



# Decolonisation of development cooperation

## Part III - The future is now: actionable pathways towards a decolonised development sector

To conclude the trilogy on the decolonisation of development cooperation, this third brief adopts a future-oriented perspective to explore actionable pathways towards a decolonised sector. Building on the ‘iceberg model’ employed in the second brief, it shows that we need a two-pronged approach to tackle colonial remnants in: 1) dominant mindsets, attitudes and values that make up the ‘deep structures’ of development cooperation; and in 2) visible behaviours, practices and policies, situated at the tip of the iceberg. As such, we first zoom in on the ‘deep structures’, to provide organisations and practitioners with a starting point for a reflexive journey to decolonise mindsets, attitudes and values. The second section focuses on four dimensions of development cooperation: 1) communication, 2) resource mobilisation and grant-making, 3) planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning (PMEL), and 4) diversity, equity and inclusion, to provide inspiring examples of decolonial initiatives and distil good practices. By discussing specific initiatives, we hope to inspire action rather than provide a definitive ‘how to’ guide, as ultimately every development practitioner and organisation will have their own unique trajectory towards decolonisation.



# Part I: Reflexivity and intentionality: addressing colonial mindsets, attitudes and values

As discussed in the previous two briefs, the colonial project has shaped the ‘deep structures’ of development cooperation, influencing the minds of all international development actors.<sup>1</sup> A robust decolonising approach should, thus, be aimed at prompting a sector-wide mindset shift, which will also enhance the impact and success of complimentary policies and initiatives.<sup>2</sup> While truly decolonising mindsets will be a long-term process, there are multiple steps international development actors and organisations can readily undertake to embark on this journey.

**Start with yourself** — To tackle the colonial remnants and deeply entrenched racism shaping the ‘deep structures’ of the sector, we, as development actors, can start out by acknowledging our possible contribution towards implicit racial biases and by identifying how such biases influence our thoughts, feelings and behaviours.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, it is important to reflect on different aspects of our identity, such as race, gender, socioeconomic and educational status, to become aware of the privileges they grant us.<sup>4</sup>

## Take a test

The biases we hold are often unconscious and implicit. Project Implicit seeks to educate the public about bias and to provide a “virtual laboratory” for collecting data on the internet. You can discover your own biases by taking a quick [test!](#)

- [Implicit Bias- how it affects us and how we push through | Melanie Funchess | TEDxFlourCity](#) ;
- [Decolonise. Now! Practical inspiration guide for equitable international cooperation, Toekomstwerf Dekoloniseren ; INGOs can help dismantle development’s ‘white gaze’, PopWorks Africa founder says, Devex](#)

## Fostering a safer space

A productive conversation around race and racism in development cooperation requires the creation of a safe space, characterised by respect, honesty and openness. Is your organisation thinking of holding such a conversation? Then consider using the [LARA \(Listen, Affirm, Respond, Ask questions\) method](#) to foster a safe space.

- [How to be anti-racist in aid, a conversation about racism in the aid sector, Aid Re-Imagined](#)

While reflecting on one’s own biases and privileges will undoubtedly be an uncomfortable process, it can also create new opportunities for individuals to identify existing factors that fuel systemic imbalances, and, take action against oppressive structures.<sup>5</sup>

## Be comfortable with being uncomfortable —

Addressing colonial mindsets, however, is not only an individual task, but also a responsibility of development organisations. Directors and managers, in particular, need to make room in staff’s agendas for meaningful conversations around colonialism’s effects on development cooperation, race and racism. And while reflexive conversations are bound to be deeply challenging, development organisations and practitioners should embrace the discomfort and take a hard look in the mirror to identify the colonial elements in their own work.<sup>6,7</sup> Importantly, such conversations should not happen in a Northern bubble, but in collaboration with Southern organisations and partners, who can better recognise colonial prejudices and perceptions. The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) recently ventured into such an internal, organisation-wide dialogue—mirroring a growing trend in the sector—to unpack how racism manifests in their written content.<sup>8</sup>

Participants in the discussion contemplated on the process and its positive impact towards institutional decolonisation: “This discussion [...] encouraged others to reflect on how they have participated in racist dynamics[...] As a response to the process, the majority of participants want to change the way they write [...] They said it [the discussion] has the potential to move IIED toward more radical, progressive narrative framing and voice.”<sup>9</sup>

## Consider alternative framings and definitions for development cooperation —

As discussed in the first brief, development cooperation has been largely framed through the Western liberal ideals and values of individual prosperity, technological advance and economic progress.<sup>10</sup> A meaningful mindset shift, however, will require our conceptualisation of development to embrace diversity and become inclusive of non-Western ways of knowing, values and norms. A powerful starting point to expand our definition of development could be the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which revolves around the idea that as human beings our personhood is fostered in relation to others.<sup>11</sup> According to Ubuntu, then, development is a “process of ‘mutual empowerment’, which enables people and societies to realize their full material, social and spiritual potential.”<sup>12</sup>

## Take a deep dive

If you want to gain a deeper understanding of the Ubuntu philosophy, then the following videos provide a great starting point:

- [UBUNTU—Concept of “Ubuntu”](#) ;
- [Ubuntu- a person is a person through other persons: Getrude Matshe at TEDxTeAro](#)

## Part II: Actionable insights to decolonise development policies, practices and behaviours

While becoming anti-racist by addressing colonial mindsets, attitudes and values at an individual- and organisational-level is a necessary transformation, it is not enough to fully decolonise the sector.<sup>13</sup> Reflexive thinking and conversations need to be accompanied by concrete actions. This section discusses promising initiatives across four dimensions of development cooperation and distils good practices to support organisations in their decolonising efforts.

### Communication for development cooperation

Words create worlds and as such communication has a vital role to play in transforming the sector's vocabulary as well as dominant forms of representation and storytelling. An increasing number of organisations are working to rid development language of paternalistic and technocratic jargon, whilst creating space for more colourful and diverse linguistic expressions.<sup>14</sup> Bond UK, for example, recently published a **language template**, which proposes that terms reflecting colonial and racist ideas, such as 'beneficiaries', 'Third World' and 'localisation', will be 'banned' from the Bond vocabulary and replaced with more dignified and respectful terms, such as 'communities we work with', 'Low Income Countries' and 'locally-led', respectively.<sup>15</sup>

#### Good practices for communication

- **Language** should be: **practical** (easy to understand and concise), **accurate** (corresponding to the situation described) and **respectful**;
- **Communication style** should: focus on **solutions**, showcase an organisation's **values** and what they stand for, and inspire **hope**;
- **Storytelling** should be: **contextualised** (sensitive to individual circumstances, cultures and narratives); **agency-affirming** and **ethically produced**.

In terms of storytelling and representation, the sector is making concrete efforts to move towards an ethical direction, contextualising the stories told and celebrating the agency of those who have shared their experiences. The Institute of Development Studies (IDS), for example, has crafted **ethical content guidelines** to ensure that the imagery, audio and written text employed in their communications result in inclusive and representative stories, illustrative of the agency of those featured.<sup>16</sup> The organisation has taken these efforts a step further by applying their guidelines to create a new visual identity for their building, which now displays diverse and inclusive pictures and paintings.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond language, imagery and storytelling, the overall communication style for development cooperation tends to focus on the most wicked problems and crises, emphasizing such negative emotions as fear and guilt.<sup>18</sup> Such a communications approach, however, risks both perpetuating damaging stereotypes about aid recipients and desensitising audiences, thus making it less likely that they take action.<sup>19</sup> To tackle this risk, a growing number of organisations are experimenting with **hope-based communication**, which promotes the strategic employment of positive framing to showcase what an organisation stands for (instead of what they oppose) and propose solutions (instead of guilt and threats).<sup>20</sup>

### Resource mobilisation and grant-making

Significant shifts are also underway to decolonise funding and grant-making practices and ensure the latter are grounded in such principles as mutual accountability and 'nothing about us, without us'.<sup>21</sup> The sector is gradually moving away from exclusively valuing financing to **appreciating a wider range of resources**, including contextual knowledge, volunteer labour, legitimacy and access to local governments.<sup>22</sup> The community-driven philanthropic initiative, We Can Clean up Our Own Town Foundation, which aims to mobilise communities to clean

#### Good practices for resource mobilisation and grant-making

**For everyone:** acknowledge that all **resources**, whether financial or not, can contribute to transformational change; ensure funders and grantees are **mutually accountable** to each other.

**For funding and grant-making organisations:** emphasize **longer-term and flexible funding**; shift **administrative and due diligence** tasks to donors; implement **innovative and participatory approaches** to grant-making; **fund partners** instead of projects.

**For courageous organisations that want to venture into participatory grant-making:** start with small steps; reflect and iterate on the progress continuously; seek feedback from partners; consult others who have done it.

up the town of Igala, puts such an appreciation to practice. The foundation is simultaneously focused on raising funds and mobilising non-financial resources from the community, including the time and labour that go into volunteering, preparing cleaning supplies and food, to support its endeavours.<sup>23</sup>

Development organisations around the world have also been experimenting with new and innovative forms of grant-making to bring about the envisioned transformation<sup>24</sup>. For example, A Thousand Currents, a U.S.-based grant-making NGO, has forged a **bottom-up, participatory approach** to **impact investment** through its Buen Vivir Fund<sup>25</sup>. The fund, which supports grassroots economic initiatives that yield financial, environmental and social returns, operates through a member assembly, where grantees and investors have equal decision-making powers through their vote.<sup>26</sup> **Participatory grant-making**, which ultimately

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seeks to cede decision-making power about grants to the communities affected by funding decisions, is seen as another promising avenue through which to decolonise funding practices.<sup>27</sup> Purposeful's With and For Girls Fund, for example, is an Africa-rooted participatory fund for young feminist activists, grounded in the principles of solidarity and collectivity. The fund has an 'always open database' for activists to submit their proposals on their own timelines and terms.<sup>28</sup> Along with radically flexible funding windows, the fund operationalises its participatory approach through its Global Girl Advisory panel, where girl activists make decisions regarding grant allocations.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly some organisations, such as Mama Cash, are also transitioning into fully-fledged participatory grant-makers.<sup>30</sup>

Apart from participatory grant-making, some bilateral donors are adopting **social transformation approaches** to grant-making, which are grounded in such principles as grassroots participation, empowerment and ownership.<sup>31</sup> The policy instrument, Dialogue and Dissent, of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, adopted a more flexible and context-specific approach to promote greater project ownership by civil society organisations (CSOs).<sup>32</sup>

### Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (PMEL)

Dominant PMEL practices and policies have also come under criticism for contributing to unequal North-South power dynamics. As a result, development organisations are innovating with more participatory approaches to ensure that the communities they seek to support are involved in the design and implementation of PMEL methodologies.<sup>33</sup> While there is a wide range of **participatory PMEL methods and tools**, they all share some common principles: they are **bottom-up** and take as their point of departure **community priorities**, and as such promote **downward accountability**.<sup>34</sup>

Looking at more specific examples, EyeOpenerWorks, an organisation designing and implementing creative

### Good practices for PMEL

- **Involve community members in design and adapting PMEL methods, collection, analysis and use of data;**
- **Measure success and impact as internally defined by the community;**
- **Seek out and include marginalised voices to ensure the design and implementation of PMEL are representative;**
- **Engage in the triangulation of relevant information to ensure reliability and multiplicity of voices.**

monitoring and evaluation, recently facilitated a training in **Participatory Video (PV) methodology** for AVSI Foundation Uganda to evaluate the project, Agri Skills 4 You (AS4Y).<sup>35</sup> EyeOpenerWorks offered a ten day training into basic video skills to project participants, after which participants collected stories of change and edited them into four clips, showcasing the impact and outcomes of the AS4Y project.<sup>36</sup>

**Beneficiary Feedback Mechanisms (BFM)** is another participatory PMEL methodology that encourages project participants to provide ongoing feedback, enabling timely adjustments to a project.<sup>37</sup> The Civil Society Challenge Fund (CSCF), which supported over 500 projects between 2000 and 2015, employed the BFM methodology extensively and across all its funded projects.<sup>38</sup> For a project aimed at reducing violence among schoolchildren in Uganda, CSCF introduced 'Letter Link Boxes' that allowed children to provide live feedback to project staff on how to improve their services.<sup>39</sup> The same system was used at the end of the project to enable children to evaluate the programme and its impacts.<sup>40</sup>

### Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)

With structural racism still being pervasive in the sector, there is increasing demand for development organisations

to undertake institutional, anti-racist action to foster more diverse, equitable and inclusive organisational cultures.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, development organisations are responding to such pressure, crafting and implementing a range of concrete anti-racist initiatives and policies.

More specifically, development organisations are requiring their staff members to participate in **implicit bias and institutional racism training**.<sup>43</sup> Such training, however, has to be well-designed and implemented to trigger institutional change and not end up a mere ticking box in a DEI checklist. Population Works Africa, a network of black female consultants, stands out as a positive example in that regard, providing an array of robust, tailor-made, decolonising workshops for development organisations.<sup>44</sup> In addition to anti-racist training and in an effort to promote more equitable entrance into the sector, many organisations have stopped offering unpaid internships, turning towards **paid internship programmes**, grounded in affirmative action principles.<sup>45</sup> Palladium International, for example, has launched the funded International Development Career Accelerator Internship programme, which aims to provide undergraduate students from underprivileged backgrounds with experiential learning, mentorship opportunities and

### What do diversity, equity and inclusion really mean?

The Chief Diversity Officer at the University of Michigan has likened the terms diversity, equity and inclusion to various aspects of attending a dance :

**Diversity** is where everyone is invited to the party;

**Inclusion** means that everyone gets to contribute to the playlist;

**Equity** means that everyone has the opportunity to dance.



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### Good practices for DEI

- Clearly articulate what your organisation stands for and its values and develop an anti-racist DEI policy accordingly;
- Ensure DEI initiatives extend beyond the human resources department;
- Invest in and provide inclusive training, professional development, and mentorship opportunities for staff members;
- Evaluate senior leadership and managers on their efforts to address racism;
- Create clear, effective mechanisms to address instances of racism at the workplace.

meaningful exposure to development cooperation.<sup>46</sup> Finally, looking at initiatives that aim to foster anti-racist organisational cultures, UNDP has undertaken inspirational action as part of UN's #FightRacism campaign. Initially, UNDP hosted a townhall meeting and a reading series to involve its staff members in co-creating the institution's efforts to confront racism.<sup>47</sup> The insights raised during these events fed into the formation of a Corporate Anti-Racism and Discrimination team, tasked with uncovering systemic bias in the organisation and forging an anti-racist action plan.<sup>48</sup>

### Conclusion

This third and final brief in the series on the decolonisation of development cooperation has provided practical guidance, inspiring initiatives and good practices to support development organisations and practitioners in their decolonisation journeys. The first part of the brief focused on the 'deep structures' of development aid, suggesting avenues through which to tackle colonial remnants in dominant mindsets, attitudes and values. Efforts to transform the sector depend on a normative mindset shift as much as on concrete decolonising actions and initiatives across all key dimensions of development cooperation.

The second part, therefore, focused on four dimensions of development—communications; resource mobilisation and grant-making; planning, monitoring and evaluation; and diversity, equity and inclusion—providing examples of promising decolonising initiatives and distilling good practices.

Although the term 'final' suggests that this document forms some sort of conclusion or endpoint, in fact it aims to do the opposite. Our hope is that the trilogy will inspire more honest and open conversations around the decolonisation of the sector as well as provide a practical starting point for organisations and practitioners to undertake anti-racist and decolonising action.

### Additional decolonising initiatives and resources

#### Communication for development cooperation

Language: Health Poverty Action, [A Practical Guide for Communicating Global Justice and Solidarity](#) ; Sum Of Us, [A Progressive's Style Guide](#) ; Global Development Incubator, [Localizing Development: Our Process to Select Language](#)

Storytelling and representation: Save the Children, [The People in the Pictures: Vital perspectives on Save the Children's image making](#) ; Photographers Without Borders, [Code of Ethics](#) ; Bond UK, [Putting the People in the Pictures First: Ethical guidelines for the collection and use of content \(images and stories\)](#) ; Africa No Filter, [How to Write About Africa in 8 Steps: An Ethical Storytelling Handbook](#)

Communication style and narratives: Partos, [Workshop: Hope-Based Communications x](#)

[Krizna Gomez](#) ; European Commission, ['Stories shape societies': hope-based communication guidelines](#)

#### Resource mobilisation and grant-making

Grantcraft, [Deciding Together: Shifting power and resources through participatory grant-making](#) ; Peace Direct, [Radical flexibility: Strategic funding for the age of local activism](#) ; Both Ends & DOB Ecology, [Putting people first: The transformational impact of small grants funds](#) ; Centre for Humanitarian Leadership, [Funding models and finance](#) ; The Fund for Global Human Rights, [Fund 101: Intro to Participatory Grant-Making](#)

#### Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

CDA& Bond, [Beneficiary Feedback: how we hinder and enable good practice](#) ; Health City—Advancement Project, [A short guide to community based participatory action research](#) ; Feinstein International Center, [Participatory Impact Assessment: a design guide](#)

#### Diversity, equity and inclusion

Dismantling Racism Works, [Analysis Tools & Action Tools](#) ; Petersen & Lentfer, ['Grassroots means no brains': How to tackle racism in the aid sector](#) ; Aid Re-Imagined, [How to be anti-racist](#) ; The New Humanitarian, [Aid agency actions on racial justice 'inadequate', aid workers say](#) ; ProInspire, [Awake to Woke to Work: Building a Race Equity Culture](#)

## 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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