

DECOLONIZING AID

How We Got Here: Our Working Notes

Overview

Peace Direct's 2020 consultation, [Time to Decolonise Aid](#), reinforces that many current practices and structures within foreign assistance are the legacies of colonialism. Specifically, aid often flows between former colonial powers and their former colonies; funding and decision-making power lay primarily in the Global North; language used in the sector inherently upholds existing unequal power dynamics; and standards set for program design, research, and monitoring and evaluation are created by organizations based in and informed by the same powers in the Global North and their preconceived notions of what defines program "success."

The "decolonization" of aid is a running theme that we have seen when talking about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the international development and humanitarian space. But what exactly does it mean to decolonize aid? As the authors of the Peace Direct report frame it, decolonization refers to the deconstruction or dismantling of "colonial ideologies about the superiority of Western thought and approaches." The international non-governmental organization (INGO) sector needs to be attuned to the many ways it risks replicating colonial power. So many of the global inequities experienced today are the result of the historic (and ongoing) colonialism, exploitation, and structural violence perpetrated by imperialist powers that are now donors in the international development and humanitarian space.

Decolonization goes beyond diversity, equity, and inclusion. It forces us to look deeper at the historicity and the structure of aid—how it maintains structural racial and economic inequalities—and how this ultimately deprives and keeps the Global South from independent growth. As Twasiima P. Bigirwa [frames it](#), decolonization can "only be reached through a reconstruction of power and a reimagining of the world." In other words, decolonizing aid must begin with a shift in mindset from one of charity to one of justice. For INGOs, and by extension INGO staff, the default assumption tends to be that the work being done is positive and that those who work in the INGO sector are intrinsically politically neutral actors navigating complex social and cultural situations and environments within and between other countries. Decolonizing aid involves a necessary reckoning with the outdated assumption that aid work is neutral. Moreover, it necessitates INGOs from the Global North recognizing their past wrongdoings and understanding their responsibility to the countries and communities of the Global South. By doing so, INGOs can set the stage for a new approach to achieving our shared global goals.

Source: Peace Direct



Impact

Colonialism, imperialism, and the continued exploitation following the end of colonial rule helped create today's global inequality and the marginalization of countries and communities in the Global South. Current aid structures—with which we all contend—not only perpetuate this inequality but also deepen it.

White Saviors and the White Gaze

As an inheritant of colonial power relations informed by **white supremacy**, the sector is steeped in the **white gaze** of development, where development and humanitarian work, by default, is defined by the Global North's standards of economic, political, and social success—standards that countries in the Global South have not achieved or perhaps may never achieve.

This structure inherently overvalues the Global North's citizens, culture, knowledge production, and ways of working, which in turn, means that people of the Global South are either excluded or are under pressure to assimilate in order to succeed in the sector. Nationality and race often influence whose voices are heard within aid organizations, who can shape decision-making, who is given opportunities for career growth, and

who receives which level of compensation and benefits. Instead of affected communities and marginalized populations being centered in aid work, actors from the Global North are the ones granted access, agency, and capital. Operating as **white saviors**, there are many documented cases of individuals and groups acting under the banner of an INGO from the Global North that have **wreaked havoc** and caused **immeasurable harm** to the very communities with which INGOs work and seek to serve.

With the lack or complete absence of local voices in positions of decision-making or financial power, communities engaged in INGO projects often do not have the means to effectively tackle the development and humanitarian challenges that impact them directly. The aid sector cannot truly localize, commit to locally-led development, and elevate local leaders without decolonizing its approaches.

Dependency and Aid Flows

The current dominance of aid funding that flows through development and humanitarian organizations based in the Global North also perpetuates unequal power dynamics in the sector, including across the broader ecosystem of INGOs and between local NGOs and INGOs. Lower and middle-income countries are dependent upon the goodwill of donor nations and institutions to receive millions or billions of dollars to support the economic growth and prosperity of their people. This dependency keeps the Global South at the mercy of the Global North, while current aid structures often center donor nations' self-serving interests or foreign policy goals over the goals and needs of historically exploited countries and communities.

Systemic Change

The decentering of whiteness and the lens through which the Global North conceptualizes problems and enacts solutions creates space for a range of approaches to development and humanitarian response that are currently undervalued or ignored. By opening the sector to approaches, knowledge, and practices that are both local and indigenous to operating contexts, INGOs will be even more effective in reaching development goals that are responsive to the needs identified by these communities.

Decolonizing aid provides a framework to help dismantle the aid sector's existing exploitative systems and increase the agency of historically exploited communities to more effectively pursue their own growth and development.

Shifting to a **justice-oriented approach** to development requires donors, especially those located in the Global North, to reexamine their rationales for providing foreign assistance and abandon aid that is solely given based on self-interest. The notion of decolonizing aid challenges us to rethink the purpose of our structures and operations, and to reimagine aid as part of an **equitable and holistic approach**.

Recommendations

1. **Confront and unpack the different ways in which the sector perpetuates unequal power dynamics:** Organizations must recognize and value local perspectives and other ways of gaining and disseminating knowledge.
2. **Acknowledge the history of colonialism, imperialism, and exploitation as a cause of current development challenges:** INGOs should acknowledge this shared history and its implications for the projects they implement abroad, including through trainings.

- As part of this acknowledgment, organizations must also explicitly identify underlying structural racial and unequal power dynamics between Global North/South actors and policies that contribute to the cycle of poverty and dependency to foreign aid.
3. **Elevate human-centered design in all aspects of the aid sector:** Organizations should prioritize participatory grantmaking and program design by making time and creating spaces for collaboration with local actors—including historically marginalized populations—on program designs and approaches.

Working Notes