Time to Decolonise Aid

Insights and lessons from a global consultation

Executive Summary

About this report

In November 2020, Peace Direct in collaboration with Adeso, the Alliance for Peacebuilding and Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security, convened a three-day online consultation to discuss the issue of structural racism and how to 'Decolonise Aid'. Over 150 people from the development, humanitarian aid, and peacebuilding sectors took part in the consultation over three days, and we are indebted to all those who shared their insights, stories and analysis.

Introduction

As discussions about unequal power dynamics in the international aid system have entered the mainstream, local activists have become increasingly vocal about how power and resources in the system remain dominated by and between, certain organisations and relationships largely based in the Global North.

Despite commitments to address the inequities in the system, most notably announced at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in 2016, little progress has been made in many key areas. This includes funding for local organisations and the way that decisions, power and control is still held by a relatively small number of donors and INGOs.

Following the Black Lives Matter protests that began in US in 2013 and gained global prominence in the summer of 2020, those working in the aid sector have been forced to confront the reality that their own work is steeped in structural racism, something which has been barely discussed or acknowledged until very recently.

Decolonising development, humanitarian aid and peacebuilding – the movement to address and dismantle racist and discriminatory structures and norms that are hidden in plain sight in the aid system – is emerging as an urgent, vital and long overdue discussion which adds greater weight to the existing calls to transform the system. If policymakers, donors, practitioners, academics and activists do not begin to address structural racism and what it means to decolonise aid, the system may never be able to transform itself in ways that truly shift power and resources to local actors.

Key findings

↗ Many current practices and attitudes in the aid system mirror and are derived from the colonial-era, which most organisations and donors in the Global North are still reluctant to acknowledge. Certain modern-day practices and norms reinforce colonial dynamics and beliefs such as the 'White saviour' ideology visible in fundraising and communications imagery used by INGOs, to the organisational structures of INGOs in the Global South and the attitudes of some White international aid workers working in Global South.

↗ Aid flows between former colonial powers and former colonised regions often mirror their past colonial relationships, with decision-making power concentrated in the Global North.

↗ Structural racism is so deeply embedded in the everyday culture and working practice of those in the sector that it has affected the way local staff regard their own communities and how they engage with INGOs.

↗ Some of the language used in the aid system reinforces discriminatory and racist perceptions of non-White populations. The phrase 'Capacity building' was cited as one example that suggests that local communities and organisations lack skills, while other terms, such as 'field expert' perpetuate images of the Global South as 'uncivilised.'

↗ Many Global North aid sector practitioners perceive themselves, and the wider sector, as operating neutrally, which is not only a fiction, it also reinforces the 'white saviour' and 'white gaze' mentality that has its roots in colonialism.

↗ Structural racism benefits organisations in the Global North and also those from the Global South who know how to 'play' the system. The most widespread example cited in the consultation was funding opportunities for programmes and research which benefit a relatively small number of 'usual suspects' i.e. INGOs with pre-existing relationships with donors.

↗ One of the most obvious manifestations of structural racism in the sector is the parallel system for employing staff in the Global South, not only in terms of salaries and benefits offered to Global South staff compared to the Global North counterparts, but also in how skills and experience are devalued in practitioners from the Global South.

↗ Programme and research design are rooted in Western values and knowledge systems meaning that many programmes inadvertently create a standard based on the West that communities in the Global South are required to meet. Local knowledge is, by default, devalued.

↗ The challenges faced by individual practitioners of colour are amplified if they belong to other marginalised groups, including women, the LGBTQ* community, the disabled community, the non-Anglophone community, etc. Attempts to bridge the global-local divide often focuses on a particular identity group, thereby failing to incorporate an intersectional approach.

How structural racism shows up in the sector

Attitudes

Donor and INGO assumptions of the inherent neutrality of their work; that local communities lack capacity and skills and require external training; that local communities can't be trusted to manage funds

Recruitment

Implicit bias in recruiting western educated, white staff into management positions over locally educated staff

Strategies

INGO emphasis on professionalization and impartiality that implicitly devalue local knowledge and ways of working. Organisational strategies that prioritise income growth and expansion of staffing/activities over shifting power to local actors

Knowledge Generation and Analysis

Implicit preference for western led analysis of contexts in the Global South. This includes the dominance of western models of monitoring and evaluation.

Funding

Calls for proposals limited to western INGOs or NGOs of a certain size and structure; Due diligence requirements that exclude local organisations; lower risk threshold when dealing with local orgs.

Language

References to low capacity of local actors and 'beneficiaries'; of 'least developed' countries; risks of fraud and mismanagement

Relationships

Establishing networks and ways of working that privilege relationships with people from the Global North, including informal discussions where resource allocation decisions are made

Organisational Structures

Establishment and maintenance of INGO country offices which extends and entrenches the INGO footprint rather than reducing it over time

Partnerships with local actors

Donors and INGOs seeking 'implementing partners' and establishing disempowering partnerships that focus on a contractor-contractee relationship

Fundraising

INGO fundraising/communications that portray people in the Global South as helpless and without agency, to generate sympathy and funding, and to reinforce the notion of the white saviour or 'professional' INGO

Recommendations

Recommendations for donors, INGOs and policymakers

↗ Acknowledge that structural racism exists

Acknowledging that structural racism exists does not erase the good that the sector does, nor does it signify a complete rejection of international assistance/cooperation. Moreover, acknowledgement does not imply personal guilt. Nevertheless, there is a collective responsibility to tackle the problem. Donors and INGOs can help by auditing their assumptions and practices, in the process assessing how structural racism may be showing up in their work (see diagram pg 6). This could involve examining how ingrained racist, discriminatory or biased assumptions have impacted the donor or INGO's relationship with local organisations and people, especially if local actors hold multiple intersecting marginalised identities. An important first step would be to put a public statement on the organisation's website and in its communication materials acknowledging its power and position within the aid system, the biases that may have informed the organisation's past actions, and the systemic power dynamics that privilege certain people over others.

↗ Encourage conversations with grantees and communities about power

Donors, policymakers and INGOs need to spend as much time listening to the concerns of local groups and communities about the imbalances of power in the system as they do about their material, economic and skills needs. Conversations about power, who holds it and how it is wielded will not often be raised by local groups. Thus, donors and INGOs need to allow opportunities for a critique of their power and practices. This could be started by asking grantees to complete an anonymous survey that solicits their perceptions of the organisation, its staff and its past interactions with them. This can then be built on by gathering more detailed feedback from grantees. Such a process could both form the basis of a conversation and create the conditions that would allow for this.

↗ Create space for change

The changes needed in the system will be driven by actors across the spectrum, so it is important that donors and INGOs create spaces and opportunities for local groups, organisations and grantees to share experiences and strategise together. It is especially important to create spaces centred around those with more marginalised identities, such as women, youth and disabled people. While such strategising may lead to groups challenging an organisation or individual's power, they must be prepared to accept this, however uncomfortable. In fact, if a conversation about power is not uncomfortable, it is unlikely that open or honest opinions are being shared, or that the necessary enabling environment has been created. Donors and INGOs should also be aware that some groups will claim space for change, rather than waiting to be invited into a newly created space, and must be open to relinquishing control of these processes.

↗ Mind your language

Reassessing existing language, as well as adopting new language and terminologies, can help in shifting from frameworks rooted in colonial histories to new, inclusive and creative approaches. Donors and INGOs should phase out terms that are no longer appropriate, such as 'beneficiaries', 'capacity building' and even 'aid' (a term used in this report). Local communities should be allowed to lead the change in terminology, with organisations deferring to them where possible and re-evaluating where not.

↗ Encourage a culture of openness to critique

A culture needs to be created that is actively opposed to racist, discriminatory and prejudiced language and practices. This requires everyone to speak up when they witness incidents of racism and/or discrimination, rather than putting the responsibility on non-White, non-Western actors. This requires all organisations to establish safe spaces for internal critique, particularly for people of colour within White-dominated organisations. These safe spaces must be cognisant of gender, age and any other factors that might impact someone's willingness to critique. Moreover, leaders of organisations should acknowledge their own failings to encourage a culture of self-reflection and honesty.

↗ Fund courageously

'Fund courageously' is an invitation to funders to create funding pathways that are more accessible and inclusive, as well as to accept greater levels of uncertainty and possible failure. When funders accept the possibility of programme failure, it opens the door to innovative and flexible funding approaches, such as funders taking on the brunt of the bureaucratic work or adopting context-specific measures of success. Efforts and examples in this realm include organisations pooling funds to mitigate risks, direct funding, PEER funding, the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, setting targets for the provision of unrestricted funding for local organisations, adapting due diligence requirements for local organisations, and modifying eligibility criteria that give preferential treatment to Western INGOs.

↗ Recruit differently

Organisations must end the practice of first seeking expatriate staff for any position based overseas. Instead, it should be assumed that all positions can be filled by local staff. For those organisations based in the 'Global North', INGOs should ensure they have policies and strategies to recruit a more diverse pool of staff. Resources such as the WCAPS 'Orgs in Solidarity' 12-point solidarity statement should be used as a basis for such work.

↗ Invest in indigenous knowledge

Part of decolonising the aid system is examining what is considered legitimate data and who is considered skilled enough to collect it. Funders and organisations should invest in local researchers rather than funding Western researchers' travel, with research rooted in local indigenous values and incorporating indigenous methods. When designing a programme, INGOs should work with local leaders to examine existing models, logframes and theories of change, and adopt new ones rooted in local approaches. Programmes must be evaluated through culturally-specific frameworks, established by local practitioners. Expertise should be reframed to require the inclusion of guidance from, among others, youth experts, feminist experts, women experts and faith/religious experts, thereby allowing for contextual solutions, technical expertise and active locally-led decision-making. To ensure that the relationship between funders, INGOs and local communities is not extractive, the results of the programme and/or research must be shared with the local community, and should serve its needs above those of the organisation.

Recommendations for INGOs specifically

↗ **No more White gaze fundraising**

INGOs should end the practice of using imagery and language that diminishes the agency and dignity of communities in its fundraising/marketing materials. Moreover, they should conduct an audit of their external and internal communications to provide a benchmark for future improvements, and consider alternative and collaborative approaches to documenting efforts in the Global South.

↗ **Adopt a transition mindset for organisational strategies**

INGOs should consider adopting a transition mindset, putting in place clear milestones for the transfer of power and resources to local organisations. Special attention should be paid to ensure the local organisations that are most proximate to the Global North and most familiar with the international aid system are not privileged. Such a transition mindset should be enshrined in clear organisational strategies that measure success according to the extent to which an INGO is reducing, rather than expanding, its traditional organisational footprint (for example, the number of staff it employs, the level of income it attracts and the number of people and communities it directly serves). Direct implementation should be phased out in favour of a shift of resources to local organisations and reserved only for exceptional situations at the request of local organisations. Country offices should have clear targets for supporting indigenous civil society organisations, including channelling at least 25% of funding to local organisations, with much more ambitious targets set for the next 5–10 years.

↗ **Avoid localisation spin**

INGOs should avoid 'spinning' (i.e. reinterpreting or reframing) localisation to defend a particular organisational position or to justify the status quo. Examples of this practice include defining an INGO country office as 'local' based on the number of locally employed staff it has, the registration of the organisation as a 'National' organisation and the percentage of funds that it raises nationally, rather than from its international 'parent'. If an INGO has a country office, it should accept this identity as an INGO and explain through external communications that it is aware of the power it has and the responsibility it bears to relinquish power.

↗ **Re-evaluate partnerships with local organisations**

INGOs should end the practice of seeking short-term 'implementing partners' and instead establish long-term strategic partnerships that are not determined by project cycles. Peace Direct's nine partnership principles of effective partnerships might be a good place for INGOs to start. These are (1) Acknowledge and challenge power imbalances; (2) Confront racism and prejudice; (3) Support and invest in local leadership; (4) Strive for mutual accountability and learning; (5) Establish long term partnerships; (5) Provide unrestricted funding; (6) Be adaptable, and promote adaptability and resilience with your partners; (7) Consider non-financial resources as part of any partnership; and (9) Ensure that partnership transitions are a collaborative endeavour.

Recommendations for individuals

↗ **Reflect on your identity**

In order to dismantle the pervasive 'White gaze' that still dominates the aid, development and peacebuilding sectors, every practitioner – both those who are locally based and those who work internationally – must reflect on their motivation for being involved in this industry. Questions to be asked include: What privileges do your identities afford you? In what ways have you reinforced the 'White gaze' of the sectors?

↗ **Remain humble**

The history of the aid industry is built on the idea that the West holds the answer. Disassembling the established hierarchy requires international practitioners to approach their work with greater humility. It is vital that they remain open to criticism and feedback from actors in the Global South, and that they reflect on those comments. Part of de-privileging Western knowledge is remaining open to local approaches to knowledge and context-specific understandings of development, humanitarian aid and peacebuilding.

↗ **Shift access and power**

Throughout the consultation, participants shared numerous experiences of a White person from the Global North being given preferential access and opportunities over a person of colour from the Global South. Global North practitioners can thus help shift power towards excluded communities by redirecting opportunities towards marginalised practitioners who would otherwise be overlooked. Those with institutional power and leadership positions could encourage openness around conversations about racism, discrimination and decolonisation. The role played by practitioners from the Global North in decolonising these fields will sometimes be to leverage their power to push for inclusion and sometimes to step back, making space for local practitioners to occupy the space.

↗ **Organise**

Local activists and practitioners wishing to challenge structural racism and shift power in the system will often find themselves excluded from discussions with those in the system who wish to retain power, or even vilified by them. To address this, it is important that activists organise themselves and connect with other groups both nationally and internationally. There are networks and groupings that support this agenda, such as the NEAR network, CIVICUS and the START network, as well as more informal groups of activists willing to raise this issue at a national and international level.