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REINFORCING OR TRANSFORMING? How partnership brokering should, and can, support decolonization of aid

With the ever-growing realization of the impact of colonization and racism in aid, development, and humanitarian action globally, it is both crucial and an opportunity that decolonization be taken into account in partnership brokering. Systemic inequality has the risk of negatively impacting on partnerships and reinforcing colonialism and racism in aid, impacting on the ability of partnerships to reach shared goals - unless there is a conscious exploration of issues. A partnership broker has the opportunity to support facilitating and creating culturally safe spaces for transformational work that enables partnerships to move forward in shifting power that is in line with decolonization and localization approaches. But to do this, partnership brokers need to look at their own practice and how they can bring a decolonization lens to their work. This article reflects on assumptions of power, cross-cultural practice, power imbalance and racism in aid, and provides suggestions for integrating a decolonisation lens in partnership brokering. It concludes that partnership brokering can, and should, support decolonisation of aid.

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Reinforcing or transforming? How partnership brokering should, and can, support decolonization of aid

Annie Sloman

Introduction

Brokering partnerships in Timor-Leste forced me to confront the impact of systemic inequality¹ due to colonialism and structural racism in aid, development and humanitarian action. Reflecting on assumptions of power, cross-cultural practice, and power imbalances helped me conclude that partnership brokering can, and should, support decolonisation of aid². I write this as a white Australian female working in international development in the Global South³. It is written as part of a partnership brokering accreditation process where I actively aim to critique my own practice with a decolonisation lens as a way to improve my practice and support others to do the same. I recognise the responsibility white Global North actors have for making a decolonisation shift, handing over power and supporting spaces and processes to do this, and that this is not easy to do. To support others I provide suggestions for integrating a decolonisation lens into partnership brokering, built on my and others experiences.

Assumptions of equality

In my first remote online partnership brokering experience as a participant, early in the pandemic, a partnership broker stated that one of the benefits of meeting online in remote partnering was that it could create a more equal playing field. The argument being that we are all reduced to windows on a screen with a mic and the usual hierarchy, power structures and physical presence that we bring to a space are reduced. I continued to hear this in partnership brokering trainings and online spaces. At the time, I was sceptical about this claim. Working in international development in Timor-Leste and Global South countries had shown me that online spaces can exacerbate inequalities, as further backed by literature on digital divides (Vassilakopoulou & Hustad 2021 & Sanders & Scanlon 2021). Timor-Leste, for example, has some of the slowest and most expensive internet in the world. Like many countries in the Global South, it has low levels of digital accessibility and literacy.

Additionally, Timor-Leste, like many cultures in the Global South, is a collective culture, respecting hierarchy, social harmony, implying what is meant and taking time to reach a conclusion. Relationships are more important than individual gain. Global North cultural norms tend to be dominated by individualistic cultures, where things are said directly and to the point, timeliness is important, and there are assumptions about hierarchy being more equal (Rhodes 2014). Cross cultural online spaces in East Timor tend to be dominated by Global North cultural

¹ *Systemic inequality* in this article refers to inequality that is ingrained within the systems and culture of the aid sector due to colonisation and structural racism. It is where people, cultural and work practices and languages from the Global North are seen as superior to those from the Global South. This prejudice may be visible or invisible. It is often normalised to the extent that people may not be conscious of biases.

² While decolonisation has traditionally meant states pulling out of countries that they previously colonised, often leading to the country's independence. It has more recently had a second meaning as "the process of deconstructing colonial ideologies regarding the superiority and privilege of Western thought and approaches (Peace Direct p13)." This is the definition that is more often used in regards to 'decolonising aid' and is used in this piece. Racism and colonialism are understood to be linked because in the context of the Global North they are seen to stem from the colonisation by white Europeans/Westerners of BIPOC populations in indigenous lands and in the Global South (Lawrence & Dua 2005).

³ Within this reflection I use the terms: *Global North* referring to Western, developed countries (although not necessarily in the north), that tend to have majority white populations and where much of the global power and money reside, and *Global South* referring to countries classified by the World Bank as low or middle income that are located in Africa, Asia, Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean (Clarke 2018) and tend to have a greater proportion of the population who are people of color. I acknowledge the limitations of these categorizations, as Clarke (2018) argues "it lumps together very diverse economic, social and political experiences and positions into one overarching category".

practices and English. This often puts my Timorese colleagues at a disadvantage, as online spaces favour those that are confident and fluent in working in Global North communication styles, speak English, have access to computers, decent internet and are digitally fluent. These spaces norms are being set by Global North actors. I was surprised that assumptions about equality in online spaces were being made. They seemed blind to these inequalities, lacking nuance about cross-cultural differences and North-South power imbalances, and how they can be hidden in online partnering.

Cross-cultural differences or systemic inequality?

This brought me to further questions; Are assumptions of equality in international development partnering hiding significant equality and power imbalance? Are issues of inequality often labelled as cross-cultural differences, but are in fact much deeper systemic inequality at play?

To answer these questions I reflected on my own work. One of the primary roles I play in partnering in cross-cultural spaces is of a cultural broker. That is supporting the “bridging, linking or mediating between groups or persons of differing cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change” (Jezewski, in Jezewski & Sotnik, 2001). Within partnerships I have facilitated and smoothed out cross cultural differences, translated (literally and culturally) meanings and misunderstandings. I have supported colleagues from the Global South to work in culturally Global North ways to meet dominant working practices. I have encouraged and supported colleagues from the Global North to increase awareness of cultural differences and look at practices and approaches that are more culturally equalising or sensitive. But I also recognised that, unconsciously, I have often smoothed over this inequality. I presented work in a way that was pleasing for Global North partners. I covered up that my colleagues from the Global South had misunderstood the meaning of a Global North colleague – so neither side would lose face. I helped enable Global North partners to feel comfortable in the partnership, even though my Global South colleagues were often struggling in these Global North dominated partnering spaces. I mentored and supported my Global South colleagues to better engage in these spaces by guiding them through what they needed to do to meet Global North cultural norms. I was playing this role due to the inherent power imbalances in development, where Global South actors are forced to conform to Global North dominate culture. I realised that while trying to facilitate greater equality, I had effectively strengthened the status quo. I reinforced the dominant Global North cultural narrative and these inequalities, and thus upheld the white saviour approach, where I, as a foreigner, was saving the day by being a cultural bridge.

This was much more than just cross-cultural challenges in practice. Even when I and colleagues tried to shift space to being more cross-culturally sensitive, say Timorese led and culturally dominated, Global North cultural norms continued to win out. The underpinning issues were ingrained in systemic inequality that centres the Global North narrative of development and cultural practices as the dominant discourse around what defines good development practice that Global South actors need to demonstrate. I was becoming more aware of issues of structural racism and neo-colonial practice in aid and my own role in upholding them.

Transforming partnership relations – but still upholding the status quo

Sparked by a focus on strengthening partnerships within Oxfam globally, In 2018 Oxfam in Timor-Leste (my place of work from 2018 until early 2022), begun a partner transformation journey brokered by a Partnership Brokers Associate⁴. It was a powerful process that brought

⁴ More can be read about this partnership transformation process [here](#).

together Oxfam in Timor-Leste staff and Timor-Leste partner organisations, to look at partnering, what power looks like and to co-develop partnership principles and health check tools. The process was planned to be culturally appropriate and Timorese led. With Oxfam national staff and partners co-designing and facilitating, and decisions simultaneously documented in the national language Tetum and English.

This process led to transforming the way that Oxfam in Timor-Leste works. Partnership proudly became the basis of all work. The commitment to a power shift where Oxfam was more like a partner than a donor was articulated and action was taken to put these words into practice. There was a commitment by partners involved in the process to shared decision making, captured in the symbolic representation of sitting at the table together to make decisions (the visual representation of this can be seen in a partnership principles poster co-designed with Oxfam and partners in Figure 1). Effort was made to do partnering differently and move away from compliance focused grant making, in line with Tennyson’s (2016) partnership brokering shifting of power exploration. There was pride in this process. Partner’s spoke positively about improvements and the partnership compared to other relationships with international organisations. Oxfam staff were proud of how they had shifted their practice to centre around partners. But still I felt there was a sense of underlying tension. Tension about Oxfam still holding the power.



Figure 1 - Oxfam in Timor-Leste Partnership Principles Poster

Four years later I still felt this tension. While we were doing better at partnering and there had been significant changes, it dawned on me, we were still not addressing the elephant in the room – the fundamental inequality between an international organisation and local organisations. The structural inequality that exists in development. Oxfam was still the boss. Making decisions about who would be a partner, who and how much money each partner received, what contracts and compliance look like, and absorbing the highest proportion of budget. The use of language by Oxfam staff, including myself, of “our” partners, mirrored colonial language around ownership. While more power was being shared with partners than previously, Oxfam’s power has not been handed over or unpacked, nor was this imbalance something we spoke about openly. But this inequality could be ignored, hiding behind assumptions that a partnership approach built equality, power was shared, that it was better than before, and better than the practice of many other organisations. But I felt there was clearly more going on beneath the surface. Had we really gone far enough?

Decolonisation of Aid

With global awareness increasing on inequality and structural racism highlighted with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, focus has also been put on #RacismInAid and the unequal power dynamics that exist in the international aid sector (Begum et al 2020, Katwikirize 2020, Nwajaku-Dahau & Leon-Himmelstine 2020, Guttenbeil-Likiliki 2020, Currion 2020, Rights Lab & WACSI 2021, House of Commons 2022). Attempts have been made to shift power and resourcing to the Global South - as seen with the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit that led to the Grand Bargain and localisation commitments in the humanitarian sector. These call for greater resourcing, decision making and power to local actors instead of international actors.

But it is recognised that limited progress has been made, with power and resourcing still held in the Global North, and clear examples where Global North actors have actively watered down definitions and commitments to favour their own interests (Peace Direct 2021, Kelly et al 2021, Slim 2020, House of Commons 2022, Aly 2022). Houghton (2018:5) highlights “despite the centrality of partnership and collaboration to the formal humanitarian narrative, integrating effective partnership action into the operations of bi-lateral agencies, the UN and INGOs has been slow. As a result, partnership remains largely rhetorical, and partnerships continue to be predominantly transactional.” The 2021 Re-imagining International Non-Governmental Organisations report (Rights Lab & WACSI 2021) found that 85% of Global South CSOs stated their relationship with International NGOs are not mutually beneficial, and 68% said that INGOs expect them to implement projects based on western defined systems and models, which significantly impact on their work.

The aid and humanitarian sectors’ attempts to localise has also often ignored race and neo-colonial practice (House of Commons 2022, Currión 2020). There is now a growing recognition that there is an urgent need to dismantle the unequal power structures and structural racism in aid, development and humanitarian action, as seen with the recent United Kingdom Parliament House of Commons report on racism in the aid sector (Becker 2020, Currión 2020, House of Commons 2022). Goris & Magendane (2021) argue that “Colonialism has resulted in various levels of power and disempowerment that still define the development system; not only in the relations between countries in the Global North and Global South but also within countries of the Global South. Organisations operate within, are shaped by and perpetuate the colonial system, which makes the transformation of this system all the more difficult. However, making explicit existing power imbalances and taking action to change them should be the core business of development organisations.” Peace Direct (2021 p4) goes further in arguing, “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.” I realised that this was the tension I was feeling, but had not confronted, wrapped in the security of my own and my international organisations’ privilege. We had been talking about partnership, cross-cultural practice and sharing power, but we had not actually been talking about the structural inequality that underlies all development work; the colonial practices and the hidden (and not hidden) racism.

Examples of colonial and racist practices in aid, development and humanitarian action include the skills and expertise of local actors and organisations from the South being disregarded over foreign, often Global North, actors skills; granting and recruitment processes that privilege Global North actors; working practices, standards and expectations being shaped around Global North cultural practices and norms; significant pay and benefit differences between local and expatriate staff; and funding and decision making about actions in the Global South more often than not sitting with Global North actors, with these actors taking a significantly bigger cut of funding (Begum et al 2020, Katwikirize 2020, Kiewied, Soremekun & Jok 2020, House of Commons 2022). Global South staff of Global North organisations, also benefit from some of these benefits, although usually not at the level of Global North staff (House of Commons 2022, Peace Direct 2021). These examples demonstrate the complex and layered levels of inequality in the system. Many of these benefits are things that I have experienced, perpetuated and benefited from directly, while simultaneously feeling uncomfortable about receiving them (but still taking them for granted).

Making this connection helped me reflect further. In the partnership process at Oxfam in Timor-Leste four years earlier and the practice that had been embedded since then, there were conversations about power – but primarily in relation to the power dynamics between a donor

and grantee⁵. How power played out in the partnership had been explored, highlighting that power was not equal - Oxfam held more power usually as top down or power over, and that there was a desire to change it moving forward –partners sitting at the table sharing power– moving to power with. While this discussion of power touched on issues of systemic inequality, particularly in relation to inequality between donor and grantees, it didn't open up the space to an open and honest dialogue unpacking this inequality, acknowledging and talking about structural racism and colonisation of aid, both internally within the organisation, and with partners. It didn't talk about if power could be handed over.

By not raising this had the real tensions in partnerships between national and international development actors been covered up? Had the opportunity to look at handing over power, in line with a decolonisation agenda, been missed? While sharing power and the desire for shared decision making had been discussed, should discussions have been more specific about what ingrained inequality existed? By not unpacking this further, I felt an opportunity to go deeper was lost. And that we at Oxfam in Timor-Leste had not really thought through what we would be willing to hand over. It felt like we had wanted to share power, but we didn't really want to change our level of power. But at the core we had not been conscious that we should be taking this into consideration.

In talking with other colleagues from the Global North across a number of organisations, I learnt that this growing realisation was not unique. While many of us were conscious of inequality in the development sector and our privilege, we were not conscious enough of neo-colonialism and racism in aid, or facing up to our own racist and privileged biases and practices. The #RacismInAid dialogues and the broader #BlackLivesMatter movement were forcing us to look at our own practice and meant that we could no longer ignore it. Many others have also written about coming to this realisation as white or Global North aid or humanitarian practitioners and many organisations, including Oxfam, have started processes to address this (Slim 2020, Currión 2020, House of Commons 2022, Aly 2022, Start Network 2022, Zigomo 2021).

So could we bring in this lens into partnership work moving forward? Would using a partnership brokering lens support radical, honest, but uncomfortable, conversations about race, inequality and recognition of the history of colonialism in aid make a difference and enable stronger more honest and open partnerships? Or would it be divisive and potentially create a wedge?

Should partnership brokering support decolonisation of aid?

Partnership brokers are in a position where they are brokering processes that have a unique opportunity to support change in how actors work and relate to each other. This provides an opportunity for those working across partnerships in aid, international development and humanitarian action to be active change agents in decolonisation and anti-racism. Partnership brokers are meant to uphold principles of equity, mutual accountability, trust and courage. If systemic inequality is not taken into account, or a partnership broker doesn't question their own role and unconscious bias within it, brokering can go against these objectives and the ethical basis of partnership brokering.

Peace Direct (2021 p5) argues that “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.” As Nwajiaku-Dahou & Leon-Himmelstine (2020) argue “convening needs to ensure that this baggage (colonialism and racism in aid) does not inhibit our progress towards just, inclusive,

⁵ Challenges highlighted in the Partnership Brokers Associations project www.fundersaspartners.org.

prosperous and sustainable societies, communities and nations”. Holden (2020) further challenges by asking “can partnership be a tool which helps different stakeholders to address these types of structural challenges? Are there ways that brokers can work with partners to try and rebalance these inherent inequities when brokering partnerships? Is this not our mandate and role as brokers?”

When I shared a draft of this article with another partnership broker, they questioned whether it would always be in the partnership’s interest to bring a decolonisation lens to partnership brokering. I argue that if there are partners that come from the Global South and Global North in a partnership, then this inequality and legacy of colonialism in aid exists and cannot be ignored. By not taking it into account, by assuming that it may not be in the partnership’s interest, the status quo is upheld and the inherent inequality that exists is denied. As Hossain & Harkoma (2020) found it is difficult to identify structures that discriminate in our society as they are embedded and often hidden. It is important to identify them and make them visible to be able to reduce practices that are harmful to partnerships. They also have consequences for non-performance of partnering arrangements, and so, should be of concern to all partnership brokers.

Integrating a decolonisation lens into partnership brokering

A key recommendation of Peace Direct’s decolonising aid report (2021) is to encourage conversations with grantees, organisations and communities about the power dynamics that influence the relationships between funder and grantee or International organisation and local partners. Partnership brokering creates a great opportunity to do this. It can create safe spaces in partnerships to tackle decolonisation head on; supporting partnerships to unpack decolonisation, what it means to the partnership and find concrete ways in which a partnership can move forward.

Alternatively it’s possible to take a softer, not so overt approach, and integrate a decolonisation lens into general partnership brokering practices. Such as acknowledging inequality and power differences, valuing different ways of working, culturally safe practices and language and looking at processes that shift decolonial practice more gradually; Looking at culturally appropriate approaches to discussions, power and decision making; unpacking how power impacts on relationships; opening up spaces for honest and hard conversations; centring practice around Global South voices and cultural practices, and acknowledging systemic inequality exists and what it means for the partnership. It is possible to even do this without using the language of decolonization. But in doing this there needs to be checks on whether this is actually hiding away from real issues and reinforcing the status quo.

Integrating a decolonisation lens within a partnering process can make discussions about inequality and racism more accessible and less intimidating. It can provide a means for organisations to have shared journeys about changing relationships, power in aid and hold each other to account. Most importantly it can be a process that supports shared ownership and understanding, particularly for people who are not from the culturally dominant group.

After realising I had not created sufficient space to have these conversations in my work, and in light of the broader localisation movement within the humanitarian sector, I co-facilitated a workshop with one of my Timorese colleagues, between Oxfam in Timor-Leste and 8 Timorese partner organisations to develop a shared humanitarian contingency plan. A plan about how we would respond together if a disaster hit. We actively developed this shared plan from a decolonisation and partnership perspective together. Using culturally appropriate ways to discuss ideas and explore concepts. In Tetum we looked at shared partnership principles, how

we wanted to work together and what we were wanting out of the partnership. We unpacked the concept of localisation, decolonisation and the global humanitarian movement. Language that was new to most in the room, but things they immediately recognised. Using this language we spoke about inequality between local and international actors, started unpacking inequality between us, and talked about decolonisation of aid and handing over power and resources in partnership. We shared that Oxfam wanted to do better at this as part of the partnership and wanted this to be a journey to support change.

It was like there was a sigh of release in the room in allowing these topics to be discussed. It allowed us to acknowledge what was really happening, broadly within the sector, and within our long standing partnerships. We agreed to look at different ways of working moving forward. It was only a first step of discussion, and did not allow space to go deep enough to really unpack issues and the power between us. But it helped set the ground for further work and showed how a decolonisation lens in a partnership brokering process can work – both as a topic to explore in partnership and in the approaches we used to broker.

Decolonising aid is not easy

If a partnership decides it wants to actively look at decolonisation and utilise partnership brokering as an opportunity to support exploring decolonisation, then it's important to understand that it will not be easy. As Peace Direct (2021 p38) outline "While such strategizing 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." This can have ramifications for partnership work, and point to needing to look at different approaches to ensure that partners have space to look at this within their organisation, but also, particularly for those with power, to be ready for relinquishing of power. Including to be open to different ways of working –such as upholding commitments to change, even when it gets hard. It's important to recognized that due to power imbalances held in partnerships, partners may accept less than ideal power situations in order to get something they need, such as funding. Not all partners will feel they have the power to say no to a partnership if there is a power imbalance. Also not all partners will want to hand over power or take on power.

I recently learnt of a program that at the outset had buy in from donors for supporting and handing over power to Pacific leaders. These leaders began to speak out on expectations of the program and the donor, which the program helped them articulate. During this time the donor's leadership changed and so did their commitment to handing over power. When expectations were named by Pacific leaders about what power transformation looked like, the donor was no longer committed to change and undermined the objective. This subsequently undermined the partnership and program, the commitment that it was based on, and the investment and work that had been done. It reinforced the traditional power over relationship between donor and recipients. It highlighted that there are risks when Global South actors move beyond the role the Global North expect of them. It also highlights the limitations of how far a decolonization process can go if the system as a whole doesn't transform. As an Timorese Oxfam in Timor-Leste colleague highlighted when reviewing this article - "A transformative change at our end alone is not sufficient. The whole aid sector needs... transformation to address structural inequality truly and genuinely... So despite INGOs such as Oxfam's attempts to share power and decolonize partnership models, we are still dancing around the real issue at hand. Inequality in power (in givers and recipients) existing from the get-go. INGOs trying different transformation

approaches address a few issues, but not all.” None-the-less Global North actors championing decolonization processes is proving to be powerful, with some key donors and actors starting to show commitment to change and there being greater dialogue on these issues (Aly 2022, Start Network 2022, House of Commons 2022).

Many donors and actors argue that a reason power cannot be handed over is because Global South actors don’t have the skill level that donors expect, such as meeting compliance and accountability requirements or capacity to implement. And this impacts on quality of outcomes. Firstly this idea needs to be questioned and critiqued. It comes from fundamental racist colonial beliefs that Global North actors and systems are superior. It does not recognize the value, strengths and capacity of Global South systems, organizations and people or the contexts they are working in. Secondly it turns a blind eye to the weaknesses, corruption and failures that exist in the Global North, including Global North actors working in the Global South.

A partnership brokering process provides the opportunity to uncover and unpack these assumptions and biases. For partners to outline expectations about quality, impact, processes and desired outcomes, including the strengths and value add that they bring to the partnership and where partners (including those from the Global North) need support. This process can help question ingrained harmful practices and beliefs and find ways to do aid differently, particularly in relation to compliance and bureaucratic systems. The Start Network’s Anti-Racist and Decolonial Framework (see Figure 2) is useful in supporting recognition of these tensions - that sectoral and organisational pressures are influenced by racial and colonial power dynamics, and that there is a need for building ethical organisational and partnership cultures that encompass trust, bravery and deep democracy. They put forward that there is a need to balance *doing the right things* with *doing things the right way* (The Start Network 2022).

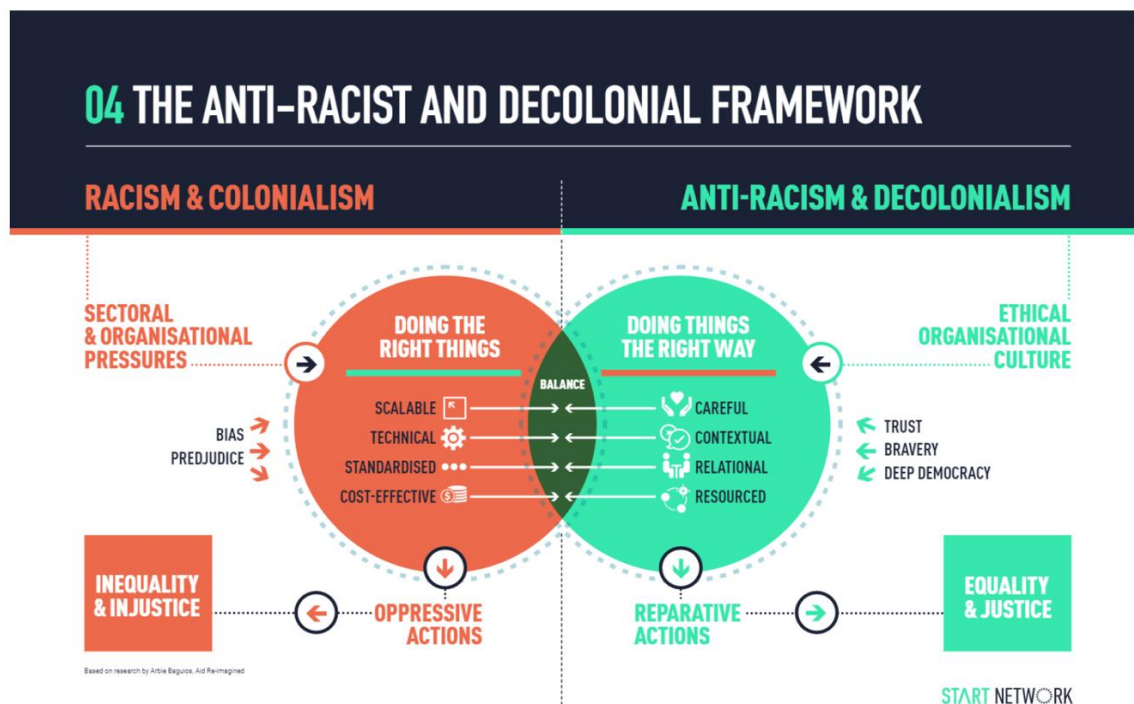


Figure 2 - The Start Network’s Anti-Racist and Decolonial Framework

But good intentions and attempts at *doing things the right way* alone may not be sufficient. In an attempt to support the localisation agenda in the Timor-Leste humanitarian space, I supported facilitating humanitarian sector (cluster) groups made of international, government and local actors. In reality though local actors had little engagement. In large this had been due to information about meetings being held by international agencies, English being the dominate language and meetings not being inclusive. In attempts to increase local actors role and power, we agreed on meetings being in the local language with English translation, local actors be co-chairs, groups use culturally appropriate communication approaches and we approached local actors directly inviting them to participate. Despite these strategies these sector groups continued to have low level local actor engagement. There was a lack of interest, as a local NGO colleague shared - the sector groups had limited value to them. Many said they found it challenging to engage and they were already over stretched.

It was clear the process we had undertaken hadn't worked. We hadn't sufficiently consulted with local actors about what might be of benefit for them in joining a sector group and the role and responsibility they would be interested in (if any). By trying to hand over power, we were demonstrating power over, by requesting local actors to do something that wasn't in their interest, making assumptions about what would work and not work, and not working with them to look at what their objectives and needs were. Effectively, in our attempts to decolonise, we were taking a colonial approach, where we assumed we knew what was best for local actors and where undertaking a process to meet our needs over the needs of local actors. This also had the potential ramification of local actors then being stereotyped as not wanting, or being able, to engage – when in fact this wasn't the case.

Talking about power differently

For partnerships to do this work, *do things the right way* and take on this decolonisation challenge, there has to be an unpacking of underlying assumptions, privilege, inequality and discrimination. There has to be discussions about power and the type of power shifts that partners want to see. But for this to be a true conversation, there also needs to be space for people of different cultures to feel safe to talk openly, be brave to take risks, have uncomfortable discussions and demand and demonstrate that commitments about power transformation, decolonisation and localisation are genuinely enacted. It also cannot do-more-harm, particularly to people that may have intersectional diverse identities. The partnership broker also needs to be looking at the power they hold in the partnership.

A recommendation from the Peace Direct (2021 p38) consultations on decolonising aid is that “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 skill 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 should be taken into account in partnership brokering – set up processes that will enable actors to be open and buy into these processes and opportunities. Support people to feel excited about being part of a larger transformation process and global movement.

When looking at power in cross-cultural partnerships we must also look at cross-cultural differences and how this might impact on discussions. We need to think about how safe spaces are created for people to unpack these topics in a way that will be sensitive to different cultural approaches. It's important to understand how power is traditionally shared or respected in different cultures that are part of the partnership. In working cross culturally it is important to

support people to work out the underpinning values that influence different cultural behavior and norms (Rhodes & Antoine 2013).

This means a conversation about power can be challenging, and that the basis of the discussion could be starting from very different points. There is a need to unpack what power means for each partner. A common difference in dialogues about power in partnership brokering versus decolonisation in aid, is about how power is shared. A key partnership brokering principle is equity – often in a partnership, as seen with the Oxfam in Timor-Leste example, it focuses on increased sharing of power between partners. Often unpacking the difference between power over (having power over another), power with (having power with another or sharing power) and power to (handing over power to another) (Pansardi & Bindi 2021). Within a decolonisation framework the push, may not just be simply to share power, but how can power be handed over from Global North actors to those in the Global South. It is actually about those from the Global North letting go of power. The challenge in a partnership approach, is whether all actors are open to this? And are other partners wanting to take on this new power (and responsibilities associated).

One of the questions that comes up with decolonization is: Are Global North actors no longer needed? A decolonization process could lead to handing over power and transitioning Global North actors out of roles (whether individuals or organizations). But it doesn't necessarily have to mean this. A partnership brokering process can help partners look at what unique value add each partner brings to the partnership and how this might look in a decolonization process. There can still be valuable roles that Global North actors can play. But it is worth critically asking this hard question as part of unpacking and looking at roles, relationships and power, as well as justifying partnerships within a decolonial framework.

Suggestions for partnership brokers to support decolonization processes

Question your own practice and support more Global South partnership brokers

For partnership brokering to integrate a decolonization lens we need more partnership brokers with a foundational understanding of power, race, inclusion, decolonization, and lived experience. We need to look at how existing partnership brokers can be supported to critically question their practice in light of decolonization of aid, and have the opportunity to build further understanding and skills. This need to include ways that will be effective and transformational, and not just tick a box.

If you are a partnership broker from the Global North, it is important to look at your own privilege and power and how it impacts on the partnership and brokering process, recognizing that you will always be a Partnership Broker from the Global North. Simultaneously we need to bring in more partnership brokers from the Global South, currently unrepresented as accredited partnership brokers, with the lived experience of colonization and racism in aid, the understanding of brokering in different cultural settings and use of different cultural approaches. To do this there is a need to shift the partnership brokering process (accreditation, trainings and materials) so that they better take into account culturally and linguistic appropriate approaches, further acknowledge the history of systemic inequality, while also supporting people to build skills to broker these really hard discussions that acknowledge inequality and racism within the sector and work across cultural divides. We need to further legitimize collective culture methods and approaches in partnering work.

Working in cross-cultural partnership brokering teams should be the norm. If a broker is from the Global North and the partnership includes actors from the Global South and North, it should be encouraged to look at working with Global South partnership brokers, particularly those from

cultures represented in the partnership. If there are no accredited partnership brokers yet from that culture or nobody is available, look at working with non-accredited facilitators and allow them to bring their own approach, while also introducing them to partnership brokering practice. Alternatively members of partners can be supported to play this role and co-create partnership brokering processes that will be more culturally appropriate. Look at working with and learning from people experienced in talking about and facilitating discussions on race and decolonization. [ACFID](#) (Tawake et al 2021) has released a fantastic publication about decolonization and locally led development. It includes a checklist for practitioners from the Global South and Global North. It can help brokers look at their own practice and how to support decolonization and be used with partner organizations. Peace Direct (2021) also has great recommendations for individuals working in the aid and development sector, that are relevant to partnership brokers:

- Reflect on your identity and motivations for working in the sector, and what privileges and ‘baggage’ you bring to your work.
- Remain humble.
- Shift access and power to those who don’t have it, in whatever ways you can.
- Organise and connect to networks and groups that support this agenda.

Bring a decolonization lens to all partnership brokering

Actively bring a decolonization lens to all partnership brokering work in aid, development and humanitarian action. Ask questions, either as a broker or with partners, like: Are power imbalances related to colonial aid practices and race playing a part in the partnership or my brokering? How conscious are partners of this? How conscious am I? How much is this causing tensions or challenges in the partnership? Is systemic inequality a barrier to the partnership going deeper and being of greater value to all? As a partnership broker what can I do to make a difference? Look at ways to support the partnership to explore further, recognizing that these issues are often hidden and people may not be conscious of them yet. As outlined earlier this can be done by encouraging partners to look at and explore decolonization head on, or bringing decolonization approaches and lens to partnership brokering processes more subtly. Look at how you can support different partners to be open and committed to exploring this in the partnership.

Put a focus on understanding each other’s cultures and cultural ways of working. Critically examine the partnering brokering process to assess whether it is supporting or transforming status quos, then look at how the process can better transform. Whether integrated within a broader process or as a specific objective in a partner transformation journey. Acknowledge that this is a hard and long journey that will not be easy, will be uncomfortable, but can also be liberating and exciting.

Start from where partners are at

While it’s important to create safe spaces for hard discussions and allow people to go out of their comfort zones, it’s important that this process doesn’t do-harm and set up organisations and partnerships for failure. Look at what approach to decolonisation is appropriate for the context and partnership. If there is buy in from leadership of all partners and those around for more radical full frontal approaches, then push these discussions further. If there is hesitancy in doing this, look at more “softer approaches” that integrate decolonisation that support more culturally open spaces for discussions, but doesn’t push the agenda as far as it could go. While this may feel like a cop-out or watering down, recognise that these processes will take time and that this may just be the first steps in a longer journey. Recognise that different partners may be at different points in this journey – acknowledge and value this and use it as part of the process – how can this be a learning process for all?

Centre partnership brokering around partners from the Global South

Actively centre partnerships and partnership brokering around partners in the Global South. Recognise that common cultural practice in the development sector is that Global North cultures dominate – shift this (Goris & Magendane 2021). Create space within partnership brokering process for partners to come up with approaches they themselves feel comfortable with – this may require time with partners separately, together and co-creation processes. So that all partners have ownership over processes, are given permission to be open and are conscious that this is an objective. Ensure these are accounted for in the design of the partnership brokering process, including required resourcing. But in doing so there is a need to be careful to not burden Global South partners or people of color. They should not be required to carry the emotional burden of this process. Allow people to acknowledge their feelings and encourage a culture of openness to critique and question and start from a position of difference. Allow space for processes to change if they are not working or different needs arise.

Also recognize the challenging position that national staff of international organizations are potentially in. Particularly if decolonization is not a discussion that is happening in their organization. It's important to acknowledge that "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." (Peace Direct 2021 p4) National staff of international organizations may be seen to take responsibility for decolonizing in a partnership as they may be the face of the partnership to local partners, but their own relationship with the organization could be one of oppression. This could put them in a challenging situation, where they don't have the power to support change in areas that are identified.

Focus on Power

Ensure that within the partnership brokering work there is a focus on power – look at ideas of power over, power with and handing over power. When talking about power, talk about the history of colonialism, aid and development and what type of partnerships and power relationships this led to historically. Support people to feel empowered and excited about looking at transforming power relationships and acknowledging that there is structural power imbalances and racism in aid. Create a safe space where its ok to talk about power. Recognize that it might be safer to do this with partners separately first. Look at using The Spindle's (2020) Power Awareness tool for partnerships⁶ as an entry point for discussing power in the relationship, but recognize that it doesn't focus on intangible power, and so there may be a need to take discussions of power deeper. In a partnership, if there is interest, set up taskforces or key groups to look at power in the partnership. Allow the space to talk about hard issues.

Be mindful of language

Be conscious and mindful of language being used and whether it has connotations that link to colonization, discrimination or disempowerment such as beneficiary (who receives help) versus participant (who is an active agent), a victim (which victimizes) versus a survivor (which empowers), capacity building (implying no capacity to begin with) to capacity strengthening

⁶ The [Power Awareness tool](#) (The Spindle 2020 p5) aims to "make power more visible, enabling partners to discuss power dynamics in their relationships and engage in joint analysis. It is our hope that by making power more visible and concrete, partners will be in a better position to shift the power and work towards more equitable and productive relationships."

(implying there is existing capacity). Raise this in the partnership and support partners to come up with language that is acceptable to all.

Conclusion

With the ever-growing realization of the impact of colonization and racism in aid, development and humanitarian action globally, as well as among individuals like myself, it is both crucial and an opportunity that decolonization be taken into account in partnership brokering. Systemic inequality has the risk of negatively impacting on partnerships and reinforcing colonialism and racism in aid. Impacting on the ability of partnerships to reach shared goals, unless there is a conscious exploration of issues. A partnership broker has the opportunity to support facilitating and creating culturally safe spaces for transformational work that enables partnerships to move forward in shifting power that is in line with decolonization and localization approaches. But to do this, partnership brokers need to look at their own practice and how they can bring a decolonization lens to their work. There also needs to be a focused effort to increase the amount of partnership brokers from the Global South who have lived experience of colonization and racism in aid and in-depth cultural understanding to facilitate these discussions. Partnership Brokers have the opportunity to be active change agents in the decolonisation process. Instigating discussions and processes that enables transformation of the deep systemic inequality that exists in the international aid, development and humanitarian sectors.

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