



CENTRE FOR
HUMANITARIAN
LEADERSHIP

Transformation in the aid and development sector

Decolonising Aid



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Decolonising aid is a call from many humanitarian actors for a fundamental shift in power and resources, grown out of concerns that the current international aid system is part of a colonial construct that operates on Western terms and from Western points of view, perpetuating power imbalances between the global North and global South.¹ The report *Time to Decolonise Aid*—which outlines the findings from a global study into the colonial legacy of the aid system—notes that while “according to its original usage, ‘decolonisation’ refers to the process of a state withdrawing from a former colony, leaving it independent”, practitioners point out that “the term has a secondary meaning, referring also to the process of deconstructing colonial ideologies regarding the superiority and privilege of Western thought and approaches”.²

Practitioners contend that this paradigm shift will require a multi-pronged approach and collective action from both global North and South institutions to work in solidarity to drive the agenda forward, to address existing power dynamics and existing norms and bias, and “requires a commitment to the redistribution of power and resources”.³

This section collates thought-provoking writing and research, as well as current conversations, movements and dialogues taking place in this space, illustrating the actions that can be taken to ‘decolonise aid’. This involves shifting organisational culture and communications, including around power dynamics and the use of certain language and how stories are portrayed, through to diversifying governing boards,⁴ and rethinking programme implementation, project management and operational structures.⁵

¹ See Degan Ali on the systemic racism impacting humanitarian response, Devex (2019). Accessed at: <https://www.devex.com/news/q-a-degan-ali-on-the-systemic-racism-impacting-humanitarian-responses-95083>

² *Decolonization and Indigenization: A Guide for Front-Line Staff Student Services and Advisors*, BCcampus (2018)

³ *Time to Decolonise Aid*, Peace Direct, (2021), p. 37

⁴ See Decolonizing the humanitarian nonprofit sector: Why governing boards are key, Center for Policy Development (2021). Accessed at: <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/decolonizing-humanitarian-nonprofit-sector-why-governing-boards-are-key>

⁵ See Are country offices preventing us from decolonising development?, Bond (2021). Accessed at: <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2021/05/are-country-offices-preventing-us-from-decolonising-development>

Case study 1: [Population Works Africa](#) ([PopWorks Africa](#))

PopWorks is a network of consultants that “support innovative African led development solutions that are locally rooted”, with a vision to help “open up much-needed spaces, opportunities, and resources to let young Africans work for the good of their communities”. They offer a range of services, from products and trainings that focus on decolonising development, through to strategic planning and program development with youth-led organisations and building bridges through partnering with INGOs to bolster current programming for young African people.

Case study 2: [#CharitySoWhite campaign](#)

In August 2019, [#CharitySoWhite](#), whose vision is to “see a shift in fundamental structures” across the aid sector, was sparked by the discovery of training materials by Citizens Advice (a UK charity) that were “deeply concerning racist stereotypes about communities of colour”. In spurring the online conversation about racism in the charity sector, “people of colour were encouraged to tweet about their experiences of racism in the third sector”, in which thousands of individuals, “from interns to board members”, began posting about their experiences and tagging the movement’s hashtag. The movement’s website also chronicles the campaign’s background, calls to action, resources, and a blog.

Research, reports & policy papers:

- [Time to Decolonise Aid: Insights and Lessons from a Global Consultation](#), Peace Direct (May 2021). This report documents inputs from three days of online, global consultations by Peace Direct, Adeso, the Alliance for Peacebuilding, and Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security. It includes contributions from 158 activists, decision-makers, practitioners, journalists, and academics. It documents participants and guest contributors' local experience and insights on "how they envision a decolonised system that is truly inclusive".

- [Will Global Health Survive its Decolonisation?](#) *The Lancet*, Volume 396, Issue 10263, Abimbola, A & Pai, M. (Nov. 2020). The authors in this article consider what "a future in which global health is decolonised" would look like. The authors contend that "global health will only survive its decolonisation, if its practitioners commit to true transformation", and that "global health must become actively anti-supremacist, and also anti-oppressionist and anti-racist".

Conceptual frameworks, guides & tools:

- [Benchmarking Race, Inclusion, and Diversity in Global Engagement: 2021 Survey Results](#) (June 2021). A group of diverse organisations came together to develop a "Benchmarking Race, Inclusion, and Diversity in Global Engagement (BRIDGE)" survey. The paper outlines the survey's results, seeking to establish an "industry-wide diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) benchmark" for the sector, as well as "a comparative lens for organisations seeking to assess their own performance against peers".

- [Decolonising global health in 2021: A roadmap to move from rhetoric to reform](#), BMJ Global Health, Khan M., Abimbola S., Aloudat T., Capobianco, E., Hawkes, S., & Rahman-Shepherd A. (Mar. 2021). In this piece, several global health practitioners' author a reflection of their "personal and professional experiences of systems and processes that institutionalise power imbalances". The authors

put forward a proposed roadmap for practitioners working in global health, in efforts to drive the "systemic changes needed in organisations led from high-income countries".

- [Dismantling Racism Works](#) is a web-based workbook and resource designed by Dismantling Racism Works, a training collaborative to support organisations, individuals and the community.

- [#PowerShifts Resources: Anti-Racism in Development and Aid](#), From Poverty to Power, Faciolince, M. (June 2020). A blogpost that compiles and discusses a list of resources to encourage further probing into actions that can be taken to support anti-racism in the aid sector.

Other interesting reads:

- [Decolonizing the Humanitarian Nonprofit Sector: Why Governing Boards Are Key](#), Center for Global Development, Worden, R. & Saez P. (June 2021). This post outlines findings from the authors' analysis of data from ten of the largest humanitarian NGOs governing boards, seeking to build deeper understanding as to the composition of humanitarian non-profit governing boards and to "initiate debate around where and how the sector can improve" such as by "diversifying governing boards" and "meaningfully balancing" the influence and participation of aid actors and recipients.

- [Are country offices preventing us from decolonising development?](#), Bond, Dylan, M. (May 2021). This post explores the challenges and intricacies around perpetuating the INGO country office model, positing that the "maintenance of country offices reinforces power imbalances between INGOs and local partner organisations" and that in the decolonisation of development "country offices must be part of that change agenda".

- [How to decolonise international development: some practical suggestions](#), From Poverty to Power, Gomez de la Torre, G. & Morris, L. (Dec. 2020). This blog post reflects on conversations around anti-racism

and decolonisation in the international development sector and outlines several key steps individuals and organisations can take in this regard.

- [Decolonising medicine and global health: We need genuine and lasting reforms that put patients in the driving seat](#), MSF Access Campaign, Aloudat, Dr T. (Nov. 2020). Author and senior strategic advisor for the MSF Access Campaign, Dr Aloudat, posits that the current global health system remains embedded in a colonial architecture, found in “many of the details of how the system is built, maintained, and functions”, and explores what impact this has on global health.
- [The aid sector must do more to tackle its white supremacy problem](#), *Global Development: The Guardian* (June 2020). This post considers dynamics around structural racism and the challenges around making any progress towards localisation.
- [How can Covid-19 be the catalyst to decolonise development research?](#) From Poverty to Power, Pinet, M. & Leon-Himmelstine, C. (June 2020). This post explores “what isn’t working with the current research cycle” and explores “how the context of the pandemic could be a catalyst to decolonise development research”.
- [#PowerShifts Resources: Anti-Racism in Development and Aid](#), From Poverty to Power, Faciolince, M. (June 2020). A blogpost that compiles and discusses a list of resources to encourage further probing into actions that can be taken to support anti-racism in the aid sector.
- [Before Defining What is Local, Let’s Build the Capacities of Humanitarian Agencies](#), Refugee Hosts, Jayawickrama, J. & Rehman, B. (April 2020). The authors question the “hegemonic framing of humanitarian discourse” and argue that “before defining who is local”, humanitarian agencies should “examine their own identities as humanitarian actors”, including reflecting on “their visions, missions, mandates and agendas”.

- [Can Development Aid ever be Anti-Racist?](#) The Racial Equity Index, Kagal, N. (Feb. 2020). This post explores global systems of power and inequality, including in regard to aid funding flows using as an example the UK’s significant budget cuts to aid, and reflects on questions NGOs can pose to themselves in promoting accountability and in deciding how aid money is expended.

- [The Localisation of Aid and Southern-led Response to Displacement: Beyond instrumentalising local actors](#), *Southern Responses to Displacement*, Refugee Hosts, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (July 2018). In this blog post, the author examines the role actors from the global south play in responding to displacement in and across the global south.

- [Humanitarian aid system is a continuation of the colonial project](#), *Al Jazeera*, Jayawickrama, J. (Feb. 2018). The author writes about fixing the “flawed humanitarian system”, and how practitioners need to “collaborate with affected populations as equal partners”.

- [Refugee Host blog](#) series aims to examine the localisation agenda from a range of perspectives, with an emphasis on the “conceptualisations of the location, value and nature of ‘the local’ itself”.

Podcasts, conversations & platforms:

- [#CharitySoWhite](#) (Aug. 2019) initiated a “conversation about racism in the charity sector”, where its vision is to see a shift in fundamental structures across the aid sector.

- [Decolonising Wealth](#), Skoll World Forum (May 2019). In this video, expert in social justice philanthropy Edgar Villanueva and author of the book, *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*, encourages those working in philanthropy to “lean into the uncomfortable history of how wealth was accumulated”.

• [Equity and Decolonization—Transformation at the Intersection of Aid](#), Institute for the future (Dec. 2020). Aarathi Krishnan, a strategy and foresight expert and a Tech. and Human Rights Fellow at the Harvard Carr Centre, discusses ways to design decolonial futures and the types of foresight methodologies that can be used.

• [Future of humanitarian action podcast: Decolonizing humanitarian aid](#), Devex (Sept. 2020) speaks with practitioners and experts in the sector to discuss the “colonialist mentality pervading humanitarian aid and how to reform it”.

• [How to be Anti-Racist in Aid: A conversation about racism in the aid sector](#) (June 2020). This panel of aid and development practitioners and experts discuss “issues on racism that remains to be addressed” within the aid community.

• In Pursuit of Development Podcast: [Episode 12 - How BLM is also a reckoning for foreign aid and INGOs](#). (Aug. 2020). Dan Banik speaks with Degan Ali on global governance and the politics of aid and humanitarian response.

• [Intersectional Feminist Foreign Policy and Adeso's 3-part webinar series](#) looks at “imagining and creating a decolonised world”.

• Mallence Bart-Williams' TEDx Talk [Change your channel](#) (2015) discusses perceptions and perspectives on global-local dynamics.

• [NGO Safe Space](#) is a “platform for intersectional feminists in the aid system to engage with issues of racism and gender discrimination”.

• [No White Saviours](#) podcast seeks to “expand the conversations” the movement has been having on social media and on the ground around power dynamics and anti-racism in the sector.

• Rethinking Development Podcast: [Episode 7 – Shifting the Power](#) (May 2018). Arbie Baguious discusses power imbalances within the international development and aid system and the decolonisation of project management.

• Rethinking Humanitarianism Podcast: [Episode 7 - Decolonising Aid with Tammam Aloudat](#) (Jan. 2021). This is a discussion on “structural and institutional racism and colonial attitudes embedded in the current humanitarian system and its implications”.

In the spotlight: Advocates, networks, and communities to follow on Twitter

Bayo Akomolafe, philosopher, psychologist, professor, and executive director of the [Emergence Network](#): [@BayoAkomolafe](#)

Dr Tamman Aloudat, Syrian doctor and global health expert: [@Tammamo](#)

Gemma Sou, development geographer post-colonialising disasters & their media representation: [@gemmasou](#)

Jessica Horn, East African feminist writer, strategist, mobiliser, documenter: [@stillSHErises](#)

Robtel Neajai Pailey, academic, activist and author of [Development, \(Dual\) Citizenship and Its Discontents in Africa](#): [@RobtelNeajai](#)

Rokhaya Diallo, writer, journalist and filmmaker activist on racial, gender and religious equality: [@RokhayaDiallo](#)

Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, historian, and decolonial/postcolonial theorist: [@sjndlovugatshen](#)

Stephanie Kimou, founder of PopWorks Africa: [@stephanieakimou](#)

Networks & Forums

[Decolonial Subversion](#), defines itself as an open access, peer-reviewed, multilingual publishing platform that is “committed to decentring western epistemology”: [@decolonise](#)

[Convivial Thinking](#), is a network for individuals working on “issues related to post- and decolonial approaches in development and development studies”: [@ThinkConvivial](#)

[No White Saviours](#), is a growing advocacy campaign started in Kampala, Uganda that is dedicated to “revealing African people as the heroes of our own stories”: [@nowhitesaviours](#)

[Population Works Africa](#) (PopWorks Africa), is a network that “supports innovative African led development solutions that are locally rooted”: [@PopWorksAfrica](#)

[Racial Justice Network](#) is “committed to fighting for racial justice and building bridges across racial, social, and economic lines”: [@RaceJustice](#)



**CENTRE FOR
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Led by the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership, Rights CoLab and a range of partners, the RINGO Project is a systems change initiative that seeks to transform global civil society to respond to today's challenges, aimed at reimagining the role of the international non-governmental organisation.

As a part of the project, this thematic series maps various initiatives under key areas that cover decolonisation, finance and funding models, technology, leadership, ways of working, partnerships, and business operating models.

The purpose of this resource is for the use of practitioners in keeping up to date with the evolving discussions in this area, and promoting greater awareness of actions, knowledge-sharing, and collaboration among humanitarian actors of the role of INGOs in spearheading, facilitating, or supporting change in the sector.

The project was supported by the IKEA Foundation and developed in partnership with the RINGO Project.

The Centre for Humanitarian Leadership is an innovative collaboration between Deakin University and Save the Children that combines good humanitarian practice with academic rigour. Our mission is to lead and influence change within the humanitarian system through critical analysis, transformational and disruptive education and research, and meaningful contributions to policy and practice.

The Centre for Humanitarian Leadership is committed to supporting a shift in power dynamics in the humanitarian sector and is engaged in a range of initiatives focused on re-imagining the humanitarian sector and the role of INGOs within that.

Rights CoLab is an open platform for facilitating collaborative efforts to advance human rights, among experts with diverse perspectives in the fields of civil society, technology, business and finance.



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