servDES'25
భారతీయ సాంకేతిక విజ్ఞాన సంస్థ హైదరాబాద్
भारतीय प्रौद्योगिकी संस्थान हैदराबाद
Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad
tcs Research
Department of Design

Towards Decolonising Service Design – Ethical Collaborations Between Designers and Indigenous Communities in Vietnam and Australia

Francesco Mazzarella
f.mazzarella@fashion.arts.ac.uk
Centre for Sustainable Fashion, University of the Arts London, United Kingdom

Abstract

This paper argues for decolonising dominant service design practice and discusses the need for designers to develop a certain cultural sensitivity to engage in ethical collaborations with Indigenous communities aimed at fostering social change and cultural sustainability. This is exemplified by ethnographic and participatory action research conducted in Vietnam and Australia adopting a range of co-creation methods to engage with diverse Indigenous communities. The paper proposes an anthropological approach for service designers to elicit diverse communities' lived experiences and contribute to community empowerment. Going beyond the limitations of both top-down and bottom-up approaches to service design, this paper proposes a 'middle-up-down' approach to co-designing social innovations and building long-term partnerships aimed at community resilience and social impact. In conclusion, the paper paves the way for a new area of service design that respects and integrates indigenous knowledges and contributes to more equitable, diverse, inclusive, and sustainable futures.

Keywords: service design, social innovation, decolonising design, Indigenous communities.

Introduction

This paper reflects on my practice as a design researcher working on participatory action research with Indigenous communities in both Vietnam and Australia, with the aim of fostering social innovation. It emphasises the need for designers to develop and practise a certain cultural sensitivity when facilitating and activating change-making processes, whilst bringing a decolonial lens to the field of service design for social innovation. To exemplify this, I discuss ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted in both countries, and knowledge exchange activities as part of the 'Regenerative Vietnam' project, using co-creation methods to foster cultural reconciliation and social justice in the context of climate change. This paper contributes to the emergent discourse on decolonising service design, proposing approaches that honour indigenous knowledge systems and experiences, promoting cultural sustainability and social innovation.

I respectfully acknowledge the sovereignty of Indigenous people (referred as 'ethnic minority groups' in Vietnam, and 'First Nations' or 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' in Australia), as original inhabitants and traditional custodians of a territory. As much as I adopt an embedded and situated approach to co-designing for service (Akama & Prendiville, 2013), I acknowledge my positionality as a design researcher in the context of the work here discussed. I am a design activist, researcher and educator having previously conducted participatory design research with marginalised communities, including textile artisan communities in the UK and South Africa (Mazzarella *et al.,* 2021) and with London-based refugees and asylum seekers (Morgado & Mazzarella, 2024). My reflections in this paper are grounded in personal fieldwork and observations of the negative impacts of local policies – such as the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice referendum (Butler, 2023) as well as positive initiatives towards 'cultural reconciliation' (Reconciliation Australia, nd.) and 'Closing the Gap' (nd.) between Australian and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Literature Review

In response to escalating global sustainability challenges and 'wicked problems' (Kolko, 2012), designers are increasingly adopting ethical approaches (Ahvonen & Miettinen, 2023), integrating frameworks of social innovation (Manzini, 2015) and social justice (Costanza-Chock, 2020) into community-centred practices (Soto *et al.,* 2021). Many designers place an activist role (Fuad-Luke, 2017), challenging dominant power dynamics at play in collaborative processes (Mirza, 2024). Akama *et*

al. (2024) argue that participatory design should move beyond either 'disempowering' hierarchies or artificially 'flattened' structures, towards what they term 'respectful hierarchies' that support plurality, mutual learning and systemic change.

Recently, there has been growing interest in artisanal practices that involve skill-intensive, hands-on work with materials to produce quality products grounded in local material culture. Increasingly, designers are collaborating with artisans to revitalise traditional craftsmanship (Sennet, 2018), strengthen community bonds (Thomas *et. al.,* 2011), and encourage localised making (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Designer-artisan collaborations can serve as powerful drivers for cultural identity, wellbeing, and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2022). Yet, most designers' collaborations with artisans focus on improving products and processes (Hu *et al.,* 2024), and there is limited research on co-designing services, strategies and systems that support sustainability and social innovation, and aimed at decolonising dominant practices that perpetuate exploitation of artisans in the Global South. Another challenge faced by artisans lies in the fact that they often work in isolated and precarious conditions within an ecosystem that neglects their needs, labour, cultural heritage and environment (Mazzarella, 2018). The problem is often exacerbated by 'cultural appropriation' (Young, 2008) practices often undertaken by designers who illegitimately use the heritage of cultural minorities without getting consent from, crediting, or compensating the communities from which it originates (Moisin & Gujadhur, 2021)

Designers have frequently initiated projects aimed at empowering communities to solve the challenges they face, as opposed to relying on top-down solutions which have often fail to address the diverse needs of specific local contexts (Bovaird, 2007). Despite the expanding role of designers in co-creating public services and systems, many professionals are originally from or trained in the Global North and are often 'parachuted' into marginalised communities in the Global South in ways that replicate colonial dynamics. Bedford (2020) highlights the barriers Indigenous people face in accessing design education, arguing for the need to embrace indigenous worldviews to decolonise dominant practices. Escobar (2018) and Mignolo (2018) advocate for embracing pluriversality, acknowledging multiple, co-existing knowledges and ontologies to decentre design from Western frameworks. Tunstall (2023) proposes a cultural justice framework for decolonising design, centring indigenous knowledge systems, and challenging prevailing Eurocentric narratives.

Fisk *et al.* (2018) highlight the need to address issues of exclusion within service design. Willis and Elbana (2017) argue that designers activating interventions within disadvantaged communities should avoid jumping too quickly to technical solutions before having fully understood the root causes of problems. To avoid the design of

technical solutions that don't lead to lasting change, designers must collaborate with local, multi-disciplinary stakeholders, engage in deep listening and adopt empathising techniques to address social issues (Needham, 2008; Drouet, *et al.,* 2023). Moreover, participatory design implies significant emotional labour, made of long-term commitment and care; this is often invisible, and yet essential to build trust, relationships and safe spaces for co-design (Yee *et al.,* 2024).

Another pressing issue in service design is its overreliance on tools as a key to legitimize their field, sometimes believing that such tools can be 'commodified' and universally applicable, disconnected from the contextual knowledge of the designer (Akama & Light, 2012). While design thinking has become widely adopted, its focus on problem-solving risks reducing design to a technical and operational domain, overlooking cultural and relational dimensions (Meroni & Selloni, 2018). Going beyond considerations about feasibility and viability, designers need to co-create social innovations with users and other stakeholders, through a 'cultural translation' to ensure that interventions are contextually grounded and socially attuned. For social innovations to succeed in a community, they must be grounded in a deep understanding of the local ecosystem, including practices, structures and traditions (Baron *et al.,* 2018). Akama and Prendiville (2013) advocate for an embedded and situated approach to co-design that centres the lived experiences of all stakeholders, to ensure that services are integrated into local contexts and truly resonate with the people who are going to use them. A 'situated service' can be defined as one that is rooted in a specific place, tailored to local understandings of time, and integrates local knowledge and practices (Mazzarella *et al.,* 2021). Adopting an anthropological approach to service design (Bloomberg & Darrah, 2015), designers should facilitate participatory practices and engage communities in co-creating more inclusive, sustainable, and culturally attuned services, while challenging dominant practices that perpetuate inequality (Mazzarella & Mirza, 2024).

Methodology

The research here discussed started with one week of ethnography (as per Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) within the Ta Oi and Paco ethnic minority groups in the rural village of A Luoi and artisans in the city of Hue (Vietnam), accompanied by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) CPED (Centre for Preservation and Economic Development). I undertook participant observations, asked questions, guided by story-listening cards (Figure 1) and captured field notes to document endangered textile craft techniques (*e.g.*, Deng textile weaving, hand lead beading, wood carving, mat weaving, basket weaving, and embroidery) alongside other

traditional cultural practices (*e.g.*, music and dance performances) and elements of community life (such as making traditional food), while eliciting the artisans' needs and aspirations for community resilience and cultural sustainability. Table 1 lists the artisans engaged in the ethnographic research.

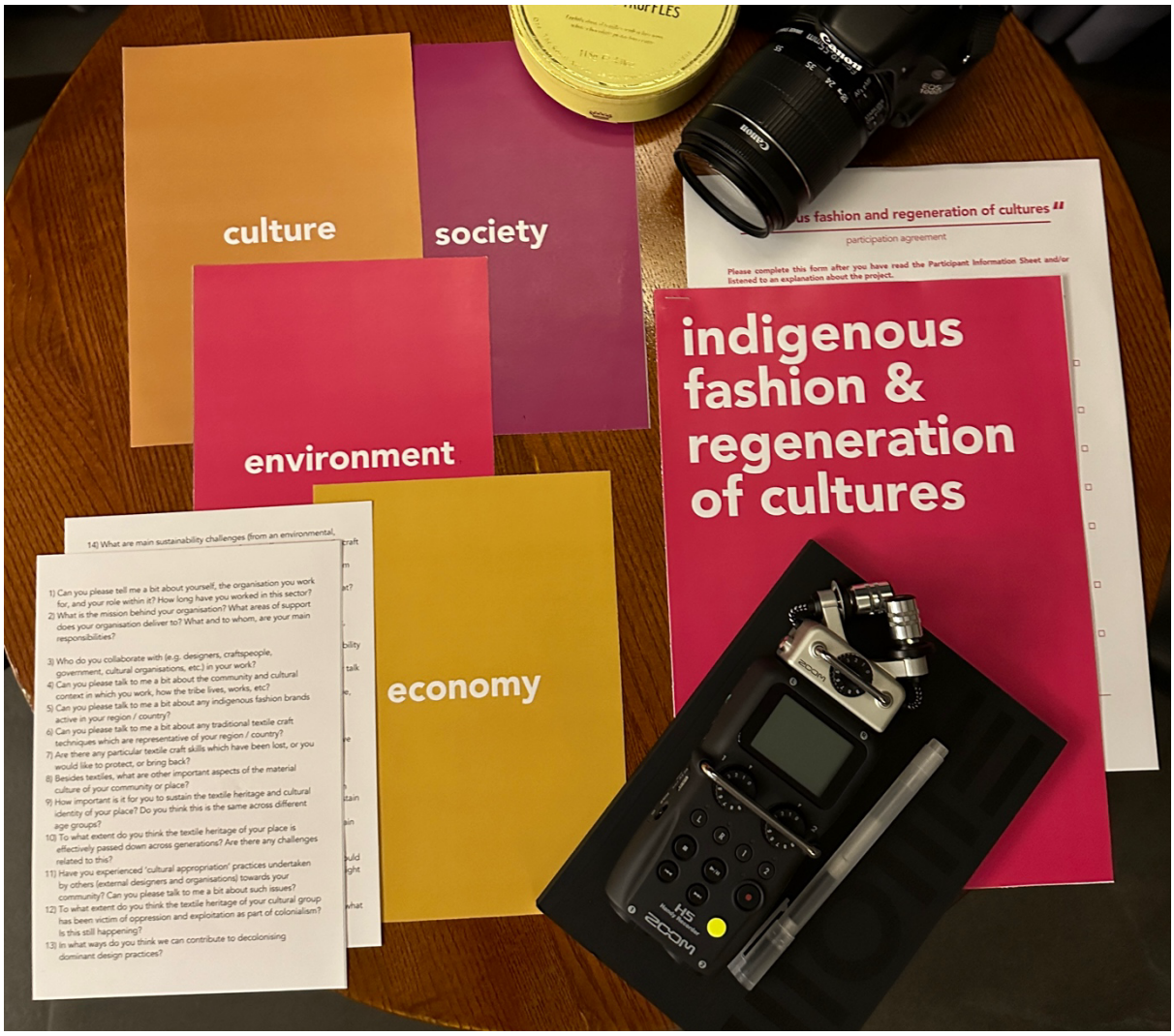
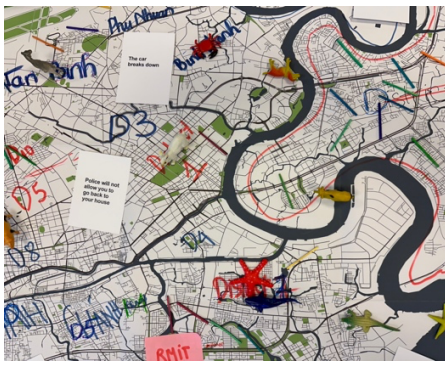


Figure 1. Story-listening cards used in the ethnographic research. Photo by Mazzarella.

Name	Expertise
Ms. A Viet Thi Phien	Deng textile weaver
Ms. A Viet Thi Nhi	Ta Oi mat weaver
Mr. Quynh Toan	Bamboo weaver
Ms. Kan Xong	Hand lead beader
Ms. Ho Thi Tha	Leader of A Hua Deng textile weaving cooperative
Mr. Than Van Do	Wood carver
Ms. Thuyen Man	Embroiderer

Table 1. Artisans participating in the ethnographic research.

To complement the ethnographic research with the indigenous community, I also collaborated with RMIT University staff members on 'Regenerative Vietnam', a participatory action research project which took place in Ho Chi Minh City, entailing collaboration between a group of academics and co-researchers engaged in cycles of planning, action, and reflection to influence positive change towards sustainability and social innovation (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003). The project entailed a series of hands-on co-creation workshops (including those outlined in Table 2) aimed at identifying opportunities for social, cultural, ecological, and economic sustainability, and developing a regenerative roadmap for businesses and communities' transition in light of climate change.

Workshop name	Description	Image
World cafe	A hands-on workshop inviting participants to apply creative, transdisciplinary methods (including 'maps and scenario cards for co-designing disaster preparedness', 'routes for cultural regeneration', and 'interest-based problem solving') to a variety of complex sustainability issues.	Map used for co-designing disaster preparedness. 
Regenerating C21st cities through business-nature partnerships	A talk, site visit, and hands-on workshop (including a drawing maps activity) aimed at exploring innovative water sensitive approaches to urban design for adapting to climate change.	Murky map produced by one workshop participant. 
Speaking through cultures	Workshop led by local artists focused on the traditional craft of coconut leaf weaving, allowing organic conversations about climate change to emerge during the making process.	Artisan and participants in the making. 

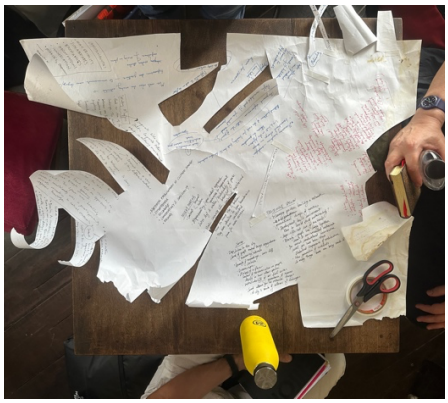
Creative writing	Hands-on workshop led by local and international writers to stimulate thinking about the climate emergency through creative writing approaches.	'Braided' text activity. 

Table 2. Co-creation workshops delivered within the 'Regenerative Vietnam' project. All photos by Mazzarella.

Finally, to gather more in-depth data, I also conducted interviews with academics, practitioners and fashion social enterprises working in this field, as outlined in Table 3.

Name	**Expertise**
Associate Professor Donna Cleveland	Interim Dean of the School of Communication & Design at RMIT Vietnam, with expertise in fashion and textile design, sustainable and transition design – based in Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam).
Corinna Joyce	Programme Manager at RMIT Vietnam, with expertise in crafts, social resilience, and sustainable fashion systems – based in Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam).
Quynh Le	Former Director of Centre for Preservation and Economic Development – based in Hue (Vietnam).
Thao Vu	Founder of Kilomet109, sustainable and ethical fashion brand – based in Hanoi (Vietnam).
Associate Professor Yoko Akama	Associate Professor at RMIT University, with experience working with Indigenous communities to strengthen adaptive capacity for disaster resilience – based in Melbourne (Australia).

Professor Mel Dodd	Dean of Monash Art, Design and Architecture, with expertise in place-making, and experience in collaborating with industry, government, and communities to shape sustainable environments – based in Melbourne (Australia).
Dr Desiree Hernandez Ibinarriaga	Senior Lecturer in Collaborative Design at Monash University, with expertise in Indigenous design, decoloniality, sustainability, and social design – based in Melbourne (Australia).
Sarah Sheridan	Co-founder of Clothing the Gaps, an Aboriginal-led brand aimed at celebrating First Nations peoples and culture – based in Melbourne (Australia).

Table 3. List of interviewees.

Findings

This section explores how dominant design practices might be decolonised within the Vietnamese and Australian contexts, and suggests pathways for enabling cultural sustainability, social innovation, and regenerative futures.

Decolonising or Indigenising Service Design

During my fieldwork, I was exposed to various definitions of the concept of 'Indigenous' people. In Vietnam the term commonly used is 'ethnic minority groups' – which implicitly denotes a position of inferiority compared to the majority of Kinh people. In Australia people refer to 'First Nations' or 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' and the term 'Indigenous' is capitalised "as a proper noun, to show respect and weight to Indigenous people, and differentiate its meaning, with reference to Indigenous people or indigenous plants, for example" – as highlighted by Sarah Sheridan.

Vietnam's colonial history continues to leave complex legacies. While colonisation is acknowledged as having introduced infrastructural developments, it also resulted in damaging exploitation of resources and labour. Despite the growing academic discourse on decolonising design, the participants in my research in Vietnam rarely referred to the term 'decoloniality' as they perceived it as "not inclusive, and

inappropriate in a post-colonial country, where people have built resilience and are growing their own local economy" as stated by Corinna Joyce.

In contrast, the research in Australia revealed deeper engagement with the effects of colonisation – particularly those linked to the historical displacement of Indigenous people through missions and government policies. In Australia I witnessed a certain level of respect for First Nations peoples, with acknowledgements of Country written at the entrance of many buildings and shared verbally in public events, although it is questionable whether this reflects genuine reconciliation or mere performativity, given the persistence of structural racism. Despite the negative outcome of the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice referendum, there are on-going efforts towards repairing historical injustices. My fieldwork in Australia shed a light on a significant body of work focused on 'cultural reconciliation', meaning a process of 'truth telling' as well as repairing and strengthening relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and settler communities.

Findings from my interviews contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the distinction between 'decolonising' and 'indigenising' design, as articulated by Desiree Hernandez Ibinarriaga:

> "The term 'indigenising' refers to the process led by Indigenous people to reclaim voice and agency to rebalance the system, while the act of 'decolonising' can be done by non-Indigenous designers and researchers, working with Indigenous allies".

Designing in such contexts demands a commitment to undoing colonial legacies and structural disadvantages. Service co-design for social and systemic change should start from a process of decolonising ourselves, unlearning inherent knowledge, opening up to uncertainty and embracing diverse worldviews, beyond Eurocentric references and approaches. Designers from or trained in the West and Global North should recognise their own privilege, unintended exploitation, power imbalances, and create allies with Indigenous people, attending to the place and local wisdom to inform their design interventions. Donna Cleveland stated:

> "The way forward is not to bring external designers to adopt a 'helper' attitude and address their sustainability challenges, but to co-design with community members and leverage their own sustainable practices. […] Designs need to come from within, from the place and local culture".

A Design Anthropological Approach to Eliciting Diverse Communities' Lived Experiences

"Design researchers often extract knowledge from artisans without creating much benefit for the community", as stated by Corinna Joyce. To counter such a colonial and extractive attitude, I employed a design anthropological approach to immerse myself in the context and engage in deep listening and a reciprocal process of making and learning with participants. Yoko Akama emphasised the emotional labour involved in infrastructuring participatory design processes:

> "We need to follow cultural protocols, talk to elders, community leaders, who are respected. There are a lot of politics involved – this can be tricky, and requires careful negotiations".

The ethnographic research in Vietnam required long and thorough planning before entering the rural village and being hosted by the Indigenous community. Despite the sense of guilt often felt as an external researcher 'parachuted' into marginalised communities, a memorable and heart-warming experience was when the tribe performed a traditional song and invited me to dance with them to celebrate and welcome me in their village.

The research in Vietnam underscored how crafts are deeply embedded in the lives of Indigenous people, and they carry such cultural practices with them wherever they go. A Ta Oi artisans explained:

> "We are born with our own culture, and we carry it throughout our life. […] I am passionate about my craft, even if the income I make from it is not much. Nowadays, young people do not have much passion for crafts as they have no patience to undertake such time-consuming practices".

Deng textile weaving is still relatively widely practised among the Ta Oi and Paco tribes, but other craft practices are disappearing. Young people are not very interested, and migrate to cities to work in factories and earn a steady income. Some artisans have lost their jobs due to mechanisation. Mr. Van Do Thanh reported that "the widespread adoption of new technologies (such as CMC machines) has seriously affected the craft of wood carving, leaving 70-80% of carvers unemployed". In response, various initiatives have begun to document endangered traditional crafts, through photography and video. Here lies a strategic opportunity for designers to undertake 3D scanning of products and develop augmented reality experiences for customers to fully understand the context, people, and process behind the cultural artefacts. There is also a need to study the meanings of traditional symbols and communicate them through digital platforms. Training designers in digital skills for

cultural preservation and craft innovation offers meaningful opportunities for advancing service design education in such contexts.

The ethnographic research in Vietnam evidenced that climate change is a major threat for Indigenous communities, with typhoons and flooding becoming more frequent and severe, and affecting crops, disrupting artisans' production, and endangering livelihoods (Figure 2). On the other hand, my ethnography in the rural village highlighted the resourcefulness, reciprocity, and resilience of Indigenous people. Beyond the impacts of climate change in Vietnam, Thao Vu highlighted the "manmade disasters" created, for instance, by the tourism industry, which "has become a money-making machine, bringing hotels, retreats, guest houses, and taking over agricultural land". The 'World Café' workshop delivered as part of the 'Regenerative Vietnam' project highlighted the need for openness and playfulness in design methods (such as maps and cards) used to engage communities in tackling natural disasters, overcoming their climate anxiety or feelings of powerlessness.

Figure 2. Vietnamese people on the Mekong Delta. Photo by Mazzarella.

The Service Designer as a Catalyst for Community Empowerment

My ethnographic fieldwork underscored the complexities involved in decolonising service design practice in contexts where Indigenous communities experience on-going social and economic injustices and are impacted by industrial development, environmental exploitation, mass migration, and even human trafficking. This poses an opportunity for designers to co-design services and strategies aimed at empowering Indigenous communities.

Increasingly, we are witnessing strategic design initiatives in collaboration with Indigenous artisans. In such contexts, is important that designers partner with local NGOs, who can help them receive a licence from the government to enter Indigenous communities in rural areas, and provide access to artisans, based on trust relationships cultivated over a long time. Before and during the community engagement, it is essential for design researchers to follow ethical protocols, having ethic forms and interview questions reviewed by local NGOs to ensure sensitivity to cultural nuances. Translation into local languages is key to ensure that artisans actually understand the meaning, consent to participate in the activities, and contribute meaningfully (Figure 3). To move away from widespread knowledge extractive practices, designers and researchers must credit and compensate artisans for their work. NGOs can also play a crucial role in managing financial transactions in rural areas where digital payment systems might be unavailable. Ethical practices must be at the core of service design research, pedagogy, and strategic interventions, to prevent exploitation and ensure benefits for the community, as stated by Quynh Le:

> “Exploitation is not necessary from foreign designers. Big retailers and souvenir shops often act as middlemen and sell products at a high price, while they pay the artisans very little. It is up individuals; the government doesn’t have the time or capacity to interfere”.

Figure 3. Myself, an artisan, and the former director of the NGO supporting my engagement with the Indigenous community.

My fieldwork highlighted the – often understated – strategic role of design towards sustainable development, going beyond paternalistic, technocratic, and short-term interventions. Some current programmes in Vietnam focus on documenting endangered traditional crafts. However, real empowerment of artisans requires taking a step further, and delivering skills training, so that they can become self-reliant. This means contributing to long-term economic impact, beyond environmental, cultural, and social sustainability, as stated by Quynh Le:

> "Our main concern is economic impact. If the artisans can't sustain themselves through their own crafts, we cannot talk about sustainability. What matters to us is the legacy that we build in the community through our projects. We don't do charity, but we want to make the artisans become self-reliant".

My research revealed that artisans are very keen on collaborating with designers and researchers, as stated by Ms. Thuyen Man: "I would like to collaborate with researchers, who could help me with storytelling, diversification of my products, sharing knowledge and ideas, and connecting with others". There is a strategic opportunity for designers to deliver training (*e.g.,* University accredited courses) over WhatsApp or other accessible digital platforms, whilst contributing to advancing service design education.

The Service Designer Nurturing Diversity and Inclusion, Beyond Cultural Appropriation Practices

My research in Vietnam revealed that artisans are eager for international customers to value local crafts, buy, and wear the fabrics they make, even in contemporary styles. This is to be seen not as cultural appropriation but as cultural appreciation. Furthermore, there are many different cultural expressions, and diverse ethnic groups live together, so everything is quite blurred.

In this regard, the 'routes for cultural regeneration' activity as part of the 'Regenerative Vietnam' project aided the workshop participants in reflecting on elements of their traditional cultural roots to sustain, markers of their current personal and cultural identity, and evolving cultural routes they envisaged for the future. The activity proved effective in enabling cross-cultural dialogue and collaborations aimed at preservation, sustainment, reparation, and regeneration of cultures. In this regard, Donna Cleveland stated:

> "Sustainability is grounded in people, place… and respect. […] Sustainability should be driven by communities' cultural practices. […] We need to acknowledge and respect traditional and sustainable cultural practices of the past to find our way into the future".

The Middle-up-down Approach of the Service Designer Bridging Community Needs with Government Support

Participants in the 'Regenerative Vietnam' project highlighted the value of hands-on creative, visual, and object-based design tools to foster engagement with multiple stakeholders. Such participatory methods can spark open discussions aimed at developing equitable solutions mindful of diverse people's agendas. Beyond the dual opposites of designers as outsiders or insiders, the project participants highlighted the need to embrace fluidity, adopting a 'middle-up-down' approach to bridging grassroots community needs with institutional services and strategies. Such an approach contributes to overcoming the limitations of top-down strategies, as stated by Mel Dodd:

> "Top-down management is not working. On the other hand, community resilience needs to be strengthened. […] Services need to be place specific. […] We need participatory, community-led processes to build resilient infrastructures, and we need local initiatives that can supplement policies".

My fieldwork in A Luoi evidenced that government officials visit the tribes regularly, especially in border areas (between Vietnam and Laos) and there is an odd relationship with the government in terms of control versus support towards the

Indigenous community. The Vietnamese government supports the Ta Oi tribe through building streets and infrastructure, providing free access to education, and healthcare services, so that they can sustain their lives locally without having to migrate to cities, which are currently over-populated. On the other hand, there is limited funding and government support to preserve and sustain traditional crafts in Vietnam. For instance, the government subsidises the fee to participate in the Craft Festival which takes place yearly in Hue; however, travel expenses are not covered, making it difficult for many rural artisans to participate.

A compelling case I investigated in my fieldwork is that of Fashion4Freedom. This brand specialises in sustainable fashion design and community development, adopting an AID + TRADE model that combines a social enterprise and a local NGO (*i.e.,* CPED) leveraging philanthropic funds to empower marginalised craft producers into creative entrepreneurs. CPED supports the Indigenous community through skills training, material donations, commissioning the making of artisanal products, bringing tourists to the village to financially support them through paying for hospitality services and purchasing of products, and promoting their work via social media and cultural events (Figure 4). Their work is an exemplar application of a cultural approach to sustainable development, focusing on culture as a means to foster social inclusion, create employment opportunities, and improve people's lives.

Figure 4. Paco textile artisans' cooperative in A Luoi, supported by CPED. Photo by Quynh Le.

Strategies to Create Impact and Build Long-Lasting Legacies

My fieldwork in Vietnam revealed that some government-funded initiatives are short-term, with no infrastructure in place to sustain them. Some websites have been produced as outputs of documentation projects, but there is often no funding or capacity to maintain these resources over time. In this regard, Quynh Le stated:

> "Innovative technologies need to be accessible, affordable and easy to use, so that the community or an NGO can adopt and maintain these new solutions".

For instance, a government-funded vocational training programme was delivered in Vietnam aimed at teaching sewing skills, but it was too short and, despite the donation of two sewing machines, artisans don't know how to use them. This example demonstrates the need for strategic and service design interventions aimed at long-term impact, as noted by Corinna Joyce:

> "Some funded projects taught artisans to make pencil cases, but they don't use traditional patterns, and don't sell. Nobody came back to the community to assess the impact of such an initiative. Now they have millions of pencil cases in stock, but nobody stopped to think this is not the right business model".

My research also highlighted the increasing pressure on design researchers to create impact and find suitable evaluation methods to evidence it. Designers need to engage with project partners from the outset, and work with them throughout the process to co-produce outcomes. Yet, measuring impact – particularly social change – is inherently challenging, and scaling it up is even harder. Desiree Hernandez Ibinarriaga emphasised the need for designers to "go beyond individual short-term projects, and build a long-lasting legacy", mentoring and training people on the ground who could sustain initiatives over time. Designers should also recognise when to responsibly end their interventions if they no longer provide benefits for the community. Besides caring for communities, designers striving for activating social change in challenging contexts, also need to adopt practices of self-care – an issue often overlooked in design research and practice. Yoko Akama stressed:

> "We need infrastrucuting, finding ways for others to carry over, and contribute to a flourishing world. […] But also, considering how much energy we put into projects, we need equal energy back, otherwise we burn out. […] Through mentoring, we can create spaces of refuge. […] Working with communities can be like an oasis, to nourish ourselves, and get the energy back. […] Finally, if it is a genuine community project, when it is no longer delivering benefit for the community, it needs to stop. Projects end, but your learning continues".

Conclusions

In this paper, I have discussed ethnographic research conducted in Vietnam and Australia with Indigenous artisans, along with insights from practitioners and researchers working on decolonising design, complemented by a participatory action research project focused on collaborative creative practice in response to sustainability issues. The research highlighted ethical complexities in designer-artisan collaborations, including the need for cultural sensibility when entering communities and immersing oneself in a context, spending time to build trust relationships, and honouring traditional cultural practices and local wisdom, whilst also navigating diverse agendas of governments, NGOs, and other institutions. The research emphasised the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, active listening and open discussions to achieve fairer outcomes, value-aligned partnerships, and creative hands-on methods to facilitate engagement. Working with marginalised and vulnerable people, such as Indigenous communities requires designers to partner with local organisations that can facilitate access to participants, tailor ethical procedures to socio-cultural contexts, create safe, inclusive and just spaces, manage risks, and collaborate with professionals equipped to deal with the unintended consequences of social design. Facilitating multi-stakeholder service design and social innovation processes demands that designers acknowledge their positionality and privilege, adopting an anthropological approach to immersing themselves in a context and empathising with project participants. To undertake this type of work, there is a need to train designers in playing multiple roles, as cultural insiders, storytellers, sense-makers, facilitators, and activists. Designers also play a political role, bridging the needs and aspirations of grassroots communities with the top-down support services delivered by governments and NGOs.

While I acknowledge the limitations of the work discussed here – especially in terms of timeframe and engagement with a small number of people in very specific contexts – the ethnographic and participatory research yielded valuable insights into Indigenous people, their place, community life, and cultural practices. Despite the sense of guilt often felt as an external researcher visiting Indigenous communities for short periods (aware of the risks of perpetuating extractive practices), the artisans I engaged with appreciated my ethical approach and genuine respect for their culture, especially at a time in which many traditional cultural practices are getting lost.

Looking forward, I outline the following recommendations for future work:

- Drawing on insights from the ethnography discussed here to inform the delivery of service design projects with Indigenous people, focused on crafts, community resilience, and cultural sustainability.

- Develop and deliver participatory action research adopting a service design approach to tackle challenges at the nexus of climate change and the mass displacement of people in various contexts.
- Embed indigenous practices in the design and delivery of student project briefs aimed at nurturing the next generation of service designers adopting decolonial approaches to working with marginalised communities and bringing about social change and cultural sustainability.

Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge London College of Fashion and the University of the Arts London's International Partnership team for funding the research here discussed. My special thanks go to Yoko Akama, Victoria Ho, Quynh Le who enabled my fieldwork, and all the people who participated in my research, sharing their invaluable knowledge, time, and commitment to decolonising design and contribute to social change and cultural sustainability.

References

Ahvonen, P. & Miettinen, S. (2023). Design ethics for including those on the margins. *DIID disegno industriale industrial design*, 80,157-167.

Akama, Y. & Light, A. (2012). A candor in reporting: Designing dexterously for fire preparedness. *Proceedings of the 1st Nordic Conference on Service Design and Service Innovation*, 24-26 November 2009, The Oslo School of Architecture and Design, Oslo, Norway, 1-11.

Akama, Y. & Prendiville, A. (2013). Embodying, enacting and entangling design: A phenomenological view to co-designing services. *Swedish Design Research Journal*, 1(13), 29-40.

Akama, Y. *et al.* (2024). Recasting "shadows": Expanding respectful hierarchies in participatory design practices. *Proceedings of PDC'24*, 11-16 August 2024, Sibu, Malaysia, 52-62.

Baron, S., *et al.* (2018). Feed people first: A service ecosystem perspective on innovative food waste reduction, *Journal of Service Research*, 21(1), 135-150.

Bedford, C. (2020. Decolonizing a fashion school: A critical reflection on fashion education in Australia through an indigenous perspective. *Fashion Theory*, 24(6), 947-949.

Blomberg, J. & Darrah, C. (2015). Towards an anthropology of services. *The Design Journal*, 18(2), 171-192.

Bovaird, T. (2007). Beyond engagement and participation: User and community coproduction of public services. *Public administration review*, 67(5), 846-860.

Butler, J. (2023). *Indigenous voice to parliament: Australia rejects constitutional change as Albanese says vote 'not end of the road'.* https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/oct/14/australian-voters-reject-proposal-for-indigenous-voice-to-parliament-at-historic-referendum

Closing the Gap (nd.) *A new way of working together*. https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/

Costanza-Chock, S. (2020). *Design justice: Community-led practices to build the worlds we need*. MIT Press.

Drouet, L. *et al.,* (2023). Using empathic-centric design in industry: Reflections from the UX researcher, the client, and the method expert. In *Proceedings of the 2nd Empathy-Centric Design Workshop*, 1-9.

Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. Duke University Press.

Fisk, R.P., *et al.* (2018). Design for service inclusion: Creating inclusive service systems by 2050. *Journal of Service Management*, 29(5), 834-858.

Fuad-Luke, A. (2017). Design activism's teleological freedoms as a means to transform our habitus. *Agents of Alternatives: Re-designing our realities*, pp/280-295.

Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (1995). *Ethnography: Principles in practice.* London, UK: Routledge.

Hu, J. *et al.,* (2024). Value-creating practices and barriers for collaboration between designers and artisans: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*, 17(1), 25-36.

Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (2003). *Strategies of qualitative inquiry*. London, UK: Sage Publishing.

Kolko, J. (2012). *Wicked problems: Problems worth solving – A handbook and a call to action*. Austin, TX: Austin Center for Design.

Manzini, E. (2015). *Design when everybody designs. An introduction to design for social innovation.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Mazzarella, F. (2018). *Crafting situated services – Meaningful design for social innovation with textile artisan communities.* (PhD Thesis) Loughborough University.

Mazzarella, F. & Mirza, S. (2024). Decentring fashion – Participatory practices for shifting narratives and regenerating cultures. *DISCERN: International Journal of Design for Social Change, Sustainable Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 5(2), 91-95.

Mazzarella, F., *et al.* (2021). A methodological framework for crafting situated services. *Journal of Service Management*, 32(5), 752-782.

Meroni, A. & Selloni, D. (2018). Design for social innovators. In Walker, S. *et al.* (Eds.), *Design roots: Local products and practices in a globalised world*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.

Mignolo, W.D. (2018). Foreword: On pluriversality and multipolarity. In B. Reiter (Ed.), *Constructing the pluriverse: The geopolitics of knowledge.* Duke University Press, ix-xvi.

Mirza, S. (2024). Power signifiers: The subtle forms of power in design practice with marginalized communities. In: Gray, C. et al. (Eds.) *DRS2024*, 23-28 June 2024, Boston, USA.

Moisin, M. & Gujadhur, T. (2021). *Documenting traditional cultural expressions*. https://www.culturalintellectualproperty.com/_files/ugd/d5b008_7bfdbe5a12814304b5cbb6466264c9fe.pdf

Morgado, S. & Mazzarella, F. (2024). *Refugees as creative change-makers: Evaluation report of DFT and WTRE projects.* London, UK: University of the Arts London.

Needham, C. (2008). Realising the potential of co-production: negotiating improvements in public services. *Social Policy and Society*, 7(2), 221-231.

Reconciliation Australia (nd.). *What is reconciliation?* https://www.reconciliation.org.au/reconciliation/what-is-reconciliation/

Sennett, R. (2008). *The craftsman*. London, UK: Allen Lane.

Soto, M., *et al.* (2021). Building a community through service design and responsiveness to emotions. In: *Arts-based methods for decolonising participatory research*, 123-145.

Thomas, N.J., *et al.* (2011). *Connecting crafts and communities.* Swindon, UK: AHRC.

Tunstall, E. D. (2023). *Decolonizing design: A cultural justice guidebook.* MIT Press.

UNESCO (2022). *Re-shaping policies for creativity. Addressing culture as a global public good.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380474

Willis, A.M. & Elbana, E. (2017). Socially engaged design: A critical discussion with reference to an Egyptian village. *Design Philosophy Papers*, 4(1-2), 33-57.

Yee. J., *et al.* (2024). Invisible designing: Emotional and affective labour in relational participatory practices. In: *Proceedings of PDC'24*, 11-16 August 2024, Sibu, Malaysia, 67-72.

Young, J.O. (2008). *Cultural appropriation and the arts*. Blackwell Publishing.

Zhang, W., *et al.* (2023). 'The located making framework' for sustainable enterprise. In: Zsolnai, L. *et al.* (Eds.) *Value creation for a sustainable world: Innovating for ecological regeneration and human flourishing* (153-186), Palgrave Macmillan.