DECOLONISING PEACE DIRECT

A Learning Paper

January 2026

Introduction

For five years, Peace Direct has worked to decolonise its own practices and advocate for the decolonisation of the wider humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors. This paper critically assesses our own motivations and practices and outlines the key lessons from our experience. We hope this paper will serve as a useful guide to other organisations and individuals on the same journey – whether just embarking, or somewhere along the way.

In recent years, calls to decolonise the humanitarian aid, development and peacebuilding sector have grown louder. However, the term risks becoming a buzzword, being misinterpreted and conflated with other important areas of work, such as Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) and shifting power to local actors.[1]

This paper is also being published at a time when the sector is experiencing political backlash, particularly from the US government, including against concepts like anti-racism and DEI. This backlash, coupled with sweeping cuts to overseas aid budgets, risks stifling vital discussions around reform and transformation of the sector.

Engaging with racism, (de)colonialism and (de)coloniality requires us to remain committed to open, honest reflection despite these external pressures.

Backlash against this work is not new and, like other obstacles on this journey, it must be resisted. We hope that the reflections in this paper will help other organisations further their work to decolonise and avoid the mistakes and missteps we have made along the way.

A note on terminology

Decolonisation in international development, humanitarian intervention and peacebuilding refers to the deconstruction and dismantling of colonial and neocolonial ideologies regarding the superiority of Global North thought and approaches.[2]

While there are many different interpretations of the term, this is the working definition that Peace Direct chose to use in a series of global online consultations that involved over 700 local actors, largely from the Global South, between 2020–2024.

Laying foundations (2004–2020)

Since its founding in 2004, Peace Direct has tried to challenge the norms underpinning the current peacebuilding, humanitarian and development sectors. We have always

believed that local people should be at the forefront of efforts to stop violence and build sustainable peace. Therefore, Peace Direct has consistently opposed the establishment of country offices and the deployment of expatriate staff, arguing that such approaches undermine the agency of local actors.

At the time, this model of shifting power and resources to local leaders was seen as radical. It contrasted sharply with dominant INGO operating models, which involved direct service delivery, country offices and positioning staff from the Global North as country programme managers in the Global South.

In supporting and valuing the work of local peacebuilders, we have, from the beginning, challenged a system built on deeply inequitable colonial practices and norms, although we did not articulate it as such until much later. This core organisational belief was demonstrated in our 2011 report *Coming Home*,[3] which highlighted the importance of local cultural understandings for evaluation, emphasising that they are often more useful or relevant than internationally imposed measures. The publications *Local First* and its sequel *Local First in Practice*, published in 2012 and 2014, also promoted the concept of locally led development, a term now in the mainstream within the sector but less so a decade ago.

Despite these early signs of a principled commitment to systems change, very few of our policies, research or advocacy spoke directly to race, coloniality or decolonisation. Peace Direct's internal governing document from 2007 highlighted the need to promote racial equality in the sector, but institutional knowledge around the subject remained limited.

In 2015, things started to change. The newly appointed CEO, Dylan Mathews, was one of a small handful of non-white CEOs in the sector, and brought with him a personal commitment to anti-racism. However, at this stage, Peace Direct had little funding and was financially unstable. The next few years were therefore focused on reidentifying priorities and promoting Peace Direct's mission to shift power and resources to local peacebuilders.

In 2016, we began reforming our Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) processes following the publication of our research report, *Putting the Local First*.[4] Our research had identified that the sector's existing processes to MEL were too rigid and had a limiting effect on adaptive programming – a critical challenge given local peacebuilders work in

unpredictable environments. **As such, the way MEL was conceived and conducted needed a systemic overhaul.** To start this process internally, we improved the quality of our partnerships at all levels of programming and ensured local partners had greater control and ownership of partnership processes, including MEL. However, this was not internally recognised as a move that actively challenged neo-colonial practices until a few years later.

In 2019, Peace Direct's Board of Trustees approved its first DEI policy and established a cross-organisational DEI working group. This was important preparation for subsequent changes within the organisation. It enabled the staff and Board to discuss issues of race, among other issues, openly for the first time. This helped to socialise the idea that such discussions were not only acceptable, but welcomed.

That same year, Peace Direct's advocacy began to make references to race and discrimination, including at PeaceCon, a major global peacebuilding conference held by the Alliance for Peacebuilding in Washington, DC. There, our CEO spoke on the need to include marginalised voices in peacebuilding processes. Our argument was well received by the audience and raised awareness of exclusion in our sector's approaches.

Racial reckoning in the sector and at Peace Direct (2020–2021)

On 25 May 2020, George Floyd was murdered by Derek Chauvin, a police officer, in the US. This blatant act of racist violence sparked a racial reckoning across the West, including within the humanitarian aid, development and peacebuilding sectors. INGOs began to engage, at varying degrees, with conversations about race.

By this time, Peace Direct had acknowledged the prevalence of racism within the sector. Yet, despite this, the Senior Leadership Team admits that it was unprepared to address the outpouring of frustration and anger that came from staff and the DEI Working Group.

Much of this anger was at the wider system, but the group also criticised the Senior Leadership. Criticism was rooted in the belief that the organisation a) wasn't diverse enough and b) hadn't done enough to support the group to deliver its objectives. We later took action to address some of the group's concerns, such as improving our hiring practices to support diversity at the organisation.

However, we lacked the skills to hold challenging conversations at the time. As a result, internal discussions became adversarial. Notwithstanding the shared goal of a truly decolonial organisation, the Senior Leadership and staff came into these conversations with different perspectives and ideas on how to move forwards, and the arising tensions were challenging to resolve.

For Peace Direct, it was a moment of painful learning. In hindsight the Senior Leadership Team should have provided the nascent DEI Working Group with greater financial and human resources, as well as greater clarity, training and Senior Level participation. This may have supported the group in navigating this difficult moment, and may have helped the organisation find a pathway forward without the tensions that emerged between the group and the Senior Leadership Team.

Time to Decolonise Aid

In the second half of 2020, Peace Direct held a global online consultation with Global South actors and Global North allies to explore how colonial dynamics affected the sector and how practitioners were responding to these issues. The subsequent research report, *Time to Decolonise Aid* (2021),[5] attracted significant interest internationally, generating over 50,000 downloads from more than 100 countries in the first three months.

However, initiating the research project was not straightforward. Many staff in the UK-based research team recognised the limits of their positionality. As a predominantly White team, they believed they lacked the lived experience and understanding necessary to lead a piece of research on race and racism within the sector. The project was able to move forward when a US-based colleague was invited by Senior Leadership to lead the work, bypassing objections from the UK team.

There were two important lessons from that experience:

1

Listening to concerns takes empathy, time and patience, and is necessary in organisations where consultation is highly valued.

2

But if consensus still can't be found, difficult decisions may still need to be taken, which could be unpopular. Nevertheless, they may be the right decisions for the organisation and its mission.

Ultimately, the launch of *Time to Decolonise Aid* successfully sparked conversations in our sector about race, coloniality and decolonisation. Internally, the publication was also met with a strong positive response from staff, contributing to a notable shift in organisational culture and confidence.

The report's external reception helped build momentum and gave us a renewed sense of purpose around these issues, prompting us to reflect critically about these issues both internally and externally. We began to examine our processes, first by applying a decolonial lens to our external communications and then scrutinising our hiring processes.

Both processes led to clear and concrete recommendations that had a tangible impact on our ways of working. For example, we revised our recruitment practices to remove requirements that privileged academic qualifications over lived experience. We also made it explicit that we were looking for people from diverse backgrounds and began advertising on sites that catered to different groups. Not only did this help to diversify our staff team considerably, but it also fostered a culture of openness and acceptance, thus in turn further normalising discussions on race and coloniality. Staff also deepened engagement with partners in the conversation on structural/systemic racism, asking them not only about race and its impact on peacebuilding but for an assessment of our own processes and practices. Our partners welcomed these discussions.

Reimagining Peace Direct's future

In late 2020, the CEO drafted a discussion paper that invited the Board to reimagine Peace Direct's strategy, structure and operations through a decolonial lens. This was useful in socialising the conversation on race and (anti)racism among the Board, without bringing forward a specific proposal or policy recommendation.

Looking back, one of the lessons learned during this time was that while the Board was involved in the early discussions, insufficient time and effort were invested in ongoing Board-level engagement with Peace Direct's decolonising journey. The Board was supportive and saw the alignment with our charitable objectives, but there were missed opportunities in exploring the issue of coloniality at the governance level. The laws, policies and structures in place across the sector and at Peace Direct were (and still are) based on colonial systems of power. More work is needed at the governance level to unlock broader change within Peace Direct and other organisations.

Notwithstanding this missed opportunity, **Peace Direct established a Global Advisory Council, made up entirely of local peacebuilders, to help guide the organisation's strategy and act as a moral compass for our work.** A member of the Board also sat on the Global Advisory Council, ensuring an effective interface between the two bodies. The Global Advisory Council has played a valuable role in guiding Peace Direct's strategy development. However, moving forward, it is important to ensure that its potential is fully realised by imbuing the Council with more decision-making authority and developing a deeper relationship with the Board. Not only would this help place local actors largely from the Global South in spaces of governance, it would but give them greater ability to influence and even shape the priorities of the peacebuilding sector through Peace Direct's advocacy, research and programmes.

In the second half of 2021, we deepened our work on our Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) processes, acknowledging that reporting remains a critical area of power and control in the sector. This included setting up a MEL reference group of local practitioners around the world, which broadened our knowledge base and supported us to develop a learning approach that centres our local partners. For example, the reporting parameters – what is reported, in what way and for what purpose – are now being set by our local partners, not by Peace Direct. We also began developing a locally led evaluation guide based on practices that challenged coloniality in the sector, including lessons from our new approaches with our partners, which will be released soon.

Another important change made during this time was the decision, driven by the CEO and supported by Senior Leadership, to abandon growth targets. As with most non-profit organisations, the existing strategy had ambitions for growth. However, through discussions with the Board, the CEO felt that such ambitions were incompatible with a commitment to truly shift power and resources to local peacebuilding actors.

While the growth of INGOs has led to an increase in the number of communities and people being supported, it has also had a disastrous effect on the ability of local civil society to grow, secure funding, and lead their own efforts. This has entrenched deeply held notions of who holds expertise – and who does not – across the sector.

For Peace Direct,

abandoning the idea that growth equals success was an important step in moving the organisation away from the traditional INGO expansionist mindset and ways of working .

This, in turn, helped staff think about their roles and ambition for the organisation differently, with decolonisation of the sector at the forefront of our collective goals.

Deepening the work (2021–2024)

By the summer of 2021, it was clear that our organisation was committed to structural and systemic change, but it remained unclear how best to organise ourselves to do this. As a result, progress was slow in both areas. In 2022, to address this, Peace Direct established an internal Decolonising Systems Working Group (DSWG) that was responsible for driving both our internal and external change agenda. The DSWG was set up alongside the DEI Working Group and with a distinct focus, intending that the DEI Group could focus on the full spectrum of its mandate while the DSWG advanced the decolonisation agenda.

The DSWG had – and continues to have – regular engagement from the CEO, rectifying our previous mistake of failing to include senior-level input and support for the DEI Working Group. **Senior-level involvement has ensured that the decolonising agenda remains a high priority area of work for the organisation.** The group has had the support and resources it needs, even when many in the wider sector have expressed discomfort with the term decolonisation or completely disregarded its importance. The presence of senior leadership could have made staff feel as though they were not able to be completely open with their feedback, but the Group's establishment coincided with the **vital development of an internal culture of open and honest critique.**

THE DSWG WAS ESTABLISHED TO FOCUS ON FOUR DISTINCT PILLARS OF WORK:

Pillar 1

Embedding the conversation within key institutions and organisations, building a critical mass of people who were agitating for change.

Pillar 2

Operationalising the change agenda within organisations that were demonstrating a willingness to change, including producing practical guides and recommendations for the sector.

Pillar 3

Rebalancing the conversation on decolonising between Global North actors and Global South actors, recognising that Global North actors were in danger of dominating the conversation.

Pillar 4

Deepening Peace Direct's internal change process, both in terms of operations and governance.

The DSWG was also tasked with updating the whole organisation regularly – a necessary process to ensure organisation-wide visibility and buy-in.

In 2023, to support Pillar 4, an internal secondment was established to review and improve existing practices, policies and behaviours through a decolonial lens. This process began with developing a set of indicators to measure our progress against the recommendations we'd put forward in *Time to Decolonise Aid* and the subsequent research reports *Race, Power and Peacebuilding* (2022) and *Transforming Partnerships*

in International Cooperation (2023). **Having staff time dedicated to ensuring implementation of those recommendations has been vital in maintaining momentum.**

The secondment has demonstrated **the importance of embedding an understanding and commitment to all forms of anti-racism across all areas of the organisation**. This has been enabled by direct engagement with every single department to ensure that this important commitment does not become siloed.

Our strengthened commitment to anti-racism led to significant organisational decisions in line with our anti-racism commitments. In July, the UK government passed the 'Illegal Migration Bill', which gave the Home Secretary power to ban anyone travelling to the UK by boat from being allowed to seek refugee status or to ever seek UK citizenship – fundamentally, this drastically reduced legal and human rights protections for asylum seekers. In direct response to this Bill, Peace Direct made a significant decision to no longer seek or accept funding from the UK government.[6] By doing this, Peace Direct actively challenged racist government policies and ensured that we were in active solidarity with all those who have been displaced by violent conflict.

However, while there was progress with relation to anti-racism, throughout 2023 the aforementioned DEI Working Group began to lose momentum, ultimately leading to an indefinite pause later in the year. Staff changes led to a more 'fluid' membership structure, with rotating or ad-hoc attendance from staff in each team rather than a core set of committed members. But there was also a lack of clarity on the group's purpose and remit, the requirements of participants, and who was accountable to whom, as well as confusion about the overlap with the Decolonising Systems Working Group.

Efforts to reconfigure and restart the DEI Working Group are ongoing, with the intention to address the fundamental issues that had been overlooked previously.

Transforming our partnerships

While researching the *Transforming Partnerships guide*, we collaborated with Peace Direct's local partners to evaluate our partnership processes and redistribute power. This included a partnership survey, which allowed partners to share their feedback anonymously. A group learning exchange also enabled partners to voice their concerns

together. **Ultimately, we learned the need to value humility as a key building block of all our partnerships, and prioritise the long-term financial sustainability of our partners.**

We also learned that **many problematic practices go unnoticed due to their ubiquity in the sector.** For example, some staff who had joined Peace Direct from larger humanitarian and development INGOs internalised the assumption that accountability meant local partners being accountable to funders and intermediaries. In our sector, this way of working is often imbued with mistrust towards local partners and lacking a sense of accountability to the local communities our partners work with. We therefore strengthened our internal processes and guidelines as well as existing mutual accountability mechanisms in our partnerships, ensuring we are as accountable to our partners as they are with us.

These changes formed part of a broad redevelopment of our partnerships approach, led by one of our international programmes managers, which explicitly acknowledges and attempts to rebalance unequal power dynamics and centre local agency.

There are several key takeaways from these efforts to embed a decolonial approach across the processes and practices of our organisation:

- It was essential to question and evaluate all areas of work, particularly assumptions about 'how things are done', through a decolonial lens with openness and humility.

- Our internal evaluations had to involve local partners, through truly open and honest discussions as well as opportunities for anonymous feedback.

- Changing the way we value knowledge and decentring Western knowledge systems helped us to not only develop a clearer path to decolonisation internally and across the sector, but also to become more effective at shifting power and resources to local peacebuilders.

Conclusion

The decolonising agenda has fast become a mainstay topic of conversation for the humanitarian, peacebuilding and development sector. However, we have not yet achieved a critical mass of people agitating for change within the sector. For most organisations, this is uncharted territory, where a practical path remains unclear.

What we have learned through our own journey is that **without continuous, honest reflection on an internal level, we will only continue to produce the same coloniality that we are actively opposing externally.** We hope that this learning paper will help organisations in our sector to recommit to this important agenda and find that practical path for change, avoiding the mistakes Peace Direct has made.

Key lessons and recommendations

Be transparent

One of the greatest challenges has been managing staff's expectations of organisational change and wider sector change. It was not possible, nor desirable, to move at the speed of people's highest expectations. Communicating this early and regularly is important, particularly in light of the tensions that arise from making greater progress in some areas and slower progress in others.

Be prepared for tough decisions

Decolonising the sector will require painful choices to be made about your organisation's strategy, structure and identity. If your organisation is not willing to consider such changes, ask yourself whether you are ready to embark upon such a journey.

Build solid foundations

DEI is not a substitute for decolonisation, but it is a vital when forming non prejudicial and anti-racist foundations for structural change. It is important to commit to DEI at all levels of the organisation, from Board/Governance level, to Senior Leadership, to staff, particularly when DEI is under threat.

Meet discomfort with empathy

Holding spaces to discuss racism can be uncomfortable, and it is highly likely that mistakes will be made. We must be prepared for this and enter these spaces with empathy. Developing a culture of openness and acceptance is key to normalising conversations on race and (de)coloniality.

Transform partnerships

Adopting a decolonial approach requires an organisation to change the way it engages with its partners. Trust, open communication, flexible funding and the prioritisation of local ownership should be the foundation of all partnerships.
See *Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation*.

Show solidarity

An act or stance of solidarity, such as a statement or financial boycott, can embolden practitioners to challenge existing colonial practices. For us, this included an explicit rejection of any funding sources that reinforce racism.

Centre local knowledge

Decentring Western knowledge systems is fundamental to shifting power and resources to local actors. For example, programme design or MEL processes should be led by local partners rather than pushed into externally imposed frameworks.

What's next for Peace Direct?

Our internal secondment and Decolonising Systems Working Group will continue to lead internal efforts to decolonise Peace Direct, with senior leadership support and extensive buy-in across the staff.

Next steps will include broadening and normalising conversations around race while simultaneously identifying innovative practices that challenge the presence of coloniality through learning sessions, workshops, blogs and informal spaces. From this, we will develop internal guidance and/or a series of tools that will help staff to reflect on existing practices through a decolonial lens. We aim to establish 'decolonising champions' within each department to support this work. These champions will work together and learn from each other, provide status updates on each team's progress, and offer feedback to their teams.

Having recently established a Gender Working Group, we are also currently rescoping our DEI Working Group to ensure it has the power and resources to effectively respond to issues relating to the full spectrum of DEI, not just race. The secondment role will act as a bridge between the DEI, Gender and Decolonising Systems Working Groups, to ensure learnings are shared and embedded across all three and to prevent duplication.

Finally, we will continue to research sector best practices on decolonising and ensure any learnings can feed into other areas of our work, including MEL, programme design, communications and finance.

Endnotes

1   Adama Coulibaly, '*Decoding Development Buzzwords: Understanding the Meaning of Localization and Decolonization*' (EPICAfrica),
available at: https://epic-africa.org/decoding-development-buzzwords-understanding-the-meaning-of-localization-and-decolonization/.

2   Peace Direct, *Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation* (2023).
Available at: www.peacedirect.org/transforming-partnerships/.

3   Peace Direct, *Coming Home: A case study of community led disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration in D.R.Congo* (2011).
Available at: https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Coming-Home.pdf.

4   Peace Direct, *Putting Local First: Learning to adapt when measuring change* (2016).
Available at: https://www.peacedirect.org/putting-the-local-first/.

5   Peace Direct, *Time to Decolonise Aid* (2021).
Available at: https://www.peacedirect.org/time-to-decolonise-aid/.

6   Peace Direct, '*We are no longer seeking UK government funding*' (2023).
Available at: https://www.peacedirect.org/we-are-no-longer-seeking-uk-government-funding.