



Decolonisation of development cooperation

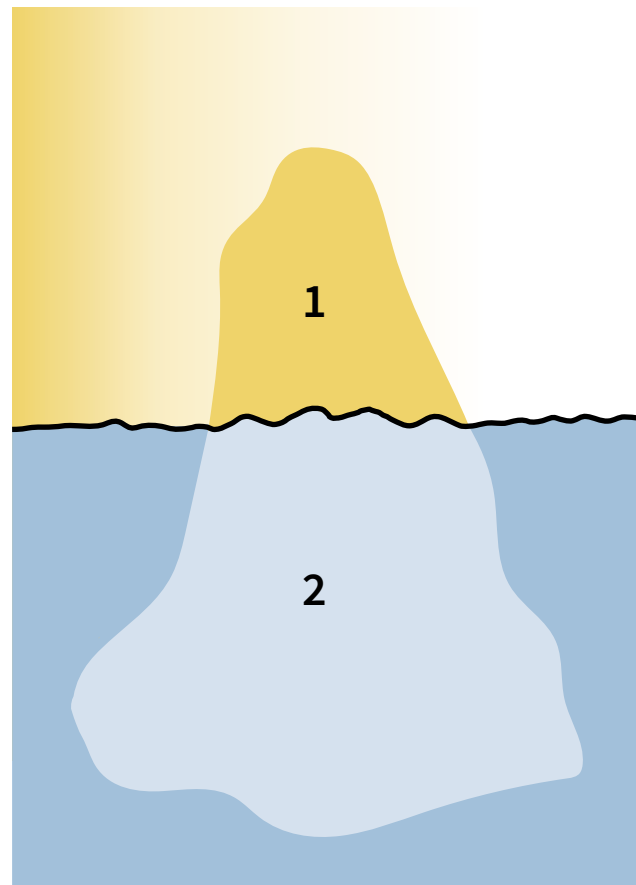
Part II - Colonial remnants in contemporary development cooperation

Building on the historical perspective of the first brief, this second document in a trilogy on the decolonisation of the development sector tackles the present. This brief employs the ‘iceberg model’ to examine how remnants from the colonial past still affect the sector today¹. According to the model, at the tip of the iceberg lay observable behaviours and practices that often replicate colonial patterns. For example, communication products and the language and imagery they employ are concrete dimensions of development cooperation. Colonial elements along those dimensions are, thus, easier to identify. These more visible aspects, however, beg the question: what lays underneath, sustaining the ties between colonialism and development cooperation? The question pushes us to take a deep dive below the surface of development practices to consider the mindsets, attitudes and values making up the ‘deep structures’ that allow colonial elements to survive. This is exactly what this brief aims to do. We will first unpack mindsets, attitudes and values, thereafter turning our attention to the tip of the iceberg to examine colonial elements along four dimensions: 1) language and imagery; 2) knowledge, skills and expertise; 3) fundraising and partnerships; and 4) human resource practices.

Part I: The 'deep structures': mindsets, attitudes and values

As the historical roots of development cooperation are inextricably linked with colonialism, the latter has actively shaped how Northern and Southern development actors think about, and position themselves in, the sector². Often referred to as the 'White gaze', this mindset evaluates people and societies through the lens of White ethnocentrism, assuming superiority of Western knowledge, practice and progress, and implying the inferiority of non-White people, practices and institutions.³ In an understandable effort to separate development cooperation from colonialism and its detrimental effects, the sector often takes on a colour-blind outlook that comes in sharp contrast with the racialised nature of development.⁴ This clash creates the potential for the innocent, but also sometimes the deliberate, exclusion of non-Western knowledge(s) from development cooperation.⁵ Actors in the sector – the very people who seek to foster inclusion and equality – are often unaware of this deeply entrenched racism and discrimination, making it all the more difficult to tackle.

The 'White gaze' and the mindset, attitudes and values it represents have also affected people and societies in the Global South. Historically, the presumed inferiority of non-Western people and their knowledge has created a widespread internalised sense of racial, cultural and geographical inferiority—which today results in valuing the attitudes, beliefs, expertise and practices of the global North more than one's own.⁶ It also pushes development actors in the global South into a constant struggle of proving themselves, their intellect and skills.⁷ Thus, the 'colonial mentality' affects both sides. That is, the mindsets of actors in the global South as well as in the global North are shaped by the colonial legacy. And, as the following will show, this mentality is manifested in several concrete dimensions of development cooperation.



Iceberg theory

- 1) **Observable behaviours of others, things we can see, hear, smell and touch.**
- 2) **'Normal' ways of working. Such as mindsets, attitudes and values.**

¹ Brief note on language and terms: This brief employs two sets of terms: Western/non-Western and global North/global South. Western is used as an adjective to capture Eurocentric forms of knowledge that ultimately emerged from European philosophical traditions. Western, in as far as it bears a connotation of Eurocentrism, is also used to capture artifacts, discourses, theories and ideologies emerging during and from the colonial project. Development cooperation, despite its links to colonialism, exists in a vastly different geopolitical and temporal space, which renders Western/non-Western as less appropriate terms. Instead, when referring explicitly to present-day development cooperation actors, organisations, policies, practices and behaviors, we employ the terms global North and global South.

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Language and imagery

Racist ideologies of the colonial project have shaped the language and thinking that dominated the early decades of development cooperation.⁸ In the most literal sense, colonial remnants are visible in the research and practice of development: they are dominated by English, Spanish, French, Portuguese or Dutch – that is, the languages of former colonial powers. This so-called 'linguistic imperialism'⁹ implies that active involvement in mainstream development cooperation requires the command of at least one European language. The colonial elements are also interwoven into the actual words we use in development cooperation. Terms like 'the field' and 'beneficiaries', for example, might seem neutral, but upon closer inspection a different story emerges. 'The field' conjures up racist fantasies of "exploring the wild" and "going somewhere dangerous to rescue people with no autonomy"¹⁰. Thus, the colonial thread is keeping the global South bound in a position of inferiority through language that seems neutral and normal to us today.¹¹

Imagery in communication for development cooperation

Colonial remnants in language and imagery have also informed communication strategies, policies and products. For example, INGOs' communication campaigns and products have traditionally used dehumanising images of black suffering bodies, also known as poverty porn, to fundraise for humanitarian relief efforts.¹² The 1984 Ethiopian crisis and the pictures employed

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by INGOs to fundraise for famine victims brought to the fore an uncomfortable but necessary conversation around poverty porn and the racist, colonial tropes it perpetuates.¹³ Poverty porn imagery is slowly becoming unacceptable in communication strategies, which have shifted towards more positive representations of its subjects. The shift towards positive imagery, however, has also come under criticism due to its essentialising and decontextualised nature.¹⁴ As a result of heightened conversations around imagery and colonialism, a more 'reflexive style' of communication for development cooperation has started to emerge, looking at pictures as acts of representation rather than as claims of truth.¹⁵ While much work remains to be done to decolonise communication for development cooperation, the changing communication paradigms described above are a testament to the sector grappling with colonial remnants.

- [Language and Power: Linguistic Imperialism Postcolonialism](#)
- [Poverty Porn 2.0](#)
- [Enjoy Poverty](#)
- [Communication in development cooperation](#)

Knowledge, skills and expertise

Colonial mindsets and attitudes have also trickled down and affected the domain of knowledge skills and expertise. To this day, the expertise and skills demonstrated by actors in the global South are often minimised and undervalued. As a result of the superiority assigned to Western knowledge, it is usually the Northern experts who design and evaluate development programmes, rooted in

Western values and set by Western standards.¹⁶ Similarly, researchers from the global North are generally given tasks of more intellectual nature while researchers in the global South are placed into the role of 'data collection partners'.¹⁷ This unequal division of tasks not only signals a great lack of recognition of the skills of Southern experts; it also risks the contributions of the former being co-opted, silenced or minimised.¹⁸ Colonial assumptions around skills and expertise are further crystallised in employment and contracting practices: Northern development experts are often paid more than Southern experts for the same job – thus assigning greater monetary value to Northern skills and expertise.¹⁹

Colonial remnants in Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (PMEL)

The devaluation of the expertise and skills of researchers and development organisations in the global South concretely manifests in the sector's dominant PMEL practices. The latter are developed and implemented in a top-down fashion, whereby Northern funders and INGOs create rigid and overly complex PMEL processes, templates, metrics and tools, infused with sector specific jargon²⁰. This usually happens with little to no input from the communities where a programme is implemented, reducing those communities to mere passive recipients of aid²¹. Upon the development of PMEL practices, partners in the global South are expected to implement the instruments and tools without exercising much autonomy or agency. To rid PMEL from these power asymmetries, many INGOs have been experimenting with participatory monitoring and evaluation²². The extent to which such alternative approaches

will be successful towards decolonisation, however, will largely depend on how they are operationalised and implemented.

- [Epistemic Injustice](#)
- [Contextualising Epistemic Injustice in Aid: On Colliding Interests, Colonialism and Counter-Movements](#)
- [Underrepresentation of developing country researchers in development research](#)

Funding and partnerships

Unsurprisingly, colonial remnants have also managed to weave their way into development funding and partnerships. From the early decades of development cooperation, money and resources have flowed from metropolises to former colonies, often serving the strategic interests of the former. Old colonial ties are still mimicked in funding, with donor governments giving disproportionately more official development assistance (ODA) to former colonies than to other countries.²³ Additionally, ODA procurement contracts are largely 'tied', benefitting companies based in donor countries.²⁴ Similarly, the bulk of development funding is allocated to organisations based in the global North at the expense of organisations in developing countries.²⁵ A similar dynamic, characterised by imbalanced power relations, can be observed in North-South partnerships for the implementation of development projects. As Northern donors continue to set the rules of the game – formulating the calls for funding proposals, setting project timelines, and determining the monitoring and evaluation criteria²⁶ – Southern-based organisations remain subordinates within development partnerships with limited decision-making power; often making little or no inputs to the process.²⁷

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Colonial remnants in funding and grant-making practices

Funding mechanisms and grant-making practices continue to reflect colonial power imbalances: “[F]unding opportunities [...] still benefit a relatively small number of ‘usual suspects’, i.e. INGOs with pre-existing relationships with donors.”²⁸ The situation is particularly precarious for women’s organisations, especially those based in the global South. They are even more bound by colonial remnants, being less likely than male dominated organisations to receive funds from Northern donors. However, there is cause for hope as illustrated by the work of Women’s Fund Asia – a prime example of how dominant colonial and paternalistic funding flows can be challenged. As Tulika Srivastava, Executive Director of Women’s Fund Asia, explains in an interview on the organisation’s decolonising approach: “Not the Northern donor but Southern women’s [organisations] distribute the funds. This allows us to support those women’s initiatives that often remain invisible, empower local groups, and strengthen women’s voices where they most need it.”²⁹ As other organisations have started to adopt similar models, participatory grant-making is emerging as a promising decolonial alternative to business as usual approaches to funding.

- ⑤ [Colonial funding models hamper the growth of African charities](#)
- ⑦ [Decolonization of Aid #2: a conversation from a development cooperation perspective](#)
- ⑤ [Partnership of equals between Africa and Europe: Slogan or reality?](#)

Human resource policies and practices

We, finally, turn our attention to human resource policies, especially recruitment and hiring practices, which often produce and reinforce racial inequalities and colonial dynamics. Internships in the development sector, for example, which can give aspiring professionals a foot in the door, are usually unpaid, disenfranchising candidates from diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds.³⁰ Despite that, hiring based on years of experience in the sector is a common recruitment practice, placing at a further disadvantage candidates unable to gain experience due to racial discrimination; candidates who cannot afford to follow an unpaid internship; and those who had to take time off for caring responsibilities.³¹ The above practices reveal an implicit bias towards recruiting western-educated white staff, hurting the chances of equally qualified candidates of colour or based in the global South from entering and progressing in the field.³² Holding aid organisations accountable for their implicit racial bias in hiring and staffing policies, however, is a challenging task, as most development organisations neither collect nor publish data on diversity in staffing.^{33 34}

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies

In an effort to break away from the colonial past, most development organisations have instituted DEI policies, which are usually focused on increasing diverse representation in staffing and fostering an inclusive and equitable work environment.³⁵ Most commonly, DEI initiatives include sensitivity trainings and town hall-style conversations to understand unconscious biases and microaggressions, and to promote anti-racist practices.³⁶ Despite the sector’s commitment to diversity and inclusion, however, a recent Bond survey addressed

at people of colour working in development found that 89% of respondents did not feel that their organisations were truly invested in DEI.³⁷ This might point to issues surrounding the implementation of DEI policies, especially when those are applied in isolation without respective changes in other domains, such as leadership.³⁸

- ⑤ [Aid agency actions on racial justice ‘inadequate’, aid workers say](#)
- ⑥ [DEI in action: Organisational policies, practices & procedures](#)

Conclusion

This brief has shown how the colonial elements have worked their way through our past and into the present, affecting the development sector in complex ways. The strongest and yet least visible manifestation of colonialism revolves around our mindsets and attitudes, which make up the ‘deep structures’ and reflect the deeply ingrained colonial power relations that have taken hold over the years. In turn, these ‘deep structures’ branch off to shape our language and imagery; the way we value knowledge and expertise; the funding and partnership patterns; as well as the human resource practices central to the development sector. Looking at these four dimensions of development cooperation, some telling examples of colonialism at work are revealed. At the same time, this closer inspection has also revealed the sector’s increasing and more systematic efforts towards decolonisation, providing hope for the future. In the third and final brief of this trilogy, we will focus on promising decolonising initiatives currently underway, distilling good practices and practical guidance, to support development practitioners and organisations in their decolonial trajectories.

Colophon

This Future Brief on the Decolonisation of Development Cooperation is a product of the Partos Innovation Hub. Partos is the membership body for Dutch-based organisations working in development cooperation. The Partos Innovation Hub is a hybrid ecosystem where development professionals interact, create, inspire, undertake, work, learn and innovate together to become better able to navigate the future and accelerate change within themselves, their organisations, and in development cooperation.

This Future Brief is a follow-up to the dialogue series on 'decolonisation of aid' organized by Partos, Kune and the Institute of Social Studies (ISS). The outcomes of this dialogue series has been brought together in [this publication](#).

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