, it will include further documentation such as our approach to community knowledge.

Recommendation 2: Engage a diversity and inclusion consultant

As part of enhancing the clarity and effectiveness of ACRC's decolonisation agenda, the Consortium should consider engaging a diversity and inclusion consultant. Entrusting an external expert with this role offers two key advantages. Firstly, it safeguards the primary project objectives by preventing the decolonisation process from overshadowing them. This external involvement ensures that the decolonisation agenda runs alongside, rather than interfering with, the core project activities. This approach also introduces a valuable layer of objectivity and professional distance. Secondly, relieving ACRC members of the responsibility for managing this process is especially beneficial, considering that many of them already have multiple demanding commitments.

Response

SMT have discussed this and see some merits in this suggestion. However, the experience of individual members to date is mixed and SMT collectively believe that choosing the right consultant is key. This individual needs to understand and align with our approach to decolonisation. We have agreed to discuss this further at our first meeting with city managers in April 2024 to understand their perspective on the recruitment and use of such specialists.

Recommendation 3: Enhance transparency in PCP selection

ACRC should address concerns about the lack of clarity in the selection process for priority complex problems (PCPs). Making the process transparent, such as sharing the evaluation criteria and outcomes, will dispel any suspicion among Consortium members and colleagues. This transparency will build trust and confidence in the decision-making process as the project transitions to Phase 2.

Response

SMT takes transparency in the selection of PCPs very seriously. PCP selection began in April 2023. We presented the framework related the selection of PCPs and approaches to addressing such PCPs to the second Consortium-wide meeting in May 2023 and received feedback on the experience of Set 1 cities with their submissions. We then modified the submission forms to make the process clearer and to facilitate completion. We also made clear both the decision-making criteria and the decision-making process.

We recognise that city domain researchers (the primary source of PCP-related proposals) are deeply committed to their research and uptake network, and the ideas that have emerged. We have sought to share substantive feedback with city domain researchers so they understand, if they were not successful, the reasons for this lack of success. We hope this will contribute to the further development of their work. In some cases we may be able to fund it but in other cases this is not possible.

Recognising the significance of stakeholder expectations, and building on discussions at both the first and second Consortium-wide meetings, we have moved forward with £40,000 grants to cities in which we are exiting. This is to facilitate the maintenance of good relations between researchers and local authorities, and maximise our contribution to urban reform even in cities in which we are leaving.

Recommendation 4: Establish clarity on decentralisation

ACRC should ensure clarity and build consensus on the objectives and structure of decentralisation. This will be crucial in determining the appropriate balance of administrative and project management duties to be devolved to the city teams. Reconstituting the SMT to include representation from all cities, potentially through involving all city coordinators, can enhance inclusivity, particularly in decision-making.

Response

SMT has committed to a more decentralised process for the Implementation Phase. This includes both the revision of key frameworks including the conceptual framework and the theory of change, and the selection of PCPs and solutions to PCPs in the cities in which we will continue work in the Implementation Phase.

We have developed a decentralised decision-making and management plan. This was presented to the second Consortium-wide meeting in May 2023. The response of the meeting was broadly supported and we received only a small number of substantive comments. We have responded to the comments that were received, revised the plan and are now working to this in establishing city teams for the Implementation Phase. The plan will be further discussed in meetings with city managers and SMT members.

We intend to revise the conceptual framework and the theory of change in collaboration with the in-city researchers (politics, urban development and community knowledge), and the city managers. See below.

Recommendation 5: Internal communication

It appears that many of the misunderstandings within the Consortium stem from information disparities among project members. Additionally, the fact that various city teams and partners were onboarded at different times means that some researchers and practitioners may never have achieved the same level of understanding regarding project details. To address this issue, implementing an onboarding induction process for all new team members is recommended. Furthermore, if it is not already in place, there should be easily accessible internal communication

channels dedicated to providing project progress and rationale. It is imperative that every effort is made to ensure that all Consortium members stay well-informed about critical project information.

Response

We very much agree on the need to continue to work on internal communication. We have sought to do this through a number of means including pre-recorded briefings (such as the [theory of change](#)), recorded sessions with city teams, mapping SMT members to city teams and encouraging SMT in-person participation in scheduled city team meetings, particularly those related to induction and PCP development. Where SMT members were not able to attend in person they were available online. We have also sought to ensure that those responsible for the different components such as political settlements, city of systems and domains visited the cities in person for further discussions. In cases in which visits did not take place, they had opportunities to engage online. Regular meetings with SMT participation have also taken place (on a two or four weekly basis).

We have also provided written material in the form of the theory of change, Conceptual Framework, and domain concept notes. All these were drafted prior to the beginning of the city research work and teams were reminded at various points of their availability. However, we recognise the limitations of Zoom meetings and also that not all individual city researchers have been present at the in-person meetings.

We have had two Consortium-wide, in-person meetings. We also acknowledge that the first in-person meeting took place in May 2022, which was later than we would have liked due to the pandemic. Additionally, we recognise that we only covered the costs of one person from each research component, so if there were teams involved in the work (eg for political settlements or city domain research), then more junior members did not have the opportunity to take part.

In summary, we tried but we accept that there were gaps in effective communication and knowledge sharing.

Recommendation 6: Adopt city-specific approaches

The researcher believes that Phase 2, which centres on action research, will take a more bottom-up or grounded approach. This approach may help alleviate concerns about the standardised theoretical framework or templates used in Phase 1 of the project. Nevertheless, the researcher also assumes that ACRC will offer some degree of guidance to researchers and practitioners on how to formulate proposed interventions and frame uptake and impact pathways concerning identified PCPs. Drawing on the lessons from Phase 1, the Consortium should aim for a balance between a more structured, programmatic approach and one that is sensitive to the unique contextual factors.

Response

The CEO, research and uptake directors sought to navigate an approach to research which balances the original ToR from DFID (now FCDO) and the relevance of those ToR to addressing urban programming challenges, with the need for local contextual sensitivity and required flexibility. We also note that the orientation to politics and systems reform which underpinned the standardised theoretical frameworks used by ACRC – the conceptual framework and theory of change – were

both required by DFID, and that this orientation is broadly accepted as accurate by key experts on urban development in the Consortium.

We sought to identify city researchers, particularly with respect to the politics and political economy analysis, with established expertise in political settlements – the key DFID approach that was requested and which we accepted in the bid. In the case of the political settlements approach, we sought African experts, located in selected cities, with this knowledge to lead this work. Hence these individuals had already determined – in their previous academic work – their interest in this approach.

However, we recognised the limitations of top-down comparative research frameworks from the beginning. Hence, we enabled the domain teams to take a more flexible approach to politics and political economy, building on their engagement with city domain researchers in the locations in which domain research took place. We also enabled the city of systems teams to be flexible in their systems research, giving more attention to those systems that they saw as more significant to this work in their local context.

We recognise that the Implementation Phase offers an opportunity to revisit the conceptual framework and theory of change collectively, with the potential to recraft these frameworks drawing both on experiences in the Foundation Phase (with some overlap in the teams) and contextual knowledge. We have scheduled a meeting in the third quarter of 2024 (once the city teams are fully assembled and functioning) that will enable in-city researchers to work with the research directors to redevelop both the conceptual framework and theory of change. We remain committed to collaborative endeavours within a meaningful comparative analysis that develops opportunities for cross-city learning and knowledge development.

In addition and with respect to the discussion in the conclusion...

We welcome the acknowledgement that the programme has made efforts to support equitable research and uptake activities which recognise both the wealth of African talent and expertise both within and beyond African cities. As noted above our existing approach has sought to prioritise working with urban reformers (academic and non-academic) in our selected cities, and in addition we have sought to protect and develop the contribution of community knowledge.

We continue to believe that ACRC has the potential to substantively contribute to knowledge that is relevant to African cities, and that we can advance a reform agenda and secure our programme objectives. We also believe that we can do this in a way that acknowledges and adds value to the work of existing reformers and reform efforts.

Specific to the issues raised:

1. In the context of FCDO, aid and UK government political agendas, we believe that FCDO gives us sufficient flexibility to generate knowledge that will advance substantive reforms with some elements of inclusivity in African cities. We are also confident that our teams include Africans with considerable knowledge of reform who are deeply rooted in their own localities and able to define an African agenda. While we understand concerns that FCDO research follows a narrow definition of UK interests, we believe that ACRC is a research programme of integrity with activities that are designed planned and implemented to

achieve the stated objectives. While the DFID ToR highlighted the need to advance the effectiveness of DFID and partners in programming in urban areas, we expanded this to include other agencies such as local government with the agreement of FCDO.

2. As outlined above, we agree that some aspects of the conceptual framework were pre-determined by the FCDO bid documentation. We tried to mitigate this by enabling more flexibility where possible. This included offering, for example, those working on political settlements the freedom to interpret this concept. We also enabled domain teams to work together to craft their approach to research within the parameters of the conceptual framework (as acknowledged in this report).
3. We are very concerned about perceptions of over-work and use of research brokers. While ACRC did not have any ten-day contracts and all our contracts were for significantly longer than this, we are aware that some of the researchers contracted part of the work to more junior researchers. We neither encouraged or discouraged this approach; we trusted the core researchers that we selected to manage the funds to realise the research objectives. In some cases, we think this added to the value, with opportunities for PhD and Masters candidates to learn about the research process and secure some paid employment.
4. We are also concerned about perceptions of over-work in general. In crafting the budgets we worked with set amounts and some degree of budget flexibility – ie we asked teams if more was required, and we negotiated. We deliberately sought out researchers with experience in the field of urban reform and urban programming more generally. We are also conscious that many researchers went above and beyond in part because they were researching areas that they had worked on for many years and where their personal motivation was extremely strong. While not dismissing the comment of over-work, we sometimes told researchers that they should stop because they had already provided more than enough for the available funding. We continue to provide funding to enable them to publish from their research because we believe that this is an important additional component where we can add value to their personal careers and acknowledge their research contributions. We are keen to contribute to efforts to place knowledge from Africans related to urban reform in the global arena.
5. With respect to community knowledge, we are also disappointed that more was not done. We sought to encourage this through specific sessions in the Consortium-wide meetings, webinars, blogs and podcasts. We also encouraged domain leads to engage with this. However, we did not think it would be helpful to insist on this where researchers in city teams were reluctant to take it further.