Decolonisation of humanitarianism: a road of responsibility, justice and democratisation

A dialogue between **Tamma Aloudat** and **Nanette Antequisa** (23 June 2021)
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Compared to debates in the development sector, the conversation on 'decolonisation' is relatively new in the humanitarian sector, thereby lending it a greater sense of urgency. With this statement Dorothea Hilhorst, professor of Humanitarian studies at the International Institute for Social Studies (ISS)[i] opened this third session in the series 'The Decolonization of Aid', organised by KUNO, Partos and the ISS. Moving our gaze from development cooperation to humanitarianism, we built on lessons learned in earlier sessions in this series to discuss what a truly decolonised humanitarian sector could look like. Two keynote speakers were invited to provide guidance towards formulating an answer to this complex question: Tamman Aloudat, Managing Director at the Global Health Centre of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, and Nanette Salvador-Antequisa, Executive Director at Ecosystems Work for Essential Benefits (ECOWEB). Leading the conversation and trying to approach some answers is co-host Kiza Magendane, knowledge broker at The Broker and by now familiar guide on this challenging path.

Taking stock

With the start of the third session, we are now approaching the half-way point of our journey. Time to take a moment and ask ourselves what we have learned so far and what lessons we can build on during the upcoming discussions. In the first session, that took a historical perspective, it became clear that understanding current debates on the transformation of aid and development is impossible without recognizing the complex interlinkages of the two with the history of colonialism. Additionally, there was widespread agreement throughout session one and two that, whilst decolonisation is of vital importance in reshaping international development and humanitarianism, we must be careful in this endeavour not to throw away 'the baby with the bathwater'. That is, we should not abandon our efforts altogether and lose sight of all the good that is being done with development and humanitarian aid.

In the second session, a core message rang out clear and simple: It is local actors who know what needs to be done and where activities should be focused. Translating that message into action, however, appears less simple. Every-day practices in the development sector are still very Northern-led, top-down, and in that sense 'colonial'. And this is not because development organisations or practitioners themselves have a colonial mindset. It is because development cooperation operates within, is an outcome of, and at the same time perpetuates, a much broader (colonial) system. As humanitarianism is embedded in this same broader system, most lessons so far can be applied to discussion on the decolonisation of this sector as well. However, professor Hilhorst argues, humanitarianism is going through multiple changes at the same time, with discussions on localisation, resilience and sustainability impacting the direction of its transformation.

On the right track?

Taking stock of our journey so far seemed like a good idea until the first speaker, Tamman Aloudat started his presentation. Questioning everything we have done so far and forcing all participants in this series to critically look at our endeavour, Aloudat pointed out that "talking about decolonization is fraught with problems." First, Aloudat argued, we have not defined what decolonisation means – "what would we end up with at the end of the process?". Second, and importantly, it is a dangerous path to travel. Humanitarianism still saves millions of lives every year and taking this journey runs the risk of disarming the great and important force that humanitarianism still is. Underlining the point made in the previous sessions, Aloudat forcefully stated that, indeed, decolonisation is *not* throwing away the baby with the bathwater. No one, Aloudat continued, has the moral position to say 'we must continue on this path of decolonisation despite the many patients that might perish because they do not get the help they need while we are on this journey'. Decolonisation is, decidedly, not about dismantling the humanitarian aid system. But then what does it mean and how can we reach that elusive goal without risking the lives of those we want to help?

Capturing (de)colonisation

Throughout this series on the decolonization aid, each speaker will be asked to select an image that symbolises the message he or she would like to share with the audience.

INGO Land Cruiser, Tamman Aloudat

For Tamman Aloudat, the Land Cruiser is a living symbol of the top-down nature of humanitarian interventions. This iconic vehicle is known for ploughing through impossibly muddy roads – showing its ability of humanitarian organisations to reach communities that would otherwise not receive humanitarian assistance. Exclusively made for INGOs, this vehicle also symbolizes something decidedly 'external' and foreign. In reality, this superpower of humanitarian organisations is not as absolute as INGOs often communicate. Tamman demonstrated this by showing a second image of this same Land Cruiser that is being dragged out of the mud by a local tractor. Contrary to our collective image, it is this local tractor that has the ability to navigate the local roads. And, similarly, it is the local communities that have the expertise to guide and shape the most effective humanitarian interventions.

Nanette Antequisa shared an image of group of local villagers in the Philippines, carrying a house to prevent it from flooding. This image, traditional in the Philippines, signifies the notion of collaboration and 'helping one another'.

Antequisa explained that local communities were, in past disasters, and are, today in the face of COVID-19, helping each other as first aid responders. In every disaster situation survivors and local communities have shown a great capacity for self-help.

Local community carrying a small house to a safe location, July 2019, in Legazpi City, Albay. Photo by Karla Thea Omelan, ABS-CBN News.

The humanitarian sector, however, has often failed to recognize this great strength and did not adjust its interventions to local culture and traditions. If this capacity would be recognised, much more could be achieved, both in terms of immediate relief as well as for long-term resilience. This does not, however, only mean letting people help each other and themselves, Antequisa noted; it also implies including local actors in designing humanitarian efforts that are implemented in their communities.

A different place in the system

Answering Aloudat's questions is no easy task. Clues may be found, however, in one of the key insights gained in the first two sessions: It is not so much about reorganising the humanitarian system itself but about challenging the place of the humanitarian sector in relation to the broader colonial, neo-liberal system. Aloudat poignantly described the humanitarian sector as 'the other arm' of the system. The army, as the left arm of the colonial system, can be seen as the 'coercive arm'. The humanitarian sector, its right arm, may not be coercive, but an arm of the same system nonetheless. Humanitarianism then, is not a colonial system itself but rather a subordinate of the colonial hegemony. Humanitarian aid workers are not colonial soldiers, but they are perpetuating and expressing the colonial power balance.

If decolonisation means fundamentally changing the relationship of humanitarianism with the global system, it seems reasonable to say that the way we are now thinking about and shaping the practice of humanitarian aid will have to undergo a radical transformation. Trying to answer his own question, Aloudat suggests that "decolonisation could be an entire divorce of the idea that someone has a real idea of what is better for the other; letting go entirely of the paternalism that is central to and still defines our current modes of working and organisation. The agency needs to find its way to the people who are receiving the aid." This means that humanitarian actors should oppose the system they are part of and, at the same time, give up the top-down approaches that shape their interventions. Largely agreeing with Aloudat, Professor Hilhorst also pointed to the effectiveness of top-down approaches in humanitarianism in extreme emergencies. That said, however, she recognises that, beyond these immediate responses, there is no place for such top-down imposed interventions and local actors should never be side-lined or substituted. They are the experts of their communities' experiences, needs and capacities.

Local resilience and expertise

Ensuring that agency becomes located with the people who receive aid has proven to be anything but a straightforward process. Nanette Antequisa, second presenter of this session, confirmed this conclusion based on her long-standing experience in the humanitarian sector. Antequisa has witnessed many examples of the 'colonial mindset' that still defines aid to this day, often leading to the disempowerment of the recipients of that aid. The present aid architecture, Antequisa argued, is the outcome of foundations that are rooted in a longstanding power imbalance, as a direct result from the colonial system. The language we use is testimony to this power imbalance – and not just 'language' in terms of the colonial wording we use, alluded to in the first session, but the literal language we use in the humanitarian sector. "We think the Western education is better, the ability to speak English

is seen as a sign of development. This has translated into a requirement in the humanitarian sector to speak and write English. Today, this greatly affects those people who do not master the language: They are not taken seriously or regarded as capable, knowledgeable actors," Antequisa pointed out. This obviously runs counter to the conclusion drawn in the previous session; that local actors are the experts when it comes to their own development. Apparently, translating such insights into practice is a tall order.

Since its establishment in 2006, Antequisa's organisation EcoWEB has tried to challenge the current organisation of aid. Focusing on disaster risk reduction and management, the organisation has adopted the Survivor and Community Led Response (SCLR) approach, recognising and relying on the expertise and resilience of local communities. These local actors do know best what is needed and what works in their own environments and, Antequisa strongly argued, they could be doing much more if only the structures of the current humanitarian system would allow for it. In fact, the experience of EcoWEB shows that, when existing frameworks are let go, and local communities are put in charge, the positive effects are clear and communities come out of the struggle stronger and more resilient than before.

Responsibility and justice, not charity

Whilst applauding Antequisa's plea for locally-led aid, Professor Hilhorst also pointed out that there lies a certain danger in the idea that 'local communities are resilient, they can do it themselves'. This notion could be used as an excuse or pretext for abandoning our humanitarian efforts altogether. Antequisa, however, pointed to the importance of 'responsibility' as a core concept that would reduce this risk of 'abandonment'. This responsibility stems from various sources, Antequisa argued. First, many vulnerabilities of people and communities in the Global South are a result of our unjust and exploitative colonial past. Second, continuing post-colonial 'development' processes and activities are contributing to climate change, conflicts and inequalities. And third, caring for others is a responsibility that comes with being human, with sharing this earth as a global community. "Humanitarian aid is not a matter of charity", EcoWEB's director summarised, "but a matter of *shared* responsibility." Taking this responsibility does not mean we have to 'provide help regardless of how people want to be helped' nor does it mean 'leaving them to it, if they know so well themselves'. Rather, it means to empower them to address the power imbalance; enable them to find solutions to their vulnerabilities; provide aid as an act of 'justice' to the disasters they have to face that are not of their own making; and take up our task to foster their resilience: "We need to put the people in crisis in the centre of a response."

Following Antequisa's line of thinking, Aloudat noted that there is no justice with charity. Charity, which is still seen as a driving force behind humanitarianism, is not 'free'. It is defined and fostered by political motivations or feelings of 'guilt'. And, perhaps most importantly, those giving charity cannot be held accountable; 'it is just a nice gesture'. Conversely, justice, and historical justice in particular, is overcoming the injustices of the colonial past, and coming together as equals around a new, transformed future.

"Charity is the drowning of justice in the craphole of mercy."

This quote by the Swiss pedagogue, political thinker and philanthropist Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) was shared by Redwa Khaled, one of the visitors to the webinar. By sharing the quote in the chat, Khaled contributed to the ongoing discussion between the speakers about the importance of designing a humanitarian aid system that focuses on justice instead of charity.

A bottom-up rebellion

First steps towards a transformed future are slowly becoming visible in the humanitarian sector. There is increasing agreement on the *idea* that 'humanitarian organisations are a support capacity'. Yet, despite the well acclaimed Grand Bargain, actions that fundamentally transform the system are conspicuously scarce. Throughout this series, the speakers in our dialogues and the authors of these articles have said and written that 'we do not want to throw away the baby with the bath water'. But saving the baby and getting rid of all the murky water proves a great challenge. The language of 'resilience' and 'shifting the power' is already being co-opted by the powers that be. Even this journey towards decolonisation is running the risk of becoming a northern-led, top-down process. According to Aloudat, however, this threat can be thwarted. "We overestimate the power of donor governments. We assume that if we stand up against them, we will stop getting funds." While this might be true for one or two organisations, Aloudat is convinced that if humanitarian organisations come together as a sector and formulate a clear and consistent demand, they have the strength to meaningfully shift the power and alter the relationship of the sector with the colonial system. A 'grand bargain' that is designed and championed by powerful, usually Northern based, humanitarian actors and governments – by the forces that are benefiting most from the current system – is not going to bring the fundamental change we seek.

Antequisa strongly agreed: "Representation now is mostly tokenistic," she noted. For her, a democratic process to realise change demands community-led processes and, as Aloudat argued, a 'bargain' designed by the people that know what is really needed. This is exactly why EcoWeb is a member of the Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4eP), a network of organisations that advocate for locally-led response within humanitarian practice. With its 'Grander Bargain 2030', the alliance advocates for the transformation of the humanitarian sector in order to put local organisations at the centre of humanitarian interventions. Finally, decolonisation will not be achieved if the development and humanitarian sectors continue their belly-gazing. Apart from looking at the broader system they are embedded in, they should also shift their attention to other fields. Or as Aloudat put it: "We need to get our heads out of our own butts." Much can be learned from labour movements, gender equality movements, patient groups, social justice groups – there are many people and groups that are working on similar processes. "Our headquarters and managements will *not* come up with solutions that will lead to the dissolvement of their own power. The solution lies in

democratisation and locally led processes.” We need to stop restricting autonomy. It is only by taking that path that we can realise decolonisation and transformation.

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