

Decolonial Approaches to Development SDIS-3000 (3 credits)

Malawi: Sustainable Development Practice

This syllabus is representative of a typical semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

Course Description

This course examines the critiques emerging from the global south of Western Eurocentric epistemologies that have been, and continue to be, the foundation for development practice today. The course seeks to recenter the perspective of indigenous epistemologies and voices of local communities from beyond the lens of western knowledge and mainstream development agencies. It engages students experientially from bottom-up, constantly centering self-reflexive approaches of learning in ways that raise critical questions and open spaces for reframing issues such as sustainability, growth, and poverty.

Each module, taught over a period of about two weeks, opens with a review of mainstream perspective on the key issues to be engaged in the module. Carefully prepared excursions, short trips, and site visits that engage diverse alternative epistemologies and perspectives follow. The goal is to critically examine the limits of Western/Eurocentric frames in prompting human dignity and social justice in countries such as Malawi.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Articulate the meaning and practice of decoloniality in the Malawi cultural context.
- Describe the epistemic practices and ways in which decoloniality and decolonial thinking are expressed in Malawi.
- Critically examine the ways in which decolonial praxis can be applied and fostered in Malawi's sustainable development endeavors.

Instructional Methods

The course, taught in English, employs carefully selected topical issues and site visits to explore and critically examine some of the ways in which decolonial approaches are presently expressed and applied in Malawi today, complemented by various learning tools and media including documentaries, films, local folklore, art, and music. Each module is taught over a period of about one to two weeks.

SIT's teaching and learning philosophy is grounded in the experiential learning theory developed by Kolb (1984; 2015) and informed by various scholars, such as Dewey, Piaget, Lewin, among others. Experiential learning theory recognizes that learning is an active process that is not confined to the formal curriculum; "knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 2015, p. 49). Learning involves both content and process. Learning is holistic and happens through various life experiences upon which students draw to generate new ways of knowing and being. Learning involves a community and is a lifelong endeavor. Learning is transformational. The suggested four step-cycle of a *concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation* embedded in the experiential learning model is not linear and might not always happen in that specific order, as any learning is highly context dependent. These stages of taking part in a shared experience; reflecting on that experience by describing and interpreting it; challenging their own assumptions and beliefs to generate new knowledge; and ultimately applying new knowledge, awareness, skills, and attitudes in a variety of situations and contexts are important for students to engage in to become empowered lifelong learners.

Required Texts

The course will assign chapters from the following three textbooks:

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2020). *Decolonization, development and knowledge in Africa: turning over a new leaf*. Routledge.

Taiwo, Olufemi. (2022). *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously*. International Africa Institute.

Assignments and Evaluation

Assignment Descriptions and Grading Criteria

1) Language Exercise and Interview (30%)

You will work with your language teachers to develop and learn words or phrases in the local language (Chichewa) that explain or express the meaning of: (1) decoloniality, (2) decolonizing, and (3) eurocentrism. Based on interviews with at least 6 local Malawians (only one of which can be your immediate homestay family member) assess the meaning of these words and relevant examples from the perspective of your interviewees.

In what ways is decoloniality expressed in local Malawian languages, practices, thoughts, action, etc.? What meanings and/or insights do you discern from them? Students have a choice of either completing a photo essay or presentation (using any application of their choice) or a written essay (1,000-1,200 words) Additional guidelines and expectations will be provided for the photo essay and presentation.

2) Case Study Assessment (30%)

Select any of the case studies from the modules in this course and critically assess the potential for decolonial epistemologies to inform new and creative policies and programs or projects that could deepen sustainability in that sector. Essay, 1000-1200 words.

3) Presentations on course themes (30%)

Each student will make two presentations (15% each) during the semester on themes or questions relating to the themes in the course. Specific themes and questions to be assigned.

4) Final Examination (20%)

The final exam for the course consists of two essay questions given to students one-day prior and a set of short answer questions. The goal of the exam is to give students the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge of development issues both within the macro and micro contexts and to use the analytical skills they have been developing as part of the course, in preparation for writing the critical independent study project paper. This final exam will be conducted at the end of the Grand Excursion, just before the ISP period.

4) Participation (10%)

This includes active involvement in lectures, readings, discussions and excursions using the following criteria:

- Attendance - promptness to class and positive presence in class.
- Active Listening - paying attention in class and during field excursions, asking appropriate questions, showing interest and enthusiasm (this includes body language), entertaining contradictory perspectives, taking notes.
- Involvement in Class Discussions - either in small or large groups, sharing knowledge. This means challenging yourself to speak up if you usually don't, and also means allowing others to speak if you are a person who tends to dominate class discussions.
- Group Accountability – positive participation in the group during field excursions and classes; not keeping others waiting.
- Displaying Respect – culturally appropriate interaction with hosts, SIT program staff, SIT lecturers and communities.

Assessment

Language exercise and interview - 30%

Case study assessment - 30%

Presentations on course themes - 30% (15% each)

Participation - 10%

Attendance and Participation

Due to the nature of SIT Study Abroad programs, and the importance of student and instructor contributions in each and every class session, attendance at all classes and for all program excursions is required. Criteria for evaluation of student performance include attendance and participation in program activities. Students must fully participate in all program components and courses. Students may not voluntarily opt out of required program activities. Valid reasons for absence – such as illness – must be discussed with the academic director or other

designated staff person. Absences impact academic performance, may impact grades, and could result in dismissal from the program.

Late Assignments

SIT Study Abroad programs integrate traditional classroom lectures and discussion with field-based experiences, site visits and debriefs. The curriculum is designed to build on itself and progress to the culmination (projects, ISP, case studies, internship, etc.). It is critical that students complete assignments in a timely manner to continue to benefit from the sequences in assignments, reflections and experiences throughout the program.

Example: Students may request a justified extension for one paper/assignment during the semester. Requests must be made in writing and at least 12 hours before the posted due date and time. If reason for request is accepted, an extension of up to one week may be granted at that time. Any further requests for extensions will not be granted. Students who fail to submit the assignment within the extension period will receive an 'F' for the assignment.

Grading Scale

94-100%	A
90-93%	A-
87-89%	B+
84-86%	B
80-83%	B-
77-79%	C+
74-76%	C
70-73%	C-
67-69%	D+
64-66%	D
below 64	F

Program Expectations

- Show up prepared. Be on time, have your readings completed and points in mind for discussion or clarification. Complying with these elements raises the level of class discussion for everyone.
- Have assignments completed on schedule, printed, and done accordingly to the specified requirements. This will help ensure that your assignments are returned in a timely manner.
- Ask questions in class. Engage the lecturer. These are often very busy professionals who are doing us an honor by coming to speak.
- Comply with academic integrity policies (no plagiarism or cheating, nothing unethical).
- Respect differences of opinion (classmates', lecturers, local constituents engaged with on the visits). You are not expected to agree with everything you hear, but you are expected to listen across difference and consider other perspectives with respect.

- **Storing Your Work:** Keep several copies of your work as back up and keep one copy accessible to you through an online forum, such as an attachment in your email, the course learning management system, or cloud-based storage. This way your work will always be available to despite technical issues. Lost files, deleted drives, or computer crashes are not excuses for late, missing work.
- **Personal Technology Use:** Cell phones and other personal electronics can be used for taking notes and other class activities. Off-task usage is not acceptable. You may be marked as absent for habitually using them for something other than classroom activities.

SIT Policies and Resources

Please refer to the [SIT Study Abroad Handbook](#) and the [Policies](#) section of the SIT website for all academic and student affairs policies. Students are accountable for complying with all published policies. Of particular relevance to this course are the policies regarding: academic integrity, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), research and ethics in field study and internships, late assignments, academic status, academic appeals, diversity and disability, sexual harassment and misconduct, and the student code of conduct.

Please refer to the SIT Study Abroad Handbook and SIT website for information on important resources and services provided through our central administration in Vermont, such as [Library resources and research support](#), [Disability Services](#), [Counseling Services](#), [Title IX information](#), and [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) resources.

Course Schedule

**Please be aware that topics and excursions may vary to take advantage of any emerging events, to accommodate changes in our lecturers' availability, and to respect any changes that would affect student safety. Students will be notified if this occurs*

The modules deepen, cumulatively, students' knowledge, enabling them to raise new questions and more complex questions related to decolonizing sustainable development, and to equip students with a consciousness that appreciates the plurality of possibilities and knowledges in the field. A conceptual framework at the start of each module equips students with tools and concepts with which students engage and critically examine the materials that they encounter in seminars, sites visits and excursions.

Module 1: A short history of sustainable development

This module aims to introduce students to the core elements of the sustainable development paradigm, especially its western origins. Students engage, simultaneously, with mainstream development approaches as they are introduced to the decolonial critiques of mainstream development.

Sessions

- a. Introduction to sustainable development practice today.

- b. Sustainable development practice in Malawi.
- c. The decolonial critiques: possibilities and limits.

Assigned reading

Rist, G. (2014). *The History of Development: from Western origins to global faith*. (Fourth edition.). London: Zed Books. Chs 1-4.

Kapoor, Ilan. (2023). Decolonizing development studies. *Review of International Studies*, 49: 3, pp. 346–355. doi:10.1017/S026021052300013X

Module 2: Agriculture: Epistemic critiques emerging from the agricultures of the Global South

African cropping partners are typically small in scale, intensive and diverse, with farmers growing a wide variety of crops (maize, potatoes, finger millet, cowpea, etc.), in a complex and symbiotic intercropping farming system that intertwines socio-cultural practices, gendered ways of living, soil fertility, income, and subsistence, among others. How do farmers make choices regarding which crops to grow, when and where to grow these crops and in what cropping patterns? How has climate change (seasons, frequency, and volume of rainfall) altered farming patterns. How have Malawi’s farmers responded to these changes? How can answers to these questions shape agriculture research agendas and agriculture development policy and practice? How do these answers to these questions complicate modernizing and Eurocentric notions that privilege large scale mono cultural cropping patterns over small-scale farming cultures?

Sessions:

- a. The role of small-scale farms in Malawi’s food security
- b. Agroecology and climate change mitigation
- c. Malawi Permaculture practices

Assigned Reading:

Bezner Kerr, R., Hickey, C., Lupafya, E., & Dakishoni, L. (2019). Repairing rifts or reproducing inequalities? Agroecology, food sovereignty, and gender justice in Malawi. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 46(7), 1499–1518. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1547897>

Conrad, Abigail (2015). *We Are Farmers: Agriculture, Food Security, and Adaptive Capacity Among Permaculture and Conventional Farmers in Central Malawi*. American University. Thesis. <https://doi.org/10.17606/kk5w-5v87>

Module 3: Foods systems and food cultures of Malawi

Narratives around food systems, such one-meal-a-day, carry profound Eurocentric and developmentalist biases and have influenced how appropriate food and access are framed and determined. Consequently, this module examines Malawi's food system from a cultural, nutritional, political, environmental, biological, and ethical perspectives. The module aims to transcend mainstream Eurocentric notions of dietary perfectionism, culinary biases, food taste, balanced diets and means of provisioning, timing, frequency, and size of meals, ownership, control and distribution of food and the food system, among others.

Sessions:

- a. Overview and structure of Malawi's food system.
- b. Cultural meanings and practices of food and nutritional implications.
- c. Actors in Malawi's food system
- d. The meaning and place of agricultural diversity in Malawi's food system.

Readings:

Mintz, S. W. (1986). Chapters 1 and 3. In *Sweetness and power: the place of sugar in modern history*. New York: Penguin Books. CH 1 & Ch 3.

Khanna Saisha (2020). Balanced Diets: Analyzing Restrictive Eurocentrism in Nutrition Standards. *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research*. Vol 05, No. 3.

Module 4: Climate change adaptation: Local and potential innovations

Countries like Malawi are very low energy users and are also, consequently, very low carbon dioxide emitters. A strong urban vs rural disparity in energy use and emissions is also quite evident within Malawi itself, as is the case with many countries of the global south. What alternative technologies do cultures, such as Malawi, use, which simultaneously enable low energy use and low emissions, and livelihoods? What creative approaches and technologies could be used to reach an optimal balance between energy use and sustainable development? What lessons can we draw for sustainable development in both the Global South and the Global North?

Sessions:

- a. Climate change and climate change impacts in Malawi
- b. Climate change adaptation: urban vs rural
- c. Normalized and non-normalized climate smart agricultural practices in Malawi

Readings:

Mwase, W., Mtethiwa, A., & Makonombera, M. (2014). Climate Change adaptation practices for two communities in Southern Malawi. *Journal of Environment and Earth Science*, 4, 87-93.

Ibrahim, M. G. P., & Alex, R. S. (2008). *The Impact of Changing Environmental Conditions on Vulnerable Communities in the Shire Valley, Southern Malawi*. Springer Netherlands. https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1007/978-1-4020-6970-3_49

Module 5: Appropriate technologies for water and sanitation promotion in Malawi

Water is one of the most basic human needs. It is essential for all kinds of domestic activities and is central to hygiene and sanitation. What alternative technologies have been used and can be used to ensure the availability of adequate water and sanitation? How have they been used or how can they be used? How do people in resource poor settings go about ensuring they have water supply, and how can water access be improved?

Sessions:

- a. Urban and rural water systems, the political economy of water access.
- b. Water use and conservation in Malawi's peri-urban, and urban settings.
- c. Water use and conservation in Malawi's rural settings.

Readings:

Dupas, Pascaline, Basimenye Nhlema, Zachary Wagner, Aaron Wolf, and Emily Wroe (2023). "Expanding Access to Clean Water for the Rural Poor: Experimental Evidence from Malawi." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 15 (1): 272-305.

Russel C.G. Chidya, Wapulumuka O. Mulwafu, Sembeyawo C.T. Banda (2016). Water supply dynamics and quality of alternative water sources in low-income areas of Lilongwe City, Malawi, *Physics and Chemistry of the Earth, Parts A/B/C*, Volume 93, 2016, pp 63-75.