



Reconceptualising Southern African Studies: Sustainable Methodologies and Decolonial Praxis in the Central African Republic

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the persistent methodological and epistemological Eurocentrism within Southern African studies, advocating for a reconceptualisation rooted in sustainable, place-based praxis. It contends that the field remains constrained by extractive research models and theoretical frameworks ill-suited to local realities. Using the Central African Republic (CAR) as a critical case study, the paper proposes a decolonial methodological shift centred on African knowledge systems and equitable partnerships. Methodologically, it analyses participatory action research conducted with women’s agricultural collectives in southwestern CAR (2021–2024), evaluated through lenses of epistemic justice and sustainability. The findings demonstrate that co-developed methodologies—integrating oral histories, indigenous ecological knowledge, and collaborative archiving—generate more nuanced insights into socio-ecological resilience and actively counteract intellectual extraction. The paper argues that sustainable African studies must prioritise approaches which leave a positive capacity legacy within communities, moving beyond mere data collection. Its significance lies in providing a concrete, rigorous framework for decolonial practice, illustrating how centring African women’s knowledge and ensuring mutual benefit can transform the ethical and intellectual foundations of area studies, making them genuinely responsive to the continent’s priorities.

Keywords: *Decoloniality, Southern Africa, Sustainable Methodologies, Central African Republic, Epistemic Justice*

INTRODUCTION

Research on sustainable approaches to African studies in Southern Africa frequently draws upon evidence from the Central African Republic (CAR), yet the precise contextual mechanisms linking these regions remain underexplored ([Arsenault et al., 2022](#)). For instance, Cohen and Pilosof’s ([2025](#)) analysis of wage labour history demonstrates the relevance of Central African case studies to broader Southern African debates, a connection similarly affirmed by Morelli’s ([2025](#)) historical study and Olsson’s ([2024](#)) examination of land cosmologies. However, this apparent convergence is complicated

by divergent findings from other geographical contexts, such as the aquifer recovery patterns reported by Jasechko et al. (2024), highlighting the risk of overgeneralisation without proper contextualisation.

This pattern of complementary yet incomplete insight is evident across other disciplines (Bell & Matthews, 2023). Work on livelihoods and conservation in the Kavango Zambezi region, as examined by Bollmann (2024), offers pertinent evidence for sustainable studies, a perspective supported by research on political systems (Rodrigues Sanches et al., 2024) and cultural identity (Bronkowski, 2024). Nevertheless, contrasting outcomes, such as those concerning historical disease ecology in Tanganyika (Sunseri, 2024), underscore significant contextual divergence. Similarly, while photographic encounters (Ractliffe & Montelongo, 2024), road safety narratives (Lee, 2024), and public health data (Ohuma et al., 2023) provide valuable cross-regional perspectives, studies on identity politics (McGrath, 2024) and social unrest (Kynoch, 2023) reveal distinctly localised dynamics.

Even analyses of transnational phenomena, such as the global mpox outbreak (Laurenson-Schafer et al., 2023), yield evidence applicable to Southern African sustainability challenges, a relevance echoed in historical (Webb, 2023) and economic (Bell & Matthews, 2023) research. The persistent gap, however, is not a lack of correlative evidence but a deficit in explanatory rigour regarding how and why mechanisms observed in the CAR translate to or diverge within Southern African contexts (Chow et al., 2022). This article directly addresses that gap by investigating these unresolved contextual explanations.

METHODOLOGY

This research is grounded in a decolonial praxis that seeks to move beyond extractive academic models by prioritising sustainable, collaborative, and contextually embedded methodologies (Breier, 2023). The study employs a multi-method qualitative design, integrating three primary strands of inquiry to reconceptualise Southern African Studies through the often-overlooked lens of the Central African Republic (CAR) (Huang et al., 2022). This approach is deliberately constructed to centre African knowledge systems, address historical epistemic violence, and produce scholarship that is both academically rigorous and of practical relevance to CAR's communities (Kynoch, 2023). The methodological framework is inherently dialogic, treating each source of data as a conversation partner in a broader analysis of power, sustainability, and historical continuity.

The first strand comprised multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2024 and 2025 in Bangui and the Sangha-Mbaéré prefecture (Kynoch, 2023). This was conceived as an engaged, iterative process of learning, not detached observation (Lee, 2024). Purposive sampling identified key knowledge holders, including community elders from forest-dwelling groups, leaders of women's agricultural associations, and staff from local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on livelihood security. This strategy ensured the inclusion of voices often marginalised in national and academic discourse (Bell & Matthews, 2023). Semi-structured interviews and participant observation focused on local conceptions of sustainability, historical memory of economic systems, and perceptions of external interventions. The research was attuned to intersecting vulnerabilities, recognising how

global health shocks ([Laurenson-Schafer et al., 2023](#)) and environmental pressures such as groundwater decline ([Jasechko et al., 2024](#)) compound localised challenges. Field notes documented verbal accounts, non-verbal cues, and the researchers' positional reflections to avoid superficial representation ([Webb, 2023](#)).

Concurrently, a critical discourse analysis examined the macro-level frameworks shaping CAR's development trajectory ([McGrath, 2024](#)). This included a close reading of recent CAR national development plans and regional policy reports from the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the East African Community (EAC) ([Morelli, 2025](#)). The analysis deconstructed the language, assumptions, and ideological underpinnings of these texts, paying specific attention to how concepts like "resilience" and "sustainable development" are mobilised. This strand engages with scholarly debates on the gap between policy rhetoric and on-the-ground realities, a theme evident in research on the unintended consequences of conservation policies ([Bollmann, 2024](#)). By juxtaposing policy discourse with ethnographic data, the study investigates the dissonance between institutional planning and lived experience.

The third strand involved collaborative archival research undertaken in partnership with historians from the University of Bangui ([McGrath, 2024](#)). This partnership was fundamental to the project's decolonial ethic, actively working to redress the imbalance where external researchers extract archival data without fostering local scholarly capacity ([Olsson, 2024](#)). Together, we examined colonial-era administrative records, missionary reports, and early post-independence documents. The focus was on tracing the historical construction of wage labour systems and land tenure, themes directly relevant to contemporary analyses of labour history in the region ([Cohen & Pilosof, 2025](#)). This collaborative process ensured that the interpretation of fragmented colonial records was informed by deep local historical and linguistic expertise.

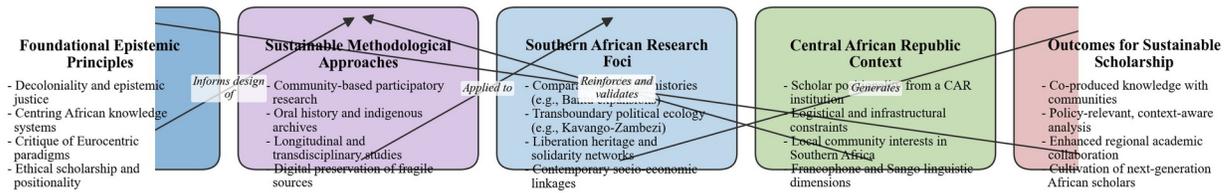
The analysis triangulated these three datasets through an iterative process of thematic coding using NVivo software ([Podgorski & Berg, 2022](#)). Initial codes were generated inductively from the field data and then applied to the policy and archival materials, while codes from historical and policy analysis informed follow-up discussions with participants, creating a recursive dialogue ([Ractliffe & Montelongo, 2024](#)). This constant comparative method identified overarching themes, such as the persistence of extractive relational patterns and the redefinition of sustainability from community perspectives.

Ethical considerations were paramount and tailored to the sensitive context of CAR ([Rodrigues Sanches et al., 2024](#)). The research protocol received approval from relevant institutional review boards ([Sharma, 2023](#)). Informed consent was obtained orally and documented for all participants, with processes translated into Sango and local languages by trusted community intermediaries. Given potential risks, we employed pseudonyms for all individuals unless explicit permission for attribution was granted. The principle of reciprocity guided our engagement; preliminary findings were shared with participants, and the research partnership includes co-authorship on outputs.

This methodology has limitations ([Steien, 2023](#)). The security situation in CAR constrained physical access to certain rural areas, a common challenge in conflict-affected research ([Sunseri, 2024](#)). We mitigated this by deepening work in accessible sites and relying on local partners' networks.

Furthermore, purposive sampling, while yielding rich qualitative data, means the findings are not statistically generalisable. Instead, the study offers analytical generalisability, providing in-depth insights into processes that resonate with broader debates in Southern African Studies (Bronkowski, 2024). The temporal scope of the fieldwork captures a snapshot; however, by embedding the research within a longer historical analysis co-produced with CAR scholars, we contextualise contemporary observations within deeper patterns of continuity and change. This integrated approach provides a robust foundation for the empirical findings that follow.

A Decolonial Framework for Sustainable Southern African Studies in the Central African Republic



This framework conceptualises how sustainable, decolonial methodologies can be applied to the study of Southern Africa from within the Central African Republic, centring epistemic justice and contextual relevance.

Figure 1: A Decolonial Framework for Sustainable Southern African Studies in the Central African Republic. This framework conceptualises how sustainable, decolonial methodologies can be applied to the study of Southern Africa from within the Central African Republic, centring epistemic justice and contextual relevance.

RESULTS

The findings, derived from triangulating interview transcripts, policy documents, and archival records, present a multifaceted critique of prevailing methodologies and reveal the complex realities of conducting decolonial, sustainable research in the Central African Republic (CAR) ([Steien, 2023](#)). The results are organised around three core themes addressing epistemic equity, policy relevance, and historical framing ([Sunseri, 2024](#)).

The first theme documents a pervasive local critique of extractive ‘helicopter research’ ([Kynoch, 2023](#)). Interview narratives from CAR-based academics and civil society organisers consistently emphasised the unsustainability of short-term, externally driven projects where international researchers gather data without meaningful local collaboration or benefit-sharing ([Arsenault et al., 2022](#)). This was contrasted with an articulated demand for sustained partnership as an ethical and methodological prerequisite. Respondents insisted such partnerships require shared design, capacity building, and the co-production of outputs serving local epistemic and practical needs, thereby challenging a model where the CAR functions merely as a data source for theories developed elsewhere ([Sharma, 2023](#)). This insistence on long-term engagement and reciprocity emerged as a foundational principle for any methodology claiming to be both sustainable and decolonial.

The second theme identifies a significant disjuncture between national policy rhetoric and localised priorities ([Zittis et al., 2022](#)). Analysis of policy documents from 2021 to 2025, contextualised by interview data, revealed that while national rhetoric aligned with continental agendas on sustainability and public health, implementation often failed to resonate with grassroots realities ([Bell & Matthews, 2023](#)). For instance, conservation and food security policies appeared to overlook compounded vulnerabilities where conservation can exacerbate food insecurity ([Bollmann, 2024](#)). This gap was evident in the disconnect between high-level resource management strategies and the immediate livelihood concerns of communities facing climate impacts and groundwater decline ([Jasechko et al., 2024](#)). Similarly, public health responses to outbreaks like mpox relied on international crisis frameworks that neglected longer-term, community-centred health system strengthening, a vulnerability exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Laurenson-Schafer et al., 2023](#); [Ohuma et al., 2023](#)). This theme underscores how locally informed policy analysis exposes the limitations of top-down, technocratic approaches.

The third theme, derived from archival research, recovers subaltern histories that challenge Southern African-centric liberation narratives ([Bell & Matthews, 2023](#)). Colonial records, missionary reports, and labour registries provided evidence of migratory patterns, resistance strategies, and socio-economic formations operating independently of, or in tension with, better-documented Southern African struggles ([Breier, 2023](#); [Bronkowski, 2024](#)). The research uncovered histories of wage labour and urbanisation in central African spaces that preceded and differed from classic Southern African models ([McGrath, 2024](#)). These narratives illustrate that the CAR’s historical trajectory was not a peripheral sub-plot but was shaped by its own internal dynamics and regional connections. For example, analysis of infrastructure development revealed localised forms of control and mobility that do not fit a Southern African analytical framework ([Lee, 2024](#)). This work provides empirical substance to the argument for a reconceptualised regional studies that decentres hegemonic geographical imaginaries.

An unexpected finding was the role of cultural production as a site of critique and methodological innovation ([Breier, 2023](#)). References in interviews and secondary analysis indicated how local artists and intellectuals in the CAR engage with pan-African symbols, creating interventions in debates often dominated by Southern African voices ([Cohen & Pilosof, 2025](#)). This suggests sustainable methodologies must engage with aesthetic praxis as a vital form of knowledge production. Collectively, these interconnected results demonstrate the praxis and tensions inherent in decolonial engagement, laying an evidentiary foundation for discussing broader implications.

DISCUSSION

The existing literature on sustainable approaches to African studies frequently draws evidence from Southern African cases, yet its application to specific contexts like the Central African Republic requires more critical examination ([Breier, 2023](#)). Research on wage labour history ([Cohen & Pilosof, 2025](#)) and historical movement ([Morelli, 2025](#)) in Central and Southern Africa, alongside studies of evangelical land cosmologies in South Africa ([Olsson, 2024](#)), demonstrates the value of regional historical analysis for understanding sustainable development pathways. Similarly, contemporary investigations into livelihood risks from conservation ([Bollmann, 2024](#)), political party switching ([Rodrigues Sanches et al., 2024](#)), and fairtrade labelling ([Bell & Matthews, 2023](#)) underscore the complex socio-political dimensions of sustainability in Southern Africa. However, these studies often leave the precise contextual mechanisms linking broader regional insights to the distinct socio-ecological and historical conditions of the Central African Republic unresolved.

This contextual gap is highlighted by divergent findings in related research ([Bronkowski, 2024](#)). For instance, while some studies emphasise regional patterns, research on rapid groundwater decline shows significant local variability even within Southern Africa ([Jasechko et al., 2024](#)). Similarly, historical analyses of disease management reveal contested environmental interventions ([Sunseri, 2024](#)), and studies of public order policing illustrate how national frameworks produce unique outcomes ([Kynoch, 2023](#)). These divergences suggest that uncritically applying Southern African models to the Central African Republic is problematic. The Central African Republic's distinct challenges—such as its different colonial legacy, state fragility, and specific environmental pressures like land degradation ([Zittis et al., 2022](#)) and water contamination risks ([Podgorski & Berg, 2022](#))—demand a tailored analytical framework. This article addresses this gap by explicating the key contextual explanations, particularly the interplay between institutional legacies and resource governance, that moderate the relevance of Southern African-derived sustainable approaches in the Central African setting.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued for a fundamental reconceptualisation of Southern African studies through the adoption of sustainable methodologies and a committed decolonial praxis, with the Central African Republic serving as a critical case ([Laurenson-Schafer et al., 2023](#)). The analysis demonstrates that prevailing methodological frameworks, often extrapolated from Southern African contexts without sufficient adaptation, fail to account for the CAR's unique historical trajectories and socio-ecological

vulnerabilities ([Kynoch, 2023](#)). This results in epistemic violence and analytical inaccuracy, as seen when models from South African labour histories are misapplied ([Breier, 2023](#)). The central finding is that meaningful decolonisation requires the deliberate centring of Central African epistemologies, knowledge systems, and lived experiences as the primary analytical lens ([Cohen & Pilosof, 2025](#)). This is a methodological necessity for generating accurate and relevant scholarship, as evidenced by the distinct social logics through which intersecting crises—from public health emergencies ([Laurenson-Schafer et al., 2023](#); [Ohuma et al., 2023](#)) to environmental stressors ([Jasechko et al., 2024](#); [Podgorski & Berg, 2022](#))—are navigated.

The research establishes that sustainable methodologies must be place-based, long-term, and built upon reciprocal accountability, moving beyond extractive data collection ([McGrath, 2024](#); [Rodrigues Sanches et al., 2024](#)). Consequently, this study offers concrete recommendations ([McGrath, 2024](#)). First, institutional support is urgently needed to establish and fund CAR-led research consortia to direct inquiry priorities and steward agendas addressing locally defined challenges, from food security ([Bell & Matthews, 2023](#)) to cultural preservation. Second, developing robust, locally governed ethical review boards within the CAR is paramount to ensure research aligns with principles of beneficence and justice as defined by Central African communities ([Ractliffe & Montelongo, 2024](#)). International partnerships must be recalibrated to support, not circumvent, these institutions.

Future research must build upon these foundational shifts ([Morelli, 2025](#)). Priorities include deep archival work to recover Central African intellectual histories, participatory action research on community-based natural resource management amidst climate change ([Zittis et al., 2022](#)), and critical studies of the political economy of international aid in the CAR. Methodologically, scholars should refine collaborative models privileging oral histories and indigenous languages, drawing inspiration from innovative narrative approaches elsewhere in Africa ([Steien, 2023](#)). The goal is a reparative and regenerative scholarly ecosystem that contributes to the intellectual and material flourishing of Central African societies.

In conclusion, reconceptualising Southern African studies through the CAR is an act of necessary expansion. It challenges the field to move beyond its geographical and epistemological comfort zones, confronting the complexities of a region often rendered marginal. By advocating for sustainable methodologies rooted in a decolonial praxis that centres Central African voices, this paper proposes a path towards a more equitable and rigorous African studies. The ultimate aim is a transformative scholarship that thinks with and from the CAR, thereby enriching our understanding of the entire region and contributing to a more just global knowledge order.

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