

Rebalancing power in aid: A Pakistan Case Study in humanitarian disasters and migration

An introduction by **Themrise Khan**
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Themrise Khan, an independent development professional and social policy researcher from Pakistan, shared a critical introduction on the concepts of ‘decolonization’ and ‘localization’ in the context of humanitarian and development practice. Both concepts are currently at the center of humanitarian discourses between the ‘Global North’ and the ‘Global South’. Themrise presented her introduction in The Hague (The Netherlands) in November 2022 for an audience of senior professionals from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and international NGOs, knowledge institutes or networks based in the Netherlands (at an expert meeting arranged by [KUNO](#)).

Despite the wide presence of the concepts “decolonization” and “localization” in contemporary debates on aid, Themrise Khan has some strong criticisms about the two as she believes that these terms are not appropriate for the aid sector. She claims that the concept ‘decolonization’ is not popular among civil society in many parts of the Global South, simply because they cannot relate to it¹. Furthermore, she underlines how the concept gives the impression that decolonization is not a violent phenomenon which historically it always has been. Regarding the concept ‘localization’, she argues the North/South dynamic and what the Global North can do better are far too prominent in the debate². Themrise instead challenges this terminology by affirming the need for the South to detach itself from the mainstream dialogue surrounding ‘localization’ and to look inwards at its own inequities³.

Themrise elaborated on this issue, utilizing the Pakistan floods in 2022 and the Pakistan’s Afghan refugee situation as two case studies.

The **floods** in 2022 (June-October) are one of Pakistani’s worst humanitarian disasters: one-third of the country was under water, over 2,000 people were killed, over 33 million people were displaced. The absence of humanitarian assistance from both the Pakistani government and the international community accelerated this. Dependence on foreign aid assistance, lack of media coverage and political instability were a few of the reasons for the lack of response of the Pakistani government. Regarding the international community, the lack of attention seems to be the main reasons for their absence. The domestic humanitarian sector was ultimately the first to respond to the floods and is still actively working on the ground in many

¹ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/decolonisation-comfortable-buzzword-aid-sector/>

² See following open access Chapter authored by Themrise Khan;
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003241003-15/moving-beyond-en-forced-north-south-collaboration-development-themrise-khan?context=ubx&refId=a137a3a2-a7ab-481a-a466-306b182c6a0c>

³ <https://www.globaldashboard.org/2020/07/07/who-speaks-for-the-global-south-recipients-of-aid/>

areas. However, due to the large scale of the disaster and the tiredness that humanitarian workers are experiencing, this is not sustainable. Although there is no (or almost no) media coverage of the situation anymore, this humanitarian disaster is far from over and the situation is still grave.

For the second case study, Themrise referred to migration. Pakistan is a migrant sending country that has a long history of taking in **Afghan refugees**. Since the 1980s, Pakistan has received about 4.5 million Afghan refugees in three waves. There are currently about [1.4 million registered Afghans in Pakistan](#). Though Pakistan has hosted Afghan refugees and asylum seekers for decades, informally, the focus is on repatriation of Afghans rather than on their integration. Afghan refugees are not able to receive Pakistani citizenship, even those born in Pakistan. Moreover, there are significant anti-refugee sentiments among Pakistanis, and Afghans who escaped the Taliban takeover in 2021 who are still waiting to be repatriated, also harbor an anti-Pakistani sentiment. This has to do with the political history of the two countries. Afghan refugees receive support from international organizations such as UNHCR, but this is still limited given the immense numbers that still reside in the country.

Themrise concluded that Pakistan has been dependent on aid since its independence. Her opinion is, the issue is not necessarily that Pakistan lacks resources. The real issue is that investment in or allocations to social or human development are not given priority. In recent years, grassroot civil society organizations have become more vocal about this, launching different movements to advocate for their various rights e.g. women's rights etc. But there is a lot of resistance towards civil society as well. Themrise urged the international community to speak up on human rights, rather than to support this movement in the default, by sponsoring specific projects through aid. According to her, the ultimate objective must be for aid to advocate for issues in support of the Global South instead of only controlling them through aid funded projects.

Themrise Khan is an independent development professional and researcher with over 25 years of practitioner and policy-based experience in international development, aid effectiveness, gender, and global migration. She has a number of [publications and articles](#) to her credit. She [blogs](#), speaks and writes actively on notions of decolonization, North-South power imbalances in development, race relations and immigrant citizenship and integration. Themrise is also the co- editor of a forthcoming book 'White Saviorism in International Development. Theory, practice, and lived experiences' (Daraja Press 2023).