



ACTION PACK:
Episode 5 - Good intentions
aren't enough



What to know:

Why is it so hard to decolonise?

In the Transforming Partnerships report, we acknowledge an uncomfortable truth: *“Reform processes in international aid and development have been ongoing for over twenty years... Yet, despite the lofty commitments and positive rhetoric, it has increasingly become apparent that many approaches are still rooted in neo-colonial hierarchies...”*

Our guests in this episode identified a number of factors that slow the pace of change and stand in the way of our efforts to decolonise:

“you have those who are unwilling, who don't see themselves as being part of the issue” – Dr Véronique Barbelet.

Many individuals and organisations struggle to recognise their role in perpetuating systemic injustices. This is two-fold: 1) a reluctance to acknowledge the harms at all; and 2) being blinded by our own good intentions, assuming they themselves can prevent harm.

- Chernor Bah: *“there's all this complex intertwined levels of harm... very few people are willing to start by even acknowledging all that harm. The assumption is that good intent, to the extent that is packaged as that is sufficient.”*
- Gunjan Veda highlighted, *“The most difficult thing in this world is to acknowledge that you are part of the problem. That you have created, accentuated, intensified the very problem that you have been trying to fight.”*

She referenced *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*.

Clinging to norms: Véronique highlighted that our understanding of what makes good work or research is dominated by Global North norms informed by racism. *“we're a bit stuck in the strict boundaries of what counts as evidence, what counts as knowledge, and what it should look like when you communicate it or publish it.”*

Assumptions: We should be going into partnerships with an open discussion about what roles we each want to play, instead of projecting our assumptions onto each other.

The problem with power: Ishani Ida Cordeiro, Gunjan Veda and Chernor Bah described the barriers to shifting power: 1) not trusting that others will use power for good; 2) the Global North being unwilling to let go of power; 3) the onus of challenging these power structures are always on on those who don't have the power to challenge it to begin with. The *Transforming Partnerships* report also outlined the challenges with shifting power – take a look on the next page.

Why have Global North organisations been reluctant to talk about their power?

Participants suggested that the reluctance to discuss power and power imbalances has four main roots. First, many donors and INGOs in the Global North wish to maintain their power. As one anonymous participant noted:

“I think it’s all skewed to maintain the power of larger middleman INGOs. There are no equal partnerships when it comes to local and global partners. This partnership conversation is geared towards suppressing local partners to the context as opposed to allowing them to access international platforms out of the fear of disrupting the status quo.”

Looking through this lens, partnerships will continue to be unequal because Global North actors have designed the system in that way. Self-preservation by retaining power, influence and funding are all reasons participants suggested the Global North may have for maintaining the status quo.

A second explanation is that Global North actors are wilfully ignorant of the neo-colonial attitudes that they hold and that perpetuate stereotypes about the ‘capacity’ of local communities and actors, who are still perceived as in need of ‘saving’. As Christiane Essombe explained, this perception:

“Ultimately reinforces the narrative according in which aid and salvation can only come either from the West, westernised folks or a westernisation of systems and processes.”

This paternalism and racism, which was covered extensively in *Time to Decolonise Aid*, depicts Global South actors as incapable of leading their own development without external support. What’s more, continued perceptions of Global South actors as ‘learners’ rather than ‘experts’ is exacerbated by the narratives spread through problematic storytelling and representation within the sector. This allows for the legitimisation of intermediary (and micromanaging) Global North actors, who need to hold onto power, as to share it would allegedly risk programme funds, reputation, and programme outputs.

A third explanation is that INGOs in particular cannot imagine a world in which they are not needed. This failure of imagination allows the Global North actors to perpetuate the myth that they need to continue to exert a dominant role in the sector in order to continue to save lives. But, as Sawssan Abou-Zahr highlighted in our consultation:


“Local actors know the needs of their communities best; they should be heard, and more importantly respected. They don’t need to be rescued by international superheroes, they just need a space to perform and advocate their rights.”

A final explanation is that Global North actors lack the skills and experience to talk about power. In previous global consultations held by Peace Direct, participants have noted that the increasingly contested term ‘capacity-building’ also applies to Global North actors, who lack the capacity to analyse their own power and privilege. In a sector where Global North actors are only slowly coming to terms with the harm they may have caused in the pursuit of ‘doing good’, reflecting on how power is held and maintained, consciously and unconsciously, appears to be a very difficult process for many organisations.


What to do:

Honesty, humility & solidarity

Frame your decolonisation efforts through true solidarity. Cherner Bah advocates for partnerships rooted in mutual liberation rather than saviourism:

A graphic of two overlapping blue speech bubbles, with the top one slightly behind the bottom one.

“If you understand that the reason you're giving up power is because you want to create a different and a new world then it's a very different conversation.”
“You're not doing it because you're doing it from the goodness of your heart. That's foundationally patronising. You're not doing it because you want to save me, that's foundationally problematic. If it is about, you understand intrinsically that your liberation is inherent in my liberation. If you understand that you are not free until I'm free. If you understand that this word is not safe, until I'm safe, that you're not liberated until I'm liberated, then you're then you get a real stake. Then you're like, ‘oh, I have to do this because this is the reality. This is doing it for me. I'm not doing it for you...’ This is what true solidarity ought to be. It's not it's not trying to save the other. It's understanding that I do it, because I do it to be. I do it to be free.”

A graphic of two overlapping blue speech bubbles, with the top one slightly behind the bottom one.

Embrace humility and reckon with harm. Educate yourself about the structural problems in this sector. Engage in self-reflection about your complicity in systemic issues, and envision a more positive role you can play - reaching beyond your intentions into action. Use *Time to Decolonise Aid* as an entry point into the problems in the sector, and follow-up with *Race, Power and Peacebuilding* and *Transforming Partnerships* for deep dives into the peacebuilding sub-sector and building better partnerships respectively.

Revolutionise knowledge production. Dr. Véronique Barbelet calls for a rethinking of what is considered as knowledge and how we communicate knowledge and evidence and findings. In the *Transforming Partnerships* guide, we encourage readers to recognise and value local expertise and indigenous knowledge systems - shaking off beliefs about the superiority of Global North knowledge, practices and approaches.

Talk to each other. When building partnerships, it's vital to start not with assumptions but with conversation. What can you each bring to the partnership? What value can you add? How do you want to work together?

Diagram How structural racism shows up in the sector



Building block 4

Practice / Roles and responsibilities



JOINT PRACTICES

- Commit to reassessing how roles and responsibilities will shift over time, in particular how any role assigned to the Global North partner should diminish.

→ Read: 'Roles and Skills of partnership brokering' from Partnership Brokers Association.

GLOBAL SOUTH ACTORS

- Use approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry to identify your organisational strengths and assets, rather than gaps, in order to help inform the roles and responsibilities that you should take.
 - Take a look at Positive Psychology's visual guide on 'How to Apply Appreciative Inquiry'.
- Proactively communicate with prospective partners about the roles that you expect to play in the partnership.

POWER AWARE BEHAVIOURS

- Recognise the inherent power that you hold as the organisation closest to the issue and community. Where there are gaps, or you work with other national or local partners who are closer to the issue you are trying to address, apply the same questions applicable to Global North partners.

GLOBAL NORTH ACTORS

- Begin by asking yourself: 'Are we actively working towards a point when we are no longer necessary?'
 - Read: 'Zombie Missions: Organizations that should close but won't' on NonProfit AF.
 - Take a look at the resources from Stopping As Success, which equip development organisations to effectively transition to local leadership.
- Have an honest and open discussion with prospective partners about the role that you hope to play in the partnership, while being open to taking on different roles that might emerge to better benefit the partnership.
 - Take a look at WaterAid's 'Partnerships in Practice Tools'.
- Unlearn assumptions about who holds technical expertise and what technical expertise is. Reflect on how much of your work is focused on technical vs transformative outcomes.
 - Read: 'Unlearning: The Other Side of Skills/Knowledge Acquisition' by Julie Winkle Giulioni.
- Unlearn assumptions about what 'capacity' gaps exist with your Global South partner. Reflect on the capacity gaps that you may have.
 - Read: 'Time to rethink "capacity" in the Global South' by Global Fund for Community Foundations.
 - Read: 'Rethinking capacity and complementarity for a more local humanitarian action' from Humanitarian Policy Group.
- When recruiting, consider a broader range of skills beyond technical skills or experience – include relational skills, intercultural communication skills, and lived experience.
 - Read: 'Lived experience isn't an optional add-on' in Peridot.
 - Read: 'Why employers value intercultural skills' in the British Council's magazine.



Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation

A practical resource for civil society, donors, INGOs and intermediaries



The guidance and recommendations in this pack are just a snippet of the advice collated from activists across the Global South and North. To learn more, and find more ways to put decolonisation into practice, read the Transforming Partnerships guide in full, via peacedirect.org

