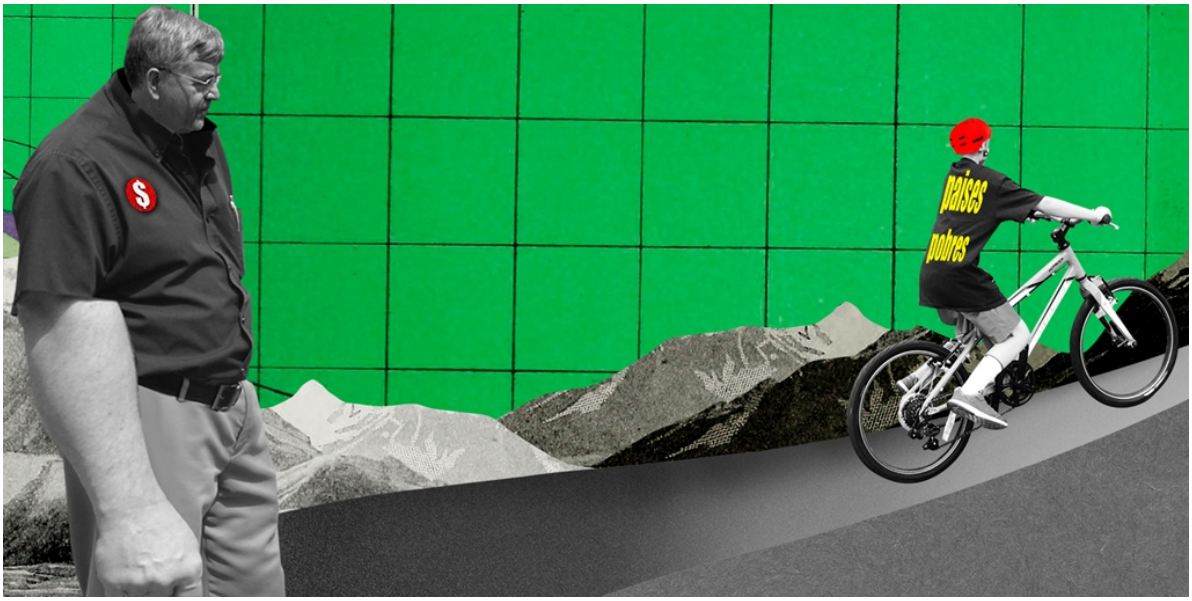
The narrative of decolonization of development aid

Are non-Western alternatives the real issue?

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Illustrator: Hansel Obando

It must be said at the outset, that I have serious disagreements with the application of the term *decolonization* to the development aid sector. An earlier article I have published in Open Democracy titled "Decolonization is a comfortable buzzword for the aid sector" explains my reasoning for this disagreement in detail. The issue, I feel, is not about whether the decolonization of aid narrative —which is being widely discussed in both Western and non-Western contexts— needs an alternative. Rather, it is whether the concept of decolonization is an appropriate approach to challenge the western dominated perceptions of development aid to begin with. I would argue, given the historical origins of decolonization, which can go as far back as nineteenth century Europe, that decolonization plays a very small part in the efforts to try and extricate the global South from its financial dependence on the global North.

This financial imbalance between aid provider and aid receiver is what defines development aid, as we know it today. Development aid, as well as its more egregious sibling, fiscal aid, provided by institutions such as the IMF, have a similar composition to European and British colonial rule, due to their intense stranglehold over countries with far less wealth

and resources available to them (and mostly former colonies) than their more powerful Northern counterparts. As such, it resembles colonialism in many ways. Perhaps this is why the term decolonization has found such popularity in the sector.

But my argument lies in the fact that despite being a tool born out of the embers of Western colonialism, development aid is not an act of colonialism. Rather, it aims to mimic colonial structures in a post-colonial world. Hence, decolonizing it, or removing its colonial constructs is irrelevant, since the structure it is built upon is vastly different from its historical predecessor —at least in theory—. This distinction is extremely important to make when discussing decolonization.

On the one hand, the actual process of decolonization emerged as an outcome of the end of British colonial rule in the mid twentieth century, a period that was by no means smooth or free of violence and conflict. Countries were decolonized because the colonizers eventually withdrew. More accurately, in most cases they were made to leave due to the resistance from the colonized, given that the colonizers would have probably stayed on for far longer had they had the opportunity.

On the other hand, the world of development aid as we know it undoubtedly has its origins in the post-colonial world following the gradual end of colonization, particularly, in the post-World War 2 period. But unlike colonization, it cannot be easily claimed that aid assistance was necessarily imposed by force upon countries that were former colonies; nor were countries invaded and as a result economic wealth plundered. Indeed, many newly independent post-colonial nations required some form of international assistance to be able to rebuild their economies. And not all of it was in the form of aid. For instance, soon after the partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947, four-fifths of all foreign assistance to the newly created state of Pakistan did not come from its former colonizer —the United Kingdom—, but from the United States, and almost 75% of that aid came not in the form of cash, but as surplus agricultural commodities [1].

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In that sense, aid is a system heavily influenced by and is an outcome of the end of colonialism. But it has in many ways developed an independent life of its own in terms of its modalities and functionalities. Aid is also a formal agreement made between two or more independent countries, rather than a violent ascension of control by one over the other. Granted, much of this economic assistance comes with strings attached, such as IMF conditionalities and World Bank loan repayments. But to frame the discussion of power inequalities between aid giver and receiver as a cause for decolonization is doing a dis-service to both the historical worth of decolonization, as well as to how we should actually be tackling the issue of aid dependency in countries of the global South. That is, not in

terms of ridding ourselves of colonial influence, but rather, being in control of our own decision-making processes so that we increase our autonomy vis-à-vis our Northern counterparts. It is about asserting our independence rather than our dependence

Why aid?

If we want to truly understand how to address the inequalities that development aid has perpetuated over the years and seek out this autonomy, we must ask two questions: first, is aid still necessary and/or useful? And, second, will and can aid ever end?

Concerning the first question, I would use an example from my personal experience as an aid practitioner for almost 30 years and as a woman from the global South —that of gender equality—. I started my career in Pakistan in the 1990s, a time when women's rights was a key item on the development agenda, thanks to the Beijing Platform for Action. Since then, international donors have poured tens of millions of dollars on gender equality in Pakistan and elsewhere. But today in Pakistan, we are still struggling for exactly those same rights, in addition to facing newer and even more dangerous struggles. Pakistan is now sixth on the list of most dangerous countries to be a woman and ranks 153rd of 156 in Global Gender Gap Index. For many of us, across all spectrums of income and class, it is a crime to be born a woman.

Such contexts question the necessity and utility of aid. While aid has never been the solution to the problems we face in the global South, and can never be on its own, it nevertheless also doesn't go deep down into the messy, sordid reality of most countries. Like addressing the tribal *jirga* (an all-male tribal court) system that views women as property. Or honour killings. Or inheritance laws. I recall being told by aid agencies that these are not the issues they will be addressing through their programmes —at least not directly—because of the political and cultural sensitivities they generate. And hence, these endemic issues have remained untouched over the years, to the point that they now threaten our very physical lives.

Development aid has consistently addressed such issues at superficial levels (or not at all), thereby questioning its efficacy and utility as a tool for positive change. If aid is barely able to skim the surface of key issues plaguing many of our societies, then what use is it? In this case, the necessity of aid is then made redundant due to the futility of aid [2].

To answer the second question concerning the end of aid programs, we must look at the perpetuity of aid across the world. Between the years 2010-2019, Official Development Assistance (ODA) increased from US$128 billion to US$156 billion as a result of shrinking grants and boosting loans. Humanitarian aid went up, while commitments to extreme poverty decreased [3]. These are mere fluctuations in the aid regime. Even in a post-COVID world where aid has decreased due to domestic priorities, such as the massive cuts in aid carried out by the UK, there is no indication that aid programs will end anytime soon. They may look different, but if anything, there are now calls to increase aid.

Alternatively, the examples of China, India and South Africa as those who no longer receive ODA are also rife in the literature [4]. Based on these cases, one could argue that it is possible for aid to end. However, these cases also create a fallacy about the “end of aid”, as these countries are now donors themselves. The idea should not be to replace existing donor countries with new donor countries, but to replace the system of aid itself with more equitable relationships based on mutual economic and political demands of both giving and receiving countries.

In answering both these questions, the crux lies not so much in asking if aid is so futile, why do donors continue to provide it. We know there are underlying power and control issues there. Rather, we need to ask, why do we in the global South continue to accept it? Is it the colonial influence over aid that perpetuates its need by others, or is it an artificial need that has been created to ensure aid’s perpetuation in a post-colonial world? The case of Afghanistan is both current and apt here. A review on the aid provided by Canada to Afghanistan over the last 20 years has claimed that «donor nations often called the shots on development priorities at the expense of fully representing the Afghan population’s true underlying needs and priorities» [5]. As such, aid was required because a need was created as a result of an international conflict that spilled across borders, and this same need was further kept alive by the requirements of the donors rather than the demands of the affected populations.

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It is clear from this and similar cases, that the global North is keeping the aid narrative alive through its control over global geopolitics. But what then is the role of recipient countries? Unlike colonization, in this era many countries do have political autonomy as independent nations to decide their own priorities. And a cult of resistance against such control has also existed for decades. Why aren’t we using it enough to push back?

Why not decolonization?

Decolonization as an expression of resistance against Northern modes of engagement with the South, or more accurately, as a lack of engagement with the South, has been popularized across a range of sectors, to the extent that it has led to what Moosavi has called the «decolonial bandwagon of intellectual decolonization» [6]. However, as pointed out by the same author, «intellectual decolonization in the Global North may be characterized by Northern-centrism due to the way in which scholarship may ignore decolonial scholars from the Global South» and in consequence enact intellectual colonization, instead of dismantling it. Moosavi lists a wealth of scholars from Latin America, Africa and Asia who have been challenging the decolonization discussion since as

early as the 1970s. Yet, these arguments have rarely been picked up by Northern academics, let alone by Northern donors, in their efforts to dismantle colonial traits that linger within development aid structures.

As a result, the narratives within the development aid sector are devoid of any real understanding concerning the intellectual discourses presented within the various regions and countries who have typically been at the receiving end of aid. Not only does this create a disconnect within the discussion itself, but it also shows that institutions of the global North are not interested in what the rest of the world has to say. Because if Northern donors were to genuinely listen to voices beyond their own, they would be well aware of the several calls for resistance that the global South has been articulating against the perpetuation of Western scholarship on non-Western lives.

By the same token, discussions on decolonization of aid cannot be separated from its sister discussion on localization, a concept I also consider to be inappropriate as I claim in The New Humanitarian. The term 'local' has always had derogatory connotations in the aid industry, for instance when speaking of those 'locally' employed by international aid institutions in the countries they work in, or 'local' beneficiaries' of a particular recipient country. Instead of being seen as independent, autonomous citizens of a nation, the term creates a sense of othering, as if we have no independent histories, capabilities or practices.

In the same way, the Twitter hashtag *#shiftthepower*, which has emanated from the decolonization of aid discourse, does not talk about how, and more importantly, when the power will be shifted. Besides, shifting power does not mean giving it up entirely but keeping some of it intact, as the concept of localization also entails [7]. Yet, if aid institutions retain the most controlling elements of the power, then the shift is pointless.

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There is no doubt that these notions of decolonization, localization and power shifts are still largely influenced by the North, who seek to continue holding on to power. Nevertheless, the fact that the countries in which aid operates are no longer colonized, actually gives the latter the legal and moral right to reject aid, and at the very least control its allocation and use, without force or duress. Addressing the question of why states do not look inwards in terms of how they may reduce their dependency on aid, but instead continue to embrace it, is one that requires us to expand our realm of inquiry beyond colonial influence.

What is missing?

To be able to critically engage with the concept of decolonization of aid —if at all— it is important to analyze not just the attitudes of the aid giver, but also of the aid receiver. There are many issues missing from this discourse which make it difficult to rationalize the use of the decolonization argument.

Decolonization is not simply about Western post-colonial powers controlling non-Western post-colonial states. Many former colonies are now themselves exhibiting colonial tendencies and exacerbating power inequalities within their own countries; for instance, by discriminating against —often through violent means— religious and ethnic minorities, by exerting feudal control, financial corruption or through political dictatorships. If we are to speak about decolonization, we cannot ignore examples of how abuse of power manifests itself outside the global North.

Likewise, *South-South collaboration* for development is based on the flawed premise that just because everyone belongs to a particular geographical, cultural or religious context, they will all get along with each other. That is true to the extent that countries of the South can collectively challenge Northern domination. But widespread power inequalities also exist within the regions of the global South based on geopolitical and economic variables such as history, wealth and global political status.

What decolonization of aid also fails to address is the *securitization of aid assistance* and the military aid given to many countries by the North. The fact that military aid is never included in the statistics concerning development aid, is a conscious omission made to obfuscate the extent of the influence that Northern countries have on the foreign policies and geopolitics of the South. The support towards military regimes as well as the sale of arms by Northern powers to countries of the South, is a major part of the global financial flows, which is then attempted to be offset by development aid aimed at those same countries who are victims of this military might. It is inherently dishonest to separate these two forms of aid when they are so inextricably linked.

Language and its impact on relationships between aid giver and receiver, is a key issue when speaking of power imbalances. I have written about how the word decolonization itself is untranslatable in many of the languages of former colonies, given that the largely English-speaking West leads the discourse. Even the lexicon used is in the language of the former colonizers. However, if centered in the various languages of the formerly colonized, the discussion on aid and power can take a startlingly different turn towards the side of those who receive aid and allowing them to have equal control.

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Western narratives on the decolonization of aid are bereft of meaning if they only focus on colonial history as their springboard, taking into account that current geopolitics and the struggle for global supremacy is now far more complex than the history of colonialism. And even if ridding ourselves of our colonial history were to be the key objective, Western understanding of how to do so is extremely arbitrary and vague. For instance, many in the Northern aid sector equate decolonization to institutional and systems change —including reforms in program management, evaluation, recruitment etc—. But these have nothing to do with decolonization since they are simply modalities within the larger structure. These "changes" are of no use unless resistance against the system of aid itself precedes them. And that resistance must come from outside the North.

Moving forward

Operation Legacy involved the destruction and secret retention of thousands of records of the British Empire and their colonial wards at the onset of decolonization in 1948. Confronted with the pressure of the end of empire, Britain faced the decision of which documents to hand over to the newly independent states and which to retain themselves [8]. Even then, the power to decide how history should be viewed moving forward remained in the hands of the colonizers.

How then do we want our current history to be remembered? Through the voices of those who provide us with aid, or through our own voices, which can be far more nuanced and responsive to our own lives?

Indeed, decolonization goes much beyond cursory institutions like development aid, and into the realm of knowledge production engineered solely by and for European audiences. Scholar and academic Priyamvada Gopal states that «in engaging with decolonization today, we do not necessarily seek to replicate or imitate such anticolonial moments (…) Reframing discussions of decolonization in the light of anticolonial thought gives grounding and historical heft to them (…) In this regard, the posing of questions is as important as finding answers» [9].

And this is why the assertions and arguments in this article have been posed as a set of questions we must ask ourselves, rather than suggestions or solutions. Questions we need to impose to be able to reduce, control or ultimately end our dependence on aid, if that is what we *collectively* conclude. Not questions about whether colonialism still exists in some new shape or form, but questions on, is aid important? Is it necessary for us to receive? If it is, for what exactly? And from whom? Do we resist it? If so, how? If not, why?

Calls for including more perspectives coming from aid receiving countries have only now begun to grow louder despite being part of the discourse since the 1990s [10]. Given this

scenario, instead of focusing on decolonization of aid, what needs to be addressed is how two countries can engage in a just and equitable negotiation to discuss their terms around aid assistance without power abuses from the donors.

Decolonization in its truest sense, if it is to be applied in any situation, emanates not from the colonizer but from the colonized. In the case of development aid, the case is not to absolve Northern donors of their misuse of power, but rather that the push for control must come from those at the receiving end. A push that challenges the very structures of aid, its purpose, its uses and its modalities. Once that happens, then perhaps we can start talking about decolonization of aid.

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2 — One can apply this example to many other areas in aid assistance, such as health, education, land reforms, democratic governance etc. Without acknowledging and targeting existing historical anomalies in these areas, aid will never be able to reform them in any meaningful way.
3 — Post-COVID figures obviously show dramatic levels of change in aid flows, but these will not be addressed in this article.
4 — India still continues to receive ODA, but its share has declined steadily over the last two decades.
5 — An even more damning indictment can be made of aid provided by the United States to Afghanistan given its role in the decades-long conflict.
6 — Moosavi, L. (2020) “The decolonial bandwagon and the dangers of intellectual decolonisation”, *International Review of Sociology, 30*:2, 332-354.
7 — Localization calls for a specific percentage of donor funding to be allocated to recipient organizations in-country. It does not actually pass on any final decision-making authority in its entirety to the recipient organization.
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