Taking the right path: An ethical perspective on the decolonisation of aid.

A dialogue between **Aarathi Krishnan** and **Hugo Slim** (29 September 2021)
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Over the past years, the ideal of a true decolonisation of aid has been given increasing attention throughout and beyond the humanitarian and development sectors. To foster an open dialogue and contribute to this endeavour, Partos, KUNO and the International Institute for Social Studies (ISS)[i] have initiated a series of online seminars, three of which have already taken place. So far, in the foregoing sessions, decolonisation of aid has been treated as something good, as a moral obligation of the sector. This fourth session serves to make this moral dimension of the undertaking more explicit and discuss the ethical frameworks and principles that can guide the journey towards decolonisation. Encouraged and critically questioned by knowledge broker Kiza Magendane – by now the familiar host of this series – two speakers were invited to share their views on the topic and spark an informed dialogue. The first to take the stage is Aarathi Krishnan, researcher at Harvard University, specialised in strategic and applied foresight for the humanitarian and development sector. Following Aarathi Krishnan is Dr. Hugo Slim, Senior Research Fellow at the Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict. Slim specializes in the study of ethics, war and humanitarian aid.

A short reflection on what we have learned so far
The fourth session within this series on 'the decolonisation of aid' was opened by Anne-Marie Heemskerk (Partos) and Peter Heintze (KUNO platform). Together, they reflected on the three earlier sessions (taking a historical perspective; a development aid perspective; and a humanitarian aid perspective) and summarised what has been learned so far

"We talk a lot about the need to shift the power, about what must change in donor requirements and strategic planning. But why is it so difficult? What are these patterns underlying our reality that make it so difficult to realise the change we want to see?" To affect change, what is needed is for us to make explicit and penetrate the roots of these patterns; roots that go back into our colonial past. It is for this reason, explained, that Partos and Kuno initiated this series: To facilitate an open dialogue to understand how our colonial past still affects us, our mindsets and our relationships. This understanding, as Anne-Marie argued, is a vital precondition for realising effective change.

What have we learned so far?
- Given the **complex interlinkages between our colonial past and the humanitarian and development sectors** from the very conception of these two projects, it is a highly challenging and risky undertaking to disentangle them. In this exercise we run the risk of losing all that is good within out humanitarian and development work. **We should not throw away the proverbial baby with the bathwater.**

- True decolonisation means we should not understand 'the West' as the epicentre of humanitarianism. 'Shifting the power' and transforming our sector into a more equitable one, implies that we change our perspective and make sure that the views and voices of the global South define our agendas. "**Listen to and follow the lead of local communities**", as Peter Heintze aptly summarised.
- 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**.
- **Decolonisation will only be meaningful if it is also extended to our funding mechanisms and resources allocation**. The resources for humanitarian and development interventions are not our own. It is this perception that keeps the Northern organisations and donors in positions of power. This funding does not belong to us, is not ours to give away. **Resources for humanitarian and development cooperation are a public good with a social purpose**.
- Transforming the humanitarian and development system demands a critical reflection on all our behaviours, relationships and assumptions underpinning our actions. One such assumption, whether it is held on a conscious or subconscious level, is the idea that 'we' (i.e. actors of the global North) know what is better for the recovery and/or development other (i.e. communities in the global South). **Decolonisation means letting go entirely of the paternalism that is central to and still defines our current modes of working and organisation**.

Knowing your position

The current humanitarian aid system is, as Peter Heintze also pointed out in his introduction, to a large degree defined by a one-directional perspective from the global North. According to Aarathi Krishnan, this gaze can be seen in practice in the way in which solutions are being proffered by the global North in the name of, and for the good of perceived people that are at different stages of vulnerability or need. And just as was the case in colonial times, when the solution of 'modernity' was imposed without thinking about whether modernity was actually wanted or needed, people are not recognised as full and legitimate participants in producing their path to development.

Colonialism and decolonisation are, for Krishnan, not only about diversity and inclusion, or about race and the dichotomous power imbalance between white people and people of colour. For her, one of the key principles in this discussion on decolonisation is that of 'positionality'. "The gaze that I have of the world and the position that I hold influences the decision that I make. I cannot speak on behalf of others that may look like me or come from a part of the world that I come from." Colonialism is not just about race: it is about cast; it is about class. Only by understanding these elements and how they define our position in the

world, can we understand how they impact our choices and relations with others. And it is on the basis of this understanding, about where we stand in relation to our fellow humans, that we can meaningfully move towards a decolonised aid system.

<u>The rights and responsibilities of self-determination</u>
To underline and make personal Krishnan's view about the importance of 'positionality', Hugo Slim reflects on the way in which colonialism shapes his own and the humanitarian sector's position in and towards the world. Hugo Slim sees himself, his family history and his upbringing as rooted in and a product of the colonial system. It is a position that many people in the global North share with one another. And as a consequence, the nature and 'gaze' of humanitarianism – led by the people whose histories are so intertwined with colonialism – has become paternalistic and colonial. Today, because of the vast scale of the humanitarian project and the sheer size of its footprint, humanitarianism has become an imperial project. "This humanitarian imperialism is wrong," Slim argues. "And much greater humanitarian self-determination is right." For Hugo Slim, the key ethical issue in the decolonisation of aid, therefore, is about getting rid of the current imperial imposition and about safeguarding and respecting the right of a people and a nation to organise and run its own society – in other words: about self-determination.

This idea of self-determination was expressed already in the human rights covenants of the 1960s but has, as yet, not found sufficient translation in practice. A true commitment to self-determination, Slim argues, sets us on a road towards a decolonial system, in which people have the right to shape and lead their own humanitarian institutions and organisations. This right, however, also comes with duties. Humanitarian self-determination must be impartial, fair, and humane. It must, in short, fulfil the duties of humanitarianism. There are, Slim continues, duties for the international organisations as well. "Their principal duty is to show solidarity and support for self-determination; […] *not* to subjugate or dominate a local or national humanitarian organisation, but to enable it and grow it."

<u>The decolonisation of ethics and the ethics in decolonisation</u>
To guide us on our journey towards a decolonial humanitarianism, it is possible to turn to the human rights frameworks that the global community has agreed upon. However, when it comes to those human rights frameworks, Aarathi Krishnan takes a critical stance. These frameworks were designed in a specific point in time, with a specific group of people. Against the backdrop of our fast-changing world, are the frameworks we have still fit for purpose? What amendments should be made to elevate them and ensure they are not imposing a 'Western' paternalistic vision of how the world should be run? To answer these questions, ethics and a reflection on our dominant ethical principles come into play.

Similar questions immediately come to the surface: When talking about the place of ethics in the journey towards decolonised aid, it is important to consider whether our ethics are not 'colonial' themselves. Ethical frameworks we usually refer to are European in origin, but we must ask ourselves, Krishnan points out, are they the most helpful in this present endeavour? Whose ethics are we talking about? Ethics for what purpose? Do Euro-ethical philosophies correspond to the values and (self-)perceptions of the communities we seek to support? Krishnan suggests a different ethical framework that could provide guidance in the decolonisation project: Ubuntu philosophy. "[Ubuntu] draws on the idea that 'I am a person through other persons' […] and it forces us to earn our personhood through how we treat others." This framework, and various other philosophies from around the world, can help expand our view on what is 'wrong or right' in humanitarian and development interventions. A more expansive sense of ethics, in other words, will help us better understand the other, shift perspective and power, and meaningfully decolonise our minds and practices.

Hugo Slim too, has given much thought to the question what ethical decolonisation means. For Slim, this should not take the form of a Fanonian, 'starting completely anew' revolutionary process. We should not, in other words, throw away the baby with the bath water. "I think that would be wrong," he says, "because it will be too destructive and create more suffering." What Slim envisions is a 'hand-over', a transition to conserve what is good and change what is bad. To guide this transition, Slim suggests seven guiding principles:

1) **It must be a fast change**. This is necessary to remedy ongoing injustice and to act prudently to create the national organisations we need to effectively address the climate crisis.
2) **It must be built on mutual care and compassion**. Both Northern and Southern parties should recognise that what the others are doing – expanding and building capacity or, conversely, shrinking and handing over power – is a difficult endeavour.
3) **Preserve what works well**. We should not demolish what is good and effective for mere ideological reasons.
4) **Results matter but mistakes are expected**. Self-determination will deliver humanitarian results, but it too will not be perfect.
5) **A change of mind is crucial**. Every single humanitarian – whether they suffer from a superiority or an inferiority complex – should work on changing their mindsets towards a mindset of equality.
6) **People's needs not institutional power play** must be at the heart of humanitarianism.
7) **There must remain a right to subvert and resist**.

Capturing (de)colonisation

Throughout this webinar series on the 'Decolonisation of Aid', we invite the two keynote speakers to share an image that illustrate their analysis of the (de)colonisation of international aid.

Hugo Slim presented two photos: The first (left) taken at the Imperial Conference Londen in 1902. Joseph Chamberlain, the colonial secretary of Great Britain is surrounded by the prime ministers of all Britains's white settler colonies and the secretaries of colony and war. These men, Slim summarizes, "were discussing how to run the world". The second image (right) is taken over 100 years later, at the 2019 meeting of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) in Geneva. "In a sense I always think this group comes together, also, as the leaders of the world to discuss how the West should run the aid world." Even though IASC is a more diverse group with different intentions, Slim cannot shake the impression that there is still a resonance of colonialism and paternalism. In that, for Slim these images signify the ongoing impact of the colonial past and the challenges the humanitarian and development sector still have before them.

Aarathi Krishnan's image reflects an emerging South American philosophy called 'Buen Vivir'; a philosophy that is currently still under construction and developing. Buen Vivir may be seen as the opposite of the dominant approach in the humanitarian and development sector, which puts a dollar figure on national wellbeing by utilizing a host of indicators to measure it. Buen Vivir does not focus on the wellbeing on the individual but talks about the wellbeing of the individual *within* the community. It is, as Krishnan explains, a fundamentally decolonial stance that draws on ethics that balances quality of life, the democratisation of the state, and the concern with biocentric ideals. As such, Buen Vivir explicitly sees the links between life, planet, people and community. The principles of Buen Vivir are, to Krishnan, an inspiration to shape the future of a decolonial humanitarian and development system.

Ethics in practice

As Aarathi Krishnan points out, staff members responsible for designing and implementing development programmes may not have the "luxury and privilege" of taking the time necessary to discuss in depth the ethical dimension of their work, let alone of the ethical aspects of the efforts towards decolonising their sector. Currently, more often than not, applying ethical principles ends up being a check-box exercise. And yet, taking the task of decolonisation seriously also means taking the responsibility to think about, critically discus, implement and integrate the ethical principles, weaving them into programme designs. Hugo Slim strongly agrees with Krishnan on this point. "A lot of people are indeed not engaged in [this discussion] because they are simply getting on with their jobs." And so, both speakers encourage practitioners in the development sector – be they water engineers, IT persons, or budget managers – to take a moment and think. "Because [they] might be involved in a perpetuating an injustice." The challenge here, as Hugo Slim puts it, "is to keep changing. To keep trying to work out what is right as the world changes. And to be ready to sometimes say 'I have been part of something wrong' or 'I am worried that I am part of something that is getting more wrong.'" For Slim, the organisation of aid is an example of something 'getting more wrong' that demands reflection and change. "The Western dominance of the ideology of aid is now excessive. We need different ideas and models […]."

But what then, would a change look like? And who will take the lead in this change process? For Aarathi Krishnan, one important thing to realise when it comes to the translation of our ideals of change into practice is that "systems and institutions don't change because it's the right thing to do. [They] change because there is a viable alternative model that they can change into." Thus, for our efforts – towards decolonisation, towards an aid sector based on new ethical principles and values of justice and equity – to succeed in practice, we must also be *practical.*

The crux for the future: No utopia

The conversation on the role of ethics in the decolonisation of aid took a philosophical and particularly challenging turn, when moderator Kiza Magendane asked the question, whether humanitarian and development aid can even exist or imagined without any trace of paternalism. Does not the very act of helping – of transferring resources from the ones that 'have' to the ones that 'lack' – carry within it a degree of paternalism and inequality? Is a system free from paternalism a utopia?

Echoing an idea shared by Tulika Shrivastava in an earlier session in this series, Hugo Slim argues that a paternalism-free system hinges on a fundamental mindshift with regard to the money that is transferred to those in need: An understanding that it is not *our* money. "It is money held on trust for the people who need it. So really, it is their money […]". Realising that mindshift, however, is very difficult, especially because the money is not only used to extend

help. The money going around in the development sector is also used to exercise power, to realise political purposes. Krishnan underwrites the importance of a 'mindshift' but applies it to our modes of thinking. "We cannot use the same tools we have been using this whole time. We must expand our knowledge sources and look at a much wider range of wisdom and truths." With this, Krishnan brings the arguments of this session full circle as she comes back to the importance of opening up to new ethical frameworks – including Ubuntu and Buen Vivir – to help guide us in our endeavour to reshape the humanitarian and development projects. Despite the importance of this mindshift, however, Aarathi Krishnan does not believe humanitarian aid without paternalism is possible. "Systems are made up of people. […] And there are always those that are racist, that are homophobic, that are fundamentally cruel and evil. We cannot imagine a system [in which] everyone suddenly ceases to be who they are. What we need is […] to design a system that is focused on mitigating the harm that we inflict." This system, Krishnan argues, would create an environment that fosters the efforts of those who are trying to drive a change towards equity, inclusion and decolonisation. It will not be perfect, no utopia; but it will increase the chance of success of those who are fighting for a better world.