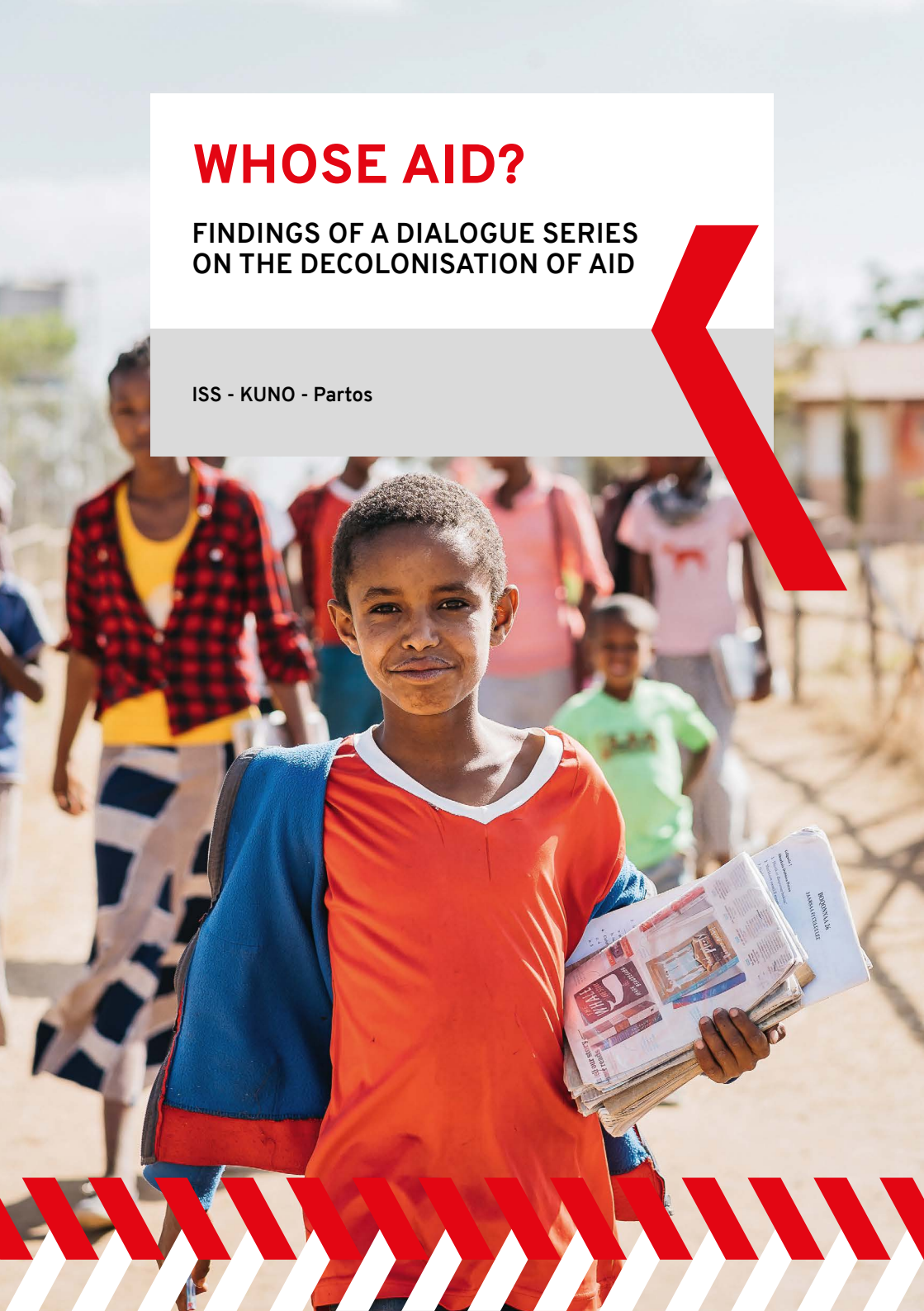


# WHOSE AID?

FINDINGS OF A DIALOGUE SERIES  
ON THE DECOLONISATION OF AID

ISS - KUNO - Partos



This report is available online here:  
[kuno-platform.nl/themes/series-on-the-decolonization-of-aid](https://kuno-platform.nl/themes/series-on-the-decolonization-of-aid)

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February 2022

International  
Institute of  
Social Studies



**kuno**  
KENNISUITWISSELING OVER  
NOODHULP \ HUMANITARIAN  
KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

*"Are we perpetuating injustice?"*

Hugo Slim

*"Solidarity in a transformed and decolonised world means that the international development sector takes a moment and lets itself be led: listen to and follow the lead of local organisations and communities."*

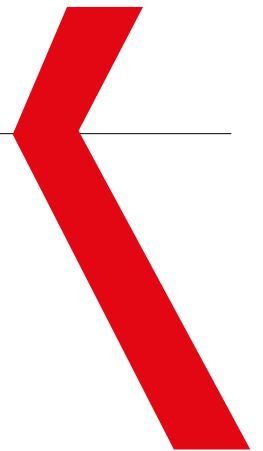
Tulika Srivastava

# **WHOSE AID?**

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ON THE DECOLONISATION OF AID**

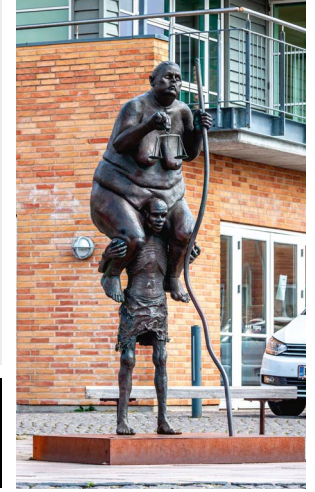
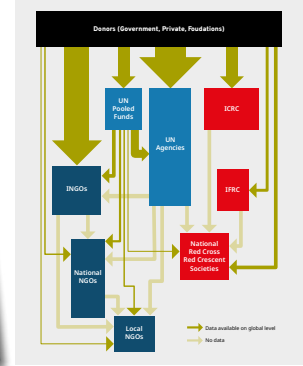
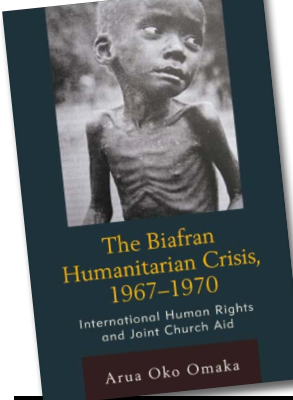
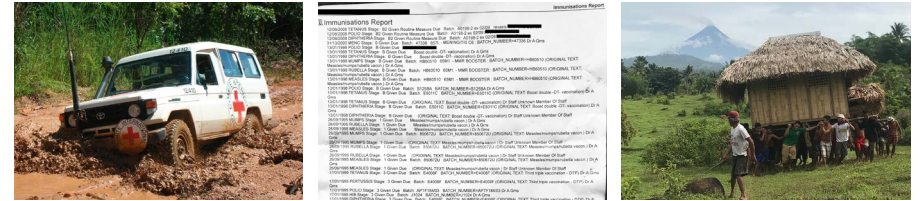
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ISS - KUNO - Partos

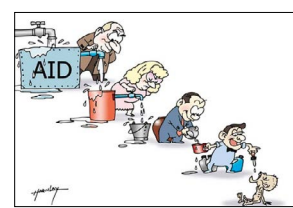


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बाबुल मोरा, नैहर छूटो ही जाए



## Whose aid?

### Findings of a dialogue series on the decolonisation of aid

This intellectual enquiry into the colonialism and decolonisation of humanitarian aid and development cooperation was inspired by the global #BlackLivesMatter movement and other movements like #decolonizeaid and #shiftthepower.

The fierce public debate on how colonial thinking and colonial history are still shaping (or even defining) social and political processes, requires deep reflection and cannot be dismissed by organisations working globally in the field of humanitarian aid and development cooperation.

#### ISS, KUNO & Partos

Together, ISS, KUNO and Partos represent the broad community of development cooperation and humanitarian aid in the Netherlands. [Partos](#)<sup>1</sup> is the Dutch membership body for organisations working in international development, bringing together more than 100 Dutch development NGOs. [KUNO](#)<sup>2</sup> is the platform for Humanitarian Knowledge Exchange in the Netherlands, supported by thirteen international humanitarian NGOs, eight academic institutions and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands. The International Institute of Social Studies ([ISS](#)<sup>3</sup>) is an international graduate school of policy-oriented critical social science. ISS is part of Erasmus University Rotterdam and does research, teaching and public service in the field of development studies and international cooperation. Thea Hilhorst, professor of Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction at ISS, joined the organising committee of the decolonisation dialogues.\*

\*) The contribution of Thea Hilhorst was enabled by her advanced grant from the European Research Council (No 884139).

Reflective dialogue was instrumental to this intellectual enquiry and to informing this paper. It helped facilitate critical (self) reflection and thorough listening. The International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), KUNO and Partos invited ten experts to participate in five separate dialogues.

Each pair of experts was asked to engage in a conversation about a specific sub-theme, to explore a perspective of this big, sensitive yet urgent topic - the decolonisation of aid. After hearing and discussing the perspectives of both speakers, questions and comments of the audience were brought into the dialogue.

An outline of each of the sub-themes and expert participants is set out below:

#### Dialogue #1 (12 May 2021): a historical perspective

- Arua Oko Omaka, historian at Alex Ekwueme Federal University (Nigeria).
- Bertrand Taithe, professor of Cultural History at The University of Manchester (United Kingdom).

#### Dialogue #2 (2 June 2021): a development cooperation perspective

- Tulika Srivastava, human rights lawyer and Director of Women's Fund Asia (Sri Lanka).
- Lydia Zigomo, Global Programmes Director of Oxfam International (United Kingdom).

#### Dialogue #3 (23 June 2021): a humanitarian aid perspective

- Tammam Aloudat, Managing Director at the Global Health Centre of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (Switzerland).
- Nanette Salvador-Antequis, Director at Ecosystems Work for Essential Benefits - ECOWEB (Philippines).

#### Dialogue #4 (29 September 2021): an ethical perspective

- Aarathi Krishnan, researcher at Harvard University (New York, USA).
- Hugo Slim, senior research fellow at the Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict (United Kingdom).

### **Dialogue #5 (13 October 2021): the role of the donor**

- Smruti Patel, founder and director of the Global Mentoring Initiative (GMI) and founder and member of the Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP) (Switzerland).
- Dirk-Jan Koch, professor of International Trade & Development Cooperation at the Radboud University Nijmegen (The Netherlands).

### **The dialogues were co-facilitated by:**

- Kiza Magedane, writer and knowledge broker at The Broker (The Netherlands).
- Thea Hilhorst, professor of Humanitarian Studies at International Institutes of Social Studies, Erasmus University (The Netherlands).

The learnings and findings of each dialogue were summarized by The Broker. The Broker is an independent knowledge brokering organisation in the field of sustainable international development based in the Netherlands (The Hague). This paper brings together the publications of [The Broker](#)<sup>4</sup> (Chapter 2 to 6).

The opening chapter provides an overview of the main topics discussed during the series and the main learnings, according to ISS, KUNO and Partos.

## An anthology based on five conversations

This opening chapter is an anthology of five inspiring discussions; an overview that cannot do justice to the wisdom shared. It aims to summarise the main conclusions and some of the (new) ways of thinking introduced in each of the dialogues.

During the dialogues, five key observations emerged:

- The need for change.
- Decolonisation: the risk of this challenging undertaking.
- Paternalism from the 19th century until 2021.
- Truly locally led responses. Or: what do we mean by 'decolonising' aid?
- Funding mechanisms and the allocation of resources. Or: the notion of aid as a public good.

### 12 The need for change

Hugo Slim indicated that the organisation of aid is an example of something 'getting more wrong,' a statement demanding that we closely examine the colonial aspects of aid. Slim stated that the "Western dominance of the ideology of aid is now excessive. We need different ideas and models." We need to take a moment and think, "because [we] might be involved in perpetuating an injustice." The decolonisation of aid demands reflection and change.

Slim pointed out that this is a moral obligation. Other speakers, such as Smruti Patel and Thea Hilhorst, also stressed how change will lead to better aid. Learning from local actors and supporting them, rather than taking the lead, is not only a moral imperative; it is an approach that will greatly benefit the communities we seek to support.

### Don't throw away the baby

Colonialism and humanitarianism became historically intertwined on several levels, historian Bertrand Taithe explained. Nevertheless, humanitarianism is also linked to the human rights movement, the anti-slavery movement and to

decolonisation. Aid also has fundamentals in non-Western beliefs and traditions. It will, however, be highly challenging to disentangle the colonial elements from humanitarian aid: in other words, to decolonise aid.

Bertrand Taithe however, shared one potent concern: We should not risk denouncing humanitarianism. The aim of saving one life, anywhere, is worth fighting for. So, please "don't throw out the baby with the bathwater." This was echoed many times throughout the dialogues.

### Paternalism

Paternalism, elite rule, positionality and charity were key concepts in trying to grapple with the shortfalls of current global humanitarian aid and development cooperation systems.

Arua Oko Omaka was the first speaker who touched on paternalism within humanitarian interventions or development cooperation. He described how in the 19th century many Europeans believed they had to 'liberate' or 'save' the African continent.

Several speakers pointed out that we are still dealing with the remnants of that 19th century mindset. Lydia Zigomo, for instance, described that the West continues to perpetuate colonialist practices while indigenous people are still treated as second class citizens.

The system in which development cooperation operates, is in essence determined by power and control. Dirk-Jan Koch pointed out that the prevailing mindset in this sector is still full of prejudices. Humanitarian and development organisations are regularly occupied by people who are the products of (and continue to perpetuate) the colonial mindsets and 'rules of the game.' This mindset, Nanette Salvador-Antequisa explained, often disempowers the recipients of that aid. Look for example at language: people that don't speak English are often not taken seriously.

However, local actors are still the experts when it comes to their own situation. Tulika Srivastava added that the privileged position is not only reserved for

representatives of the West. While it remains necessary to critically discuss the power position of the Global North, new players, including China and multilateral organisations, and a small self-enriching indigenous elite are keeping the colonial system very much alive. 'Black rule' that is essentially 'elite rule.'

Aarathi Krishnan introduced the concept of 'positionality.' Krishnan explained that colonialism and decolonisation are not only about diversity and inclusion, or about race and the dichotomous power imbalance between white people and people of colour. Solutions are being proffered by the Global North in the name of, and for the good of perceived people. Just as was the case in colonial times, people are not recognised as full and legitimate participants in producing their own path to development.

Tulika Srivastava and Lydia Zigomo highlighted the importance of a critical reflection on dominant gender norms and practices. Colonialism, Srivastava noted, rides on and benefits from patriarchy. Zigomo demonstrated how colonialism and patriarchy are historically interlinked. Meaningful decolonisation and transformation therefore also require challenging persistent cultural practices in the Global South that undermine the position of women – and, as goes without saying, other disadvantaged groups.

### ***Disempowerment versus self-determination***

Both the colonial mindset and paternalism were linked to charity, a frame that did not echo positive notions. "Caring for others is a responsibility that comes with being human, with sharing this earth as a global community," Nanette Salvador-Antequisa stated. But humanitarian aid is *not a matter of charity*. Tammam Aloudat stated that there is no justice with charity. Those who give charity cannot be held accountable.

Leaving paternalism behind, Tammam Aloudat concluded, requires radical transformation: "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. Local actors, Aloudat emphasised, should never be side-lined or substituted.

For Hugo Slim, self-determination is key. Today, because of the vast scale of the humanitarian project, humanitarianism has become an imperial project. "This humanitarian imperialism is wrong. And much greater humanitarian self-determination is right." For Hugo Slim, the key ethical issue in the decolonisation of aid, therefore, is about safeguarding and respecting the right of a people and a nation to organise and run its own society. According to Slim, self-determination does not come without obligations, but comes with responsibility. Humanitarian self-determination must be impartial, fair, and humane. It must, in short, fulfill the duties of humanitarianism.

### **Putting decolonisation into practice**

For Hugo Slim decolonisation should not mean a revolutionary process, but a transition to conserve what is good and change what is bad. To guide this transition, Slim suggests seven guiding principles. These principles can be grouped into three categories:

- Process: the process must be fast, preserve what worked well, and anticipate that mistakes will happen along the way.
- Purpose: it is crucial to build on mutual care and compassion and to achieve a change of mindset.
- Principles: people's needs must be at the heart of humanitarianism and there must remain "a right to subvert and resist".

"Systems and institutions don't change because it's the right thing to do," Aarathi Krishnan stressed. "[They] change because there is a viable alternative model that they can change into" Therefore, efforts towards decolonisation must also be practical.

### **The way forward: truly locally led responses**

The dialogues showed that the need to move away from paternalism and strive for self-determination, translates into a duty to strengthen the position of local



actors. This means that the discussions around the decolonisation of aid are strongly linked to the international localisation agenda. As Lydia Zigomo stated: "put Southern organisations in the centre of decision-making and implementation." Or, as Tulika Srivastava put it: "listen to and follow the lead of local organisations and communities." Both Zigomo and Srivastava stressed that a true transformative approach to decolonisation requires international NGOs in the Global North to scale down and become smaller, enabling their Southern national and regional colleagues to take the lead.

16 Related to the localisation debate, Smruti Patel shared a major concern: as we see in the concept of 'localisation', the promise of 'shifting the power' often turns out to be an empty shell. "What we see is that the donors' money is shrinking the space for local civil society." Donors reinforce the position of international NGOs; reinforce the power dynamic at play. "It keeps us [local NGOs] in a master/servant relationship continuously begging for grants from your institutions, while we remain bereft of core funding ourselves. This is not what we need or want." Patel stressed that power and control are now located with the Northern donors. Donors showed great awareness of and pressed for accountability on key issues like gender equity and inclusion. However, "the system itself is not accountable." Donors can similarly encourage organisations to adopt explicitly decolonised approaches.

Dirk-Jan Koch also advocated for a stronger role for donors. Donors could become leaders in the decolonisation debate, by harnessing their negotiating power to make requests and hold international NGOs accountable. For example, donors could require certain diversity standards for supervisory boards of international NGOs. Furthermore, donors could also impose conditions on the communications of international NGOs, to ensure these do not contribute to the 'White Saviour Syndrome.' Finally, donors could include in their grants criteria, a requirement that local staff are placed in management or equivalent positions where they can influence decision-making. Donors should put a premium on empowering people of colour, otherwise this won't happen, or too slowly.

Thea Hilhorst expressed her worry that if Dirk-Jan Koch's push from donors is not complemented with a push from 'below' and driven by local actors, the

donor's push "becomes a very empty shell." Involving people from the countries where humanitarians work is a precondition for formulating guidelines that will generate change towards decolonisation.

Nanette Salvador-Antequis stressed that the decolonisation process must be a democratic process: change demands community-led processes. Tammam Aloudat stated that much can be learned from labour movements, gender equality movements, patient and social justice groups – there are many people and groups that are working on similar outcomes. "Our headquarters and management will not come up with solutions that will lead to the dissolution of their own power. The solution lies in democratisation and locally led processes."

### **Aid is a public good - "It is not your money"**

17 In the decolonisation dialogues, one concept emerged that has not yet found its way convincingly into policy debates. It started with the notion that decolonisation will only be meaningful if it is also extended to our funding mechanisms and allocation of resources. Tulika Srivastava explained that Northern organisations and grant organisations should realise that they are not the owners of the resources that they hold. They are entrusted to keep the money for the people in the South safe: "It is not your money. This money is a public good for a social purpose."

This concept resonated with Zigomo. "When we start saying 'my money' and when we start appropriating, then our own agenda also comes around the corner." Hugo Slim also echoed the words of Srivastava, when he elaborated on the need to end to paternalism in aid: "It is money held on trust for the people who need it. So really, it is their money." Smruti Patel underlined this plea as well: the money raised for aid is not the donor's money, the money is public money, "belonging to the affected populations."

Dirk-Jan Koch took a more nuanced view: the money is indeed meant for solidarity and belongs to the communities we seek to support, but it also belongs to the people – the taxpayers – who give the money. In this context the term 'mutual accountability' is useful.

## Epilogue: an agenda for ISS, KUNO, Partos – and others

The concept of aid as global public good is not a concept that has been well explored in policy debates. This concept, that money for humanitarian aid and development cooperation should be acknowledged as public money, and may require a different granting system was very briefly discussed. Could we consider aid money as a form of global tax? On a national level, a taxpayer accepts that they no longer own the money after it is transferred to the state. Should Official Development Assistance (ODA) become an international tax, paid by rich countries, and transferred to a global fund? Another option that was explored briefly was considering aid money as a form of recovery payments. Perhaps we can learn from the discussions about the Special Climate Change Fund to support the least developed countries in climate adaptation. Whether these options are useful and feasible, requires further exploration and discussion. However, the notion that the Global North should realise 'they' are not the exclusive owner of the aid-resources they raise, was supported strongly by all speakers.

- 18 Humanitarian aid and development cooperation are defined by governments in the Global North as instruments to fight injustice and reduce inequality. If Northern governments and international NGOs do not want to perpetuate injustice with instruments that are supposed to support international solidarity, then they should seriously look into how we could democratise aid. How can the Global North transfer or share decision-making power with the people to whom the money belongs – the people who need it?

Below follow the reports of the five dialogues written by The Broker. We trust you will find this just as inspiring as we did.

Peter Heintze, KUNO  
Thea Hilhorst, ISS  
Bart Romijn, Partos

## DIALOGUE

# #1

## Taking a historical perspective on the decolonisation of aid

A dialogue between **Arua Oko Omake** and **Bertrand Taithe** (12 May 2021)

Authors: *Yannicke Goris, Kiza Magendane* (The Broker)

**Dr. Arua Oko Omake, historian at Alex Ekwueme Federal University, holds up an iconic black-and-white picture of a poor and hungry child suffering the consequences of the Biafran war. Omake is the first keynote speaker in the first online dialogue on the decolonisation of aid. For him, the picture he is showing his audience clearly symbolises the two sides of humanitarianism: For decades, similar images, of people suffering in the most dire circumstances, have been calling upon our shared sense of humanity, demanding from the privileged to help those who are less fortunate. At the same time however, pictures like this – which continue to drive humanitarianism and are still used to mobilise funding for this cause – also make many, and especially those working in today’s humanitarian and development sectors, uncomfortable. Despite its inherent ‘goodness’ humanitarianism, and the mechanisms that underpin it, are tarnished.**

The first webinar in a series on ‘The Decolonisation of aid’ takes a historical perspective. The series is a journey towards better understanding of the ongoing debate on the decolonisation of the international aid system, exploring the controversies and finding common ground. Taking a historical perspective in this first seminar is vitally important, Thea Hilhorst, professor of Humanitarian studies at ISS, underlined. “It can help humanitarian and development professionals better understand current beliefs and practices and critically reflect on those aspects that need rethinking.” Bertrand Taithe, professor of cultural history at The University of Manchester, and the second keynote speaker in this session, shared this view. History, Taithe argued, helps us see the inherent complexities and contradictions within the humanitarian project. Not only does it enable us to take a critical look at the past, it also presents us with a mirror. And it is with this idea in mind, that exploring the

historical roots of the humanitarian project will help us understand and critically reflect upon today’s humanitarianism, that this first session in the ‘Decolonisation of Aid’ series begins.

This chapter is a brief reflection of the first online dialogue in the series on ‘The Decolonisation of aid’. For the sake of brevity and clarity it is not possible to include the entire wealth of the questions and nuanced reflections that characterised this first session. Rather, the following narrative presents the core message of the presentations by Arua Oko Omake and Bertrand Taithe as well as the key takeaways of the conversation that followed.

### The colonial roots of humanitarianism

When seeking out the beginnings of present-day global humanitarianism, it soon becomes apparent that its roots can be traced back to the colonial project and the abolishment of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. As Oke Omake explained in his presentation, many Europeans in the 19th century held the belief that they had to ‘liberate’ or ‘save’ the African continent. Its inhabitants were thought ‘savages’ that needed help developing and civilising. And who better to take this lofty mission upon themselves than those who spread the word of God? Thus, in tandem with the conquest of Africa, missionaries and church groups became the first to champion the cause of humanitarian activities, including the provision of Western education, medicine and Christianity.

By referring to Kipling’s famous poem ‘The White Man’s Burden’, professor Taithe subscribes to Dr. Oke Omake’s analysis. They both explained that The European colonial project and humanitarian interventions became intertwined at various levels. Humanitarian logic was (mis)used as a ground for the conquest of Africa; the infrastructure used in humanitarian missions was often first established for colonial purposes – as was the case for the humanitarian intervention during Nigeria’s Biafra war. Moreover, the colonial rule and an explicitly humanitarian message could, and often did, go hand in hand, resulting in a lasting overlap between the language of colonialism with the language of aid.

Given the complex interlinkages that have begun from the very conception of the two projects, it is a highly challenging undertaking to disentangle the

colonial elements from the inherently good facets of humanitarianism – or, in other words, to ‘decolonise aid’. Doing so is a difficult endeavour for all sides, as it confronts us with our painful pasts and, especially, the ways in which we are the products of our histories.

### **A more complex network of historical roots**

The history of humanitarianism is not only intertwined with that of colonisation, but also with that of decolonisation. From the early 20th century onwards, anti-colonial voices became part of the humanitarian cause. This anti-colonialism was about more than formal decolonisation – i.e. the liberation from colonial government and the realisation of national sovereignty. It was also about the decolonisation as envisioned by radical thinkers like Franz Fanon. True decolonisation is achieved through a profound philosophical shift, Taithe explained. And this shift not only pertains to the ‘coloniser’; it also demands the mental decolonisation of the formerly colonised and those who are today’s recipients of aid. While formal and institutional decolonisation was achieved, for the most part, in the middle and late 20th century, this less tangible, social and psychological decolonisation is not yet completed. The myth of the ‘white saviour’ and colonial connotations are still present; perpetuated not in the least by the imagery of the poor, starving African that continues to drive the international aid system.

Helpful in achieving this ‘full’ decolonisation, Taithe argued, is having a better understanding of the complex origins of humanitarianism – origins that go beyond the European colonial history. Such a nuanced view will enable us to look beyond the false North-South binary that often characterises our reading of both past and present. While the roots of humanitarianism and colonialism are indeed intertwined, the humanitarian project also has more revolutionary origins, connected to the human rights movement. History provides us with concrete examples that illustrate the diverse and complex sources of humanitarianism. From the Ottoman empire, to India, China and Japan, multiple forms of humanitarian interventions have been developed based on local beliefs and traditions. True decolonisation then, also means that we should not take ‘the West’ as the epicentre of humanitarianism. Rather, Western development aid should be understood as one component of a much

broader and global collection of efforts, movements and international relations. Historical as well as contemporary examples enable us to gradually form a more complex and nuanced conception of humanitarianism – a conception that can be truly decolonised.

### **Questions for the future**

The rethinking of and reflection on current humanitarianism is widespread and in full swing across the globe. For Partos, KUNO and ISS, this first session in ‘The Decolonisation of Aid’ series, was only the beginning. “Six more will follow,” Thea Hilhorst noted, “which means that it is very legitimate to end this seminar with a lot of questions.” And indeed we did. Taking a step back to look at the complexities of history provided participants with the humbling insight that we are on a complex and challenging journey and that many questions remain, as yet, unanswered. Some questions that were raised include:

- How can humanitarianism decolonise completely and entirely when there is still such an unequal distribution of power and resources between North and the South?
- How can we say, with confidence and conviction, that humanitarianism is fully decolonised if the language used still overlaps with that of colonial times?
- Given the long-standing power differences and large inequalities in the world, is it possible at all to achieve a state of true psychological decolonisation and equality?
- Humanitarianism historically enabled (African) states not to invest in their own development – including the state’s economy, health care, education, infrastructure. Must true decolonisation imply a full withdrawal of humanitarian aid?
- How is the decolonisation of aid related to other grand issues of our times, including climate change, increasingly restricted space for civil society, and increasing inequalities within countries?

Despite these difficult questions and ongoing complex interlinkages between colonialism and humanitarianism, our conclusion should by no means be the abolishment of humanitarian and development aid. Thea Hilhorst and

Dr. Omaka reminded participants that humanitarianism is, first and foremost, rooted in the conviction that human dignity should not be limited to a particular region. “The aim of saving one life, anywhere, is worth fighting for,” Bertrand Taithe further added. “The conversation we are having should not slide into a discourse of denouncing or vilifying humanitarianism.” If we do so, we run the risk of “throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater.” In other words, while the current international aid system does have a colonial stain, it is possible to ‘save the baby’: We can decolonise the international aid system without losing or questioning the fundamental principles of humanitarianism and international solidarity.

## Capturing (de)colonisation

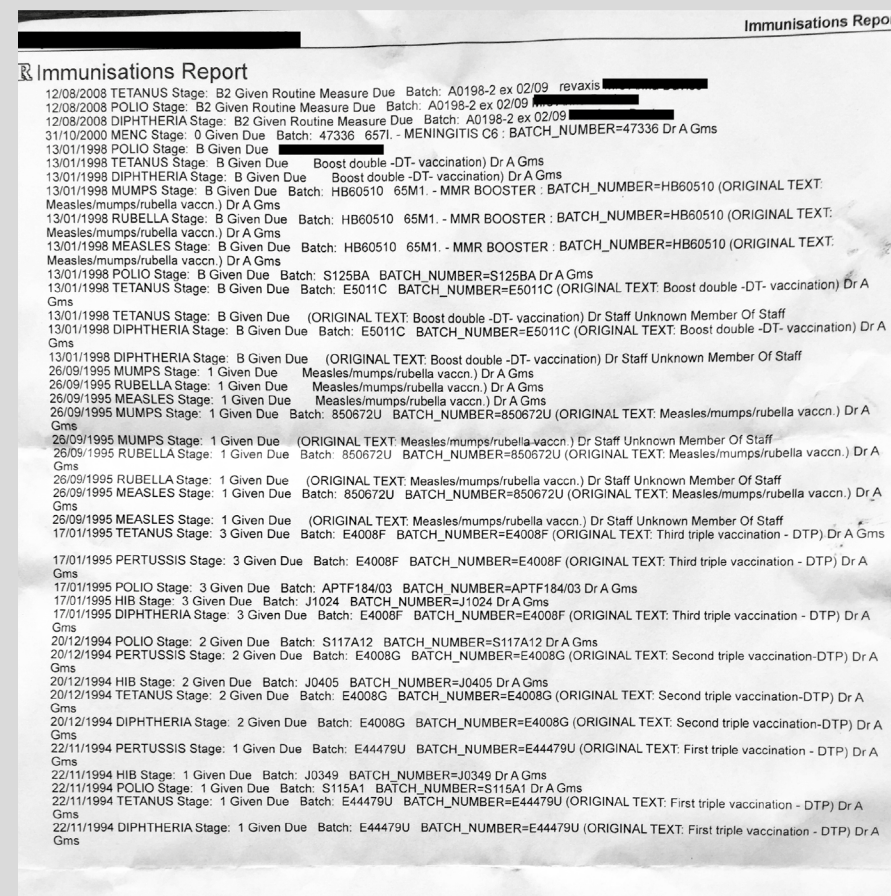
Throughout this series on the decolonisation aid, each speaker will be asked to select an image that symbolises the message he or she would like to share with the audience.

### Bertrand Taithe

For this session Bertrand Taithe chose the symbol of his vaccination passport. Not only does the passport itself have roots in the colonial past, it also represents existing inequalities that can be traced back to these same times. Much work on vaccines and non-Western diseases, such hot-topics in the context of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, was done during the colonial period. The vaccination passport constitutes both a proof of protection and a ticket to travel to other countries.

As such, it is a representation of the unequal distribution of scarce goods – only the privileged have access to this ticket. For Taithe, the vaccination passport is a symbol of our complex history and existing inequalities.

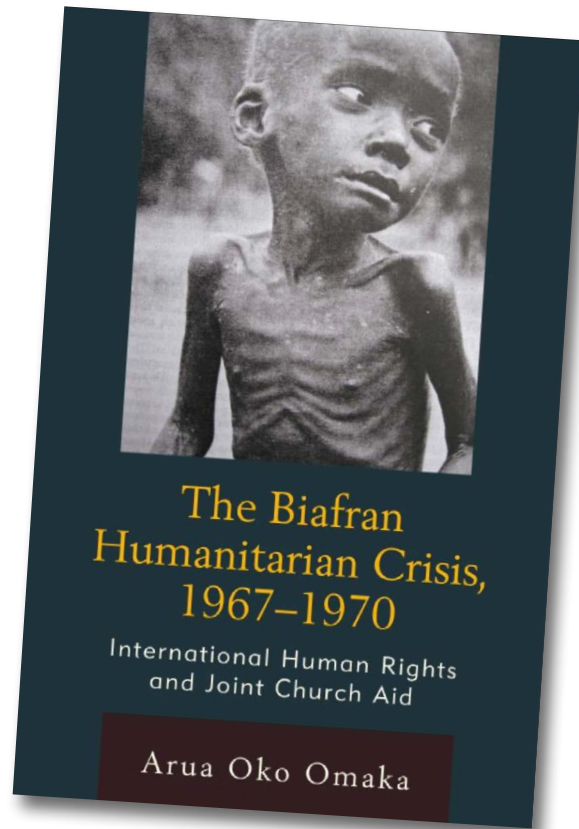
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### **Arua Oko Omaka**

Arua Oko Omaka's image was the iconic black-and-white picture of a starving child that was introduced at the opening of this article. The picture is also a cover of his book on the Biafran humanitarian Crisis. Symbolising the two sides of humanitarianism, it teaches us that good intentions may go hand in hand with complex mechanisms rooted in painful histories – the history of a white saviour and poor, malnourished and dehumanised Africans.

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## **DIALOGUE**

# #2

## Transformational solidarity: the journey towards decolonising development cooperation

A dialogue between **Tulika Srivastava** and **Lydia Zigomo** (2 June 2021)

Authors: *Kiza Magendane, Yannicke Goris* (The Broker)

**In the debate about the decolonisation of the aid industry, it is often argued that true decolonisation will be realised if the international aid system abolishes itself. Only last month, in a first webinar in a series on 'The Decolonisation of Aid' however, historian Prof. Bertrand Thaité warned that, while decolonisation is of crucial importance, we have to be careful not to throw away the baby with the bath water. In the second session in this series, we explore this conundrum further. Focusing in particular on development cooperation, we ask ourselves how this proverbial 'baby' – a baby that might be named 'global solidarity' – can be saved and nurtured into the new being we envision? If we dismiss the option of abolishing development aid altogether, what other paths are open to meaningfully transform the development sector? Building on the insights and conversations of the first session in which speakers Dr. Arua Oko Omaka and Prof. Bertrand Thaité enlightened participants with a historical perspective, for this second session speakers Tulika Srivastava and Lydia Zigomo challenged the audience to take a critical look at present-day practices of the development sector.**

### Unpacking the colonial system

The second session, taking the perspective of development cooperation, was marked by a constructive spirit. Yet, as both speakers in this session agreed, starting with a thorough deconstruction of the current system will be a necessary first step. This deconstruction already commenced during the previous webinar, when the interlinked nature of the colonial and humanitarian

project was critically assessed. The opening arguments of Tulika Srivastava, the first speaker of this session, seamlessly followed this historical perspective. According to Srivastava, human rights lawyer and director of Women's Fund Asia – a feminist regional women's fund that supports women-, girls-, trans-, and intersex- people led interventions to enhance and strengthen access to their human rights – it is only by understanding the complex nature of colonialism, past and present, that can we begin to tackle its ongoing impact today. Unpacking the 'black box' of colonialism, Srivastava argued, will reveal how much colonial experiences vary. Not only between the Global South and the Global North, but also between different countries and communities within the Global South. These colonial experiences affect the way in which current development efforts and the colonial elements therein are perceived and experienced. Without understanding such differences, transforming the development sector will be ineffective, as Lydia Zigomo, the second speaker of the webinar agreed. There is no one-size-fits all solution to the decolonisation of international aid. Rather, it is an ongoing process of transformation that must be driven by the specific needs and realities of local communities.

Zigomo, the newly appointed Global Programmes Director of Oxfam International, recently published a blog in which she shared how she experienced the 'white saviour' mentality that still permeates through many aspects of the development sector. By showing, in addition, how Oxfam is currently working to transform its agenda and operations, Zigomo does not linger on her often disheartening experiences, but ends her essay with a constructive call for action. Reiterating and further specifying Srivastava's line of thought, Zigomo argued that the first step towards a decolonial development agenda is the recognition that development cooperation is not a neutral, isolated phenomenon. On the contrary, development cooperation operates within, and at the same time perpetuates, a much broader (colonial) system. Unpacking development cooperation in this fashion it becomes clear that it is not development cooperation itself but the system in which it is embedded that needs to be decolonised.

In essence, the nature of the system in which development cooperation operates is determined by power and control. In the colonial era, this system was dominated by and served the interests of a limited number of European



power holders at the expense of a vast majority of indigenous people. Today, even though European colonialism is no longer a judicial reality in contemporary Africa, the West continues to perpetuate colonialist practices and indigenous people are still treated as second class citizens. While it remains necessary, therefore, to critically discuss the power position of the global North, Zigomo warns that we should not lose sight of colonialism by other external actors as well as 'home-grown' colonialism. New players, including China and multilateral organisations, and a small self-enriching indigenous elite are keeping the colonial system very much alive. "While we may have overturned white rule to black rule in the African struggles for independence, this black rule is really 'elite rule'," Zigomo noted. "And one can question how much this system really differs from white rule in the past." What both Zigomo's and Srivastava's arguments boil down to is that the multiple layers and players of contemporary colonialism need to be unpacked. By failing to do so, we will end up with 'a changing of the guard'; that is, the continuation and recreation of the current 'colonial' system of power and control with different power holders at the top, at the continued expense of the overall majority of people.

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### **Part of the package: patriarchy and women's inclusion**

In an attempt to deconstruct colonialism and build a decolonial agenda for development cooperation, both speakers highlighted the importance of a critical reflection on dominant gender norms and practices. Colonialism, Srivastava noted, rides on and benefits from patriarchy. Similarly, by explaining the importance of intersectionality as a key concept in our efforts to decolonise development aid, Zigomo also demonstrated how colonialism and patriarchy are historically interlinked. The African feminist movement has gained an understanding of this connection: The colonial system has negatively affected black women disproportionately, providing a legal and political framework that allowed for the disinheritance and disenfranchisement of women, more so than men. Unpacking this element of colonialism makes clear that, within the current system, various levels of power and disempowerment still exist. Meaningful decolonisation and transformation thus also implies challenging persistent cultural practices in the Global South that undermine the position of women – and, as goes without saying, other disadvantaged groups – in society.

Srivastava added that this fight against gendered injustice and for gender equality, as part and parcel of the decolonising project, should not be limited to a particular region or to the global South. Rather, she stressed, it is a universal struggle that testifies to the connected fate of women everywhere. In her response to the reflection of both speakers, Professor Hillhorst firmly agreed, noting that the persistent patriarchal power dynamics also affect the way in which this road towards transformation and the development sector itself are organised: Organisations that are facing most barriers to get a seat at the table are the feminist organisations.

### **Painful but promising steps in the journey towards transformation**

What are the implications of deconstructing colonialism and the world order in which development cooperation is embedded? According to Zigomo, as is the case for every process of de- and re-construction, some tough decisions must be made and some painful losses are inevitable. For international NGOs in the Global North, this process demands a 'stepping back'. Both Zigomo and Srivastava stressed that a true transformative approach to decolonisation requires from international NGOs in the global North that they scale down and become smaller, allowing for their Southern national and regional colleagues to take the lead. "We cannot continue to remain such massive organisations and at the same time seriously claim that we are making space for the national, Southern partners," Zigomo noted. But the process does not end with making space at the decision-making table. Rather, Srivastava added, we must determine how power can effectively be shifted to the South. To answer that question, again, the North must take a step back. "We need to hear from the leaders of the Global South, without shifting the burden on them," Srivastava argued. "What is it that they think is needed, what path do they see as the way forward to make decolonisation happen?"

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From her experience as a grantmaker in the global South, Srivastava has learned that radically changing existing funding mechanisms is a promising pathway to realise transformational change. She observed that in the current system, project proposals are often formulated and imposed by those organisations that are holding the purse-strings. They are not based on the

views, needs and realities of the people in the South, let alone formulated by these people. A truly transformative approach should let local communities, and especially local women, take the lead in their own language and voice. Additionally, Srivastava pointed to the importance of flexible funding mechanisms that change with and support, rather than add an extra burden to, organisations that are already facing great challenges at every turn.

The importance of such flexible funding schemes has become particularly clear during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to lock downs and other measures related to fighting the pandemic, organisations' needs changed dramatically and at the same time, they were barely surviving. A key lesson that can be taken from Srivastava's experiences during the pandemic is that funds should be organised in such a way that they are granted to organisations on the basis of trust and solidarity, helping them to realise their goals, even if these goals are radically altered to match the changing reality on the ground. It is in this spirit that Women's Fund Asia extends its grants to partners: giving them breathing space and following their lead rather than imposing stringent criteria and sticking to pre-designed plans. The partners knew they could count on the Women's Asia Fund, and that the organisation had their backs. In other words: they experienced a transformation of the relationship between grant-giver and recipient. Even though money was exchanged, they formed a true partnership.

Finally, a transformational approach to decolonisation also means that Northern organisations and grant organisations should realise that they are not the owners of the resources that they hold. They are entrusted to keep the money for the people in the South safe. "It is not your money. This money is a public good for a social purpose," Srivastava passionately stated. "We are holding money in trust for social justice, we are holding it in trust for transformation. Without this realisation sinking in and becoming part of the development sector's DNA, fundamental changes of the system cannot be realised." It is a message that resonates with Zigomo. "When we start saying 'my money' and when we start appropriating, then our own agenda also comes around the corner," she added. In other words, decolonisation means that organisations should do more than embracing beautiful words. It means translating these words into action, by making tough decisions and putting Southern organisations at the centre of decision making and implementation.

### **COVID-19 as an opportunity for solidarity and decolonisation**

As already became clear in the plea for flexible funding, COVID-19 – in addition to its devastating impact – has highlighted some promising pathways towards decolonisation. Importantly, the pandemic has demonstrated the necessity to reshape international cooperation and humanitarian aid structures. As Zigomo pointed out, for example, first responders during the various waves were almost invariably local people and organisations. "This is something we should celebrate and hold dear," she argued. The COVID-19 response has shown that the 'South in the lead' is not just a lofty slogan but something that can, and has been, realised. "We should take this insight and use it as an impetus to make lasting changes to the way we have organised our aid and development systems." 'Shift the power' and 'decolonise aid' are possible.

Despite the growing awareness about the interconnected nature of the world as a result of the pandemic, vaccine nationalism and increasing global inequality illustrate the vulnerable nature or even lack of global solidarity. At the same time, however, surprising initiatives across the globe may inspire hope that solidarity is, in fact, still very much alive. Yet, even though such solidarity always has a basis in good intentions, Zigomo warned, often 'a guilty conscience' and 'helping the poor Africans' – in other words, colonial sentiments – still inform solidarity in the Global North. What then, does solidarity mean in a transformed and decolonised world? For Srivastava, 'standing in solidarity' should always – but especially now in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic – mean that the international development sector takes a moment and lets itself be led. "This is not the moment to come up with new frameworks, programme designs. We should listen to and follow the lead of local organisations and communities."

Solidarity in a decolonised, transformed world means supporting from a position of trust, humility, respect and equality. For the development sector the question remains: Are we willing to continue down this difficult path of transformation, pay the prices that are due, and in the end stand in true solidarity with those we want and claim to support? If we are, this commitment is one that must be made for the long term. To quote from Zigomo's blog: "Tackling institutional racism and decolonising aid is [...] a life-long journey. There will always be another hill to climb when you think you have reached the

summit. It requires courageous leadership to make strategic, difficult choices and it requires persistence to deploy the right resources to support that journey." Additionally, it is a journey that cannot be completed by a handful of organisations or people; it demands involvement and patience of all actors involved. And finally, it is a journey that must go far beyond the development sector. The path must take us to visit and transform the broader power structures in which all our behaviours, relations and assumptions are embedded. It is still a long road ahead, but it is a road that, if we take it, will yield the greatest reward.

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## Capturing (de)colonisation

*Throughout the webinar series on the decolonisation of international aid, the invited speakers are asked to select an image that illustrates their analysis on the (de)colonisation of aid.*

### Tulika Srivastava

Tulika Srivastava, human rights lawyer and director of Women's Fund Asia, brought an image of a handwritten line from well-loved poem. The poem was originally written in 1857 by Wajid Ali Shah, the Nawab of Awadh – an Indian princely state (now part of Uttar Pradesh) – at the time of his arrest and exile from Lucknow by the British after the first war of Independence in the same year. It reads: "Oh father, I am losing my home. I am displaced from myself." For Srivastava, the sentiment in this line represents the colonialism in development efforts. Those who are given aid have been 'displaced' from their own experience and reality, and have no or limited influence on development interventions. Activists of the global South are being denied agency in ownership of the development agenda. It is the North that is determining the agenda; the South continues to be displaced.

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बाबुल मोरा, नैहर छूटो ही जाए

Oh father, I am losing my home. I am displaced from myself.

### Lydia Zigomo

Lydia Zigomo, recently appointed Global Programmes Director of Oxfam International, held up a Kenyan ceramic bowl. For her, this bowl stands for Oxfam's ongoing transformative journey. Like so many other development NGOs, Oxfam approached the countries it was working in as a 'begging bowl': The approach and language used were marked by a relationship of donor and recipient.

Once Oxfam started its journey of decolonisation, the ceramic bowl could no longer represent the relationship between Oxfam and its Southern partners. Now that Oxfam and other organisations are increasingly taking a human rights approach to their practices, a beautifully coloured glass vase has replaced the bowl. The people in the global South are not mere recipients or beggars holding up a bowl. They are people full of ideas, creativity, and agency, able to co-create solutions to their own challenges.

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## DIALOGUE

# #3

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

A dialogue between **Tammam Aloudat** and **Nanette Antequisa** (23 June 2021)

Authors: *Yannicke Goris, Kiza Magendane* (The Broker)

**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](#)<sup>5</sup>, professor of Humanitarian studies at the International Institute for Social Studies (ISS) opened this third session in the series 'The Decolonisation of Aid'. 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: [Tammam Aloudat](#)<sup>6</sup>, Managing Director at the Global Health Centre of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, and [Nanette Salvador-Antequisa](#)<sup>7</sup>, Executive Director at Ecosystems Work for Essential Benefits (ECOWEB).**

## 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](#)<sup>8</sup>, that took a historical perspective, it became clear that understanding current debates on the transformation of aid and development is impossible without recognising 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](#)<sup>9</sup>, 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](#)'<sup>10</sup>. 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 the 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, Tammam 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 decolonisation 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?

## 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 to 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](#)<sup>11</sup>, 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."

44 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**

45 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](#)<sup>12</sup>. 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](#)<sup>13</sup> (A4eP), a network of organisations that advocate for locally-led response within humanitarian practice. With its '[Grander Bargain 2030](#)<sup>14</sup>', 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 dissolution 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.



## Capturing (de)colonisation

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

### Tammam Aloudat

For Tammam 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 international NGOs, this vehicle also symbolises something decidedly ‘external’ and foreign. In reality, this superpower of humanitarian organisations is not as absolute as international NGOs often communicate. Tammam 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.



International NGO Land Cruiser, Tammam Aloudat.



### Nanette Antequisa

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.

The humanitarian sector, however, has often failed to recognise 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.

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

## DIALOGUE

# #4

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

A dialogue between **Aarathi Krishnan** and **Hugo Slim**  
(29 September 2021)

Authors: *Yannicke Goris, Kiza Magendane* (The Broker)

**In the three 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. 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 specialises 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). 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, Anne-Marie Heemskerk 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 Heemskerk 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 our 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 of the 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.

### The rights and responsibilities of self-determination

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.”

### The decolonisation of ethics and the ethics in decolonisation

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 this 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.**

## 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 discuss, 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](#)<sup>15</sup> 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.

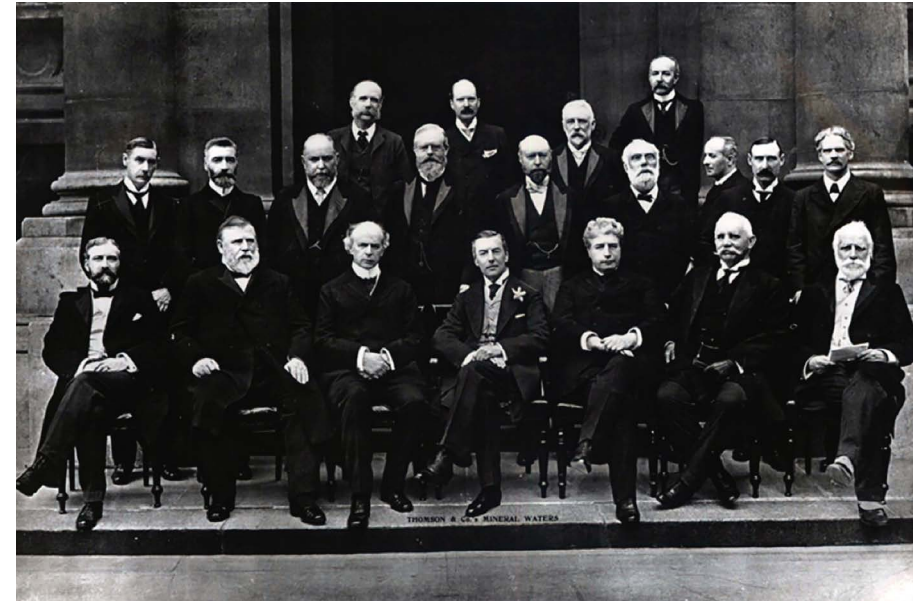
## Capturing (de)colonisation

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

### Hugo Slim

Hugo Slim presented two photos: The first (top right) taken at the Imperial Conference London in 1902. Joseph Chamberlain, the colonial secretary of Great Britain is surrounded by the prime ministers of all Britain's white settler colonies and the secretaries of colony and war. These men, Slim summarises, "were discussing how to run the world". The second image (bottom 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.

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### Aarathi Krishnan

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 utilising a host of indicators to measure it. Buen Vivir does not focus on the wellbeing of 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.

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## DIALOGUE

# #5



## Together on a complex journey: With donors towards decolonisation

A dialogue between **Smruti Patel** and **Dirk-Jan Koch**

(13 October 2021)

Author: *Yannicke Goris* (The Broker)

**In pursuit of meaningful decolonisation of the development sector, however, the role of the donor warrants some more in-depth discussion. “It is,” as The Broker’s moderator Kiza Magendane argues, “a vital precondition for this entire endeavour.” To critically reflect on the role and responsibilities of the donor on the road towards a decolonised system, two speakers will take the stage: Smruti Patel – founder and director of the Global Mentoring Initiative (GMI) and founder and member of the Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP) – and Dirk-Jan Koch, Professor of International Trade & Development Cooperation at the Radboud University Nijmegen as well as Chief Science Officer for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (speaking in a personal capacity).**

### The donor contradiction

Opening her speech, Smruti Patel immediately touches upon an issue that has been raised in previous sessions as well. When talking about the donor, it is assumed this is the actor who ‘owns the money.’ However, Patel argues in agreement with earlier speakers – [Hugo Slim](#)<sup>16</sup> and [Tulika Srivastava](#)<sup>17</sup> – the money is public money. “It is money belonging to the affected populations because we are raising it in their name.” She raised the question of how they are showing up and expressing solidarity at the country level. Indeed, Prof. Dirk-Jan Koch agrees that the money is meant for solidarity and belongs to the communities we seek to support. Yet, at the same time, he notes, it also belongs to the people – the taxpayers – who give the money. Koch argues that in this conversation the term ‘mutual accountability’ is useful. As the money is given to spend on poverty alleviation and supporting the most marginalised, ‘downward accountability’ – i.e. donors being accountable to their beneficiaries

– is of vital importance. “At the same time,” Koch argues, “I understand that those who have been providing this funding from their own pocket would like to know what has happened.” Inclusive development policy and funding means holding *both* sides accountable for meeting agreed targets and sticking to the jointly made plans. Based on her experience, Patel is somewhat sceptical about the notion of mutual accountability because, as she puts it, “it is usually more about account-ability.” Presently, accountability is about adequate bookkeeping and showing that targets are being met, while meaningful, decolonised accountability should be about “involving the populations in making decisions on the projects and programmes that affect them.”

In addition to questioning current accountability mechanisms and the ‘ownership’ of money in aid, Patel wonders just how ‘fit’ present-day donors are to deal with current and future challenges in a way that best matches the needs of those people we are seeking to support. “The way the system is organised today,” Patel argues in line with the previous sessions, “is very colonial, with colonial mindsets.” Power and control are now located with the Northern donors. Yet, Patel notes that donors “are doing a great job in putting some key issues at the centre [of development practice]: For example, gender equity, inclusion, diversity.” Thus, a contradiction becomes visible: “On the one hand [donors] are providing funding to make sure there is gender equity, there is inclusion and we [development actors] can be held accountable,” Patel explains. “Yet, on the other hand, the system itself is *not* accountable, is not inclusive, it is very patriarchal and [...] marked by a trust deficit.” Racism, prejudice, injustice – all of these are currently coming into play when funds are being distributed. To get rid of this contradiction and decolonise the system, Patel feels donors have an important role to play. In addition to putting on the agenda and prioritising the aforementioned issues of gender equity and inclusion, they can similarly encourage organisations to adopt explicitly decolonised approaches – a view that is shared by the second speaker.

### Donors are people

Ten years ago, Dirk-Jan Koch became the country director in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for a large international peacebuilding organisation. With a staff of approximately 100 people – 95% of whom were Congolese and

the other 5% white and mostly in positions of power – the organisation was doing very important work, such as providing human rights training to the Congolese army. It was, however, in a lot of trouble. There was a serious problem of corruption, the organisation was failing its audits and, consequently, donors were demanding their funds back. There was, in short, a strong trust deficit – and not without reason. Koch’s assignment was to ‘clean the house’; ensuring the accounts were put in order, getting rid of corrupt staff members and rebuilding trust with the donors. Especially in this last task, the ‘colonial’ nature of the current system became apparent to Koch: “When donors saw a white face, especially one that spoke their language, I saw that their trust improved,” he narrates. “To me it was an example that, indeed, mindsets are still full of prejudices in the sector.” Now, ten years later, Koch shares his reflections on these experiences: “Did I contribute to reducing corruption, or did I actually contribute to [maintaining] it? I had privileges, access to a car and a house that local colleagues did not have. In this way I was introducing more inequality to the system and perhaps [feeding] the scheming that comes with it.” Presently, Koch does not have an answer to these questions, but they do underline what Patel also pointed out: At present, the humanitarian and development systems are regularly occupied by people who are the products of and perpetuate the colonial mindset and ‘rules of the game’. When seeking to change these rules and mindsets, we must, therefore, look closely at people and ask the questions Patel also posed: “Are the people in the system open-minded? Do they have the open heart and the open will to change? How can we make sure they do not [hold] negative narratives about local actors? [...] And how can we tackle their [colonial] trust deficits?”

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### Decolonising donors

In his presentation, colleague Prof. Koch sketches some pathways for donors that would allow them to ‘become leaders in the debate’. At present, the funding system – and the donors within that system – is perpetuating the colonial power imbalances Patel also mentioned. The funding and aid systems we have today, however, were established for a reason. Many of the poorest countries in the world – the ones that stand to benefit most from international aid – are also faced with very poor governance structures. In these nations, where accountability is lacking, where governments cannot be relied upon to

spend aid funds on the people that need it, a parallel system had to be set up. Decolonisation does not mean abolishing this whole system and getting rid of all the intermediary NGOs. The current system and the relationships that have been built between donors, (international) NGOs, local organisations and communities have many positive aspects and effects. Yet, while this system may deliver more support and accountability to populations in the global South than their respective governments could, Koch argues it is not enough. The system needs a thorough transformation and for donors to take the lead in this process, they must step up their game in three areas:

- First, donors have a lot to gain with respect to their supervision policies. 14 years ago Koch analysed the composition of supervisory boards of international NGOs and found that only 6 percent of board members was non-White. Preparing his presentation for this session, he checked again the websites of a few Dutch international NGOs and was very disappointed: Little progress has been made. “And I do blame the donors for that,” Koch states, “because they have never asked for [diversity on supervisory boards] in all their guidelines.” But the blame does not lie with the donors alone. “We all have a role to play,” he continues and calls into action KUNO – one of the organisations hosting this session: “Why don’t we make a research project out of this?” Koch suggests. “And make a ranking of which international NGO is doing best in this respect?”
- The second area Koch addresses relates to donors’ reactive stance towards advertisement campaigns of their grantees. Despite much critique against the adverts of aid NGOs displaying poor people in their most vulnerable state to acquire funding, the ‘guilt- and pity-triggering’ images are still being used today. Improvements are visible, not in the least because organisations like Partos have set up, with their members, a [code of conduct](#)<sup>18</sup> that states organisations should select images and messages on the basis of ‘Respect for the human dignity of the people involved’. Donors, however, have taken a back-seat in this endeavour and left NGOs to auto-regulate themselves. According to Koch, donors have a responsibility to “demand that all advertisements by their grantees are not contributing to the ‘White Saviour Syndrome’”. And to Partos – the second organisation hosting this session: “I think you should toughen your guidelines in this respect too.”

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- A last element in which Koch feels donors should step up their game is related to personnel policies. Many donors, including the Dutch government, do not have any criteria with regards to diversity of staff of their grantees. Whether local staff is supported to grow into the position of country director, or whether all positions of power continue to be held by 'Northern' staff – the donor does not ask nor seem to care. To conclude this third point, Koch now calls to action all participants: "I know you lobby the government lots, especially on the funding schemes. So why don't you lobby them on this aspect as well? And ask that empowering practices with respect to local personnel are rewarded in [the government's] next subsidy scheme?"

### An empty shell?

Koch ends his presentation on a somewhat controversial note – especially considering that many NGO representatives in the audience are very protective of their autonomy. "Donors have not imposed enough rules," he states. "They have left NGOs free to organise their supervisory boards, their advertisements and personnel policies, [...] result[ing] in a largely regressive system in which a white gaze still prevails." In Koch's view, donors should put a premium on empowering people of colour because without such measures, he argues, "this won't happen, or way too slowly." As expected, this view does not enjoy full support from all participants. Among them is Thea Hilhorst, professor of Humanitarian studies at ISS, who – although agreeing with Koch on most points – expresses her worry that if this push from the donors is not complemented with a push from 'below' and driven by local actors, the donor's push "becomes a very empty shell". Involving people from the countries where humanitarians work is, for Hilhorst, a precondition for formulating guidelines that will generate change towards decolonisation.

In addition, one can question how meaningful and credible a push for decolonisation from the side of the donors is, if their own institutions are not living up to the criteria Koch suggests they put to their grantees. Are donors themselves paying enough attention to their hiring practices, diversity policies and internal accountability procedures? As an example of where donors still have a lot to gain internally, Hilhorst refers to her past experiences with

embassies. "I have felt almost ashamed," she shares, "when I visited Dutch embassies and found out that the national staff, [who] are so knowledgeable, [who] have been there for twenty or more years, and who know everything that is going on, are still in a very marginal position when it comes to decision-making." In this regard, Patel, Koch, Hilhorst and many of the participants – as apparent from their contributions to the online chat – are very much on the same page. Donors too, need to take a hard look in the mirror and change their internal policies and practices. One suggestion from participants was welcomed with open arms: the creation of a capacity building programme for donors, training the people in these institutions to be aware of and more adequately address internal power imbalances.

Hilhorst's 'empty shell' critique with regards to a top-down push of donors for decolonisation has also been expressed with regards to other aspects of donor policy and practice, among which is the concept of 'localisation'. Localisation can be seen as a response to widespread concern about the fact that so much funds are 'lost' along the way from donor to local communities (see also Patel's images in 'Capturing (de)colonisation') and, most importantly, about the top-down, Northern-led organisation of aid. Localisation is seen as a way to 'shift the power', which, for donors, means to allocate resources not to big international NGOs in the North but rather to actors in the global South. As Patel explains, however, in practice the promise of 'shifting the power' often turns out to be an empty shell: "Donors have been talking about how important civil society is to a country, to a society. Yet, what we see is that the donors' money is shrinking the space for local civil society because they are putting more and more resources into big international NGOs who are expanding their bases in the South." A similar sentiment was recently echoed in an [open letter](#)<sup>19</sup> by over 140 Southern CSOs directed at donor institutions. They argue that, while the intentions behind and the principles of 'localisation' sound great, "what happens in practice is that these efforts only serve to reinforce the power dynamic at play, and ultimately to close the space for domestic civil society. [...] All of this serves to weaken us locally. It keeps us in a master/servant relationship continuously begging for grants from your institutions, while we remain bereft of core funding ourselves. This is not what we need or want".

70 For Patel there is opportunity to improve the situation and tap into the potential that the localisation agenda holds. The crux, for her, lies in open communication, listening, and building local relationships. “Have annual direct consultations with local organisations. Speak to them directly. Do not look down on them. Do that, and you will get the direct input that you need.” As both Patel and Hilhorst argue, learning from local actors and supporting them rather than taking the lead is not only a moral imperative; it is an approach that will greatly benefit the communities we seek to support. Because, as Hilhorst puts it, these local actors have crucial capacities that go beyond the bureaucratic capacities we often think of: “Knowing what is going on, finding your way, knowing the local languages, being able to talk to local communities – we [should] see those as the most crucial capacities out there.” Beyond working with local implementing organisations or communities, moreover, it is equally important to build relationships with and strengthen the capacity of local social institutions. “Religious institutions, local authorities – they are at the end of day the social safety nets [...] for vulnerable populations,” Hilhorst points out. “It is of vital importance to invest in those relationships, to work with these [institutions] and do as much as possible to empower them.”

### The future starts tomorrow

To conclude this (for now final) session in the series, moderator Magendane invites the speakers to briefly look ahead. With the rise of new donors, what can we expect on our journey towards a new, decolonised system? In reply, Koch paints a rather pessimistic image, expressing his worry about accountability, especially towards the effected populations. “Despite all their weaknesses, the Netherlands, Sweden, and other progressive donors do try to make sure local accountability systems [...] are strengthened,” he says. With the rise of China and other less democratic nations as donors, however, such accountability systems are unlikely to be maintained. In addition to this worry, Koch also shares an important opportunity he sees for improvement. “The donors have been too passive,” Koch argues, “and [they] have not imposed enough rules.” According to Koch, in the future, “donors can, and have to be, a driver of decolonisation.” And they can do this by putting a premium on NGO programming, approaches, and activities that actively work towards decolonisation and meaningful shifts in power to local actors. “Doing nothing

leads to an entrenchment of the system. The change is happening, but it is happening way too slowly.”

Participants to this last session seem to be in strong agreement on this last point: Their contributions in the chat reflect a great impatience for development actors and donors to act *now*. While sharing this sense of urgency, Hilhorst also imparts a final piece of wisdom to conclude this series. Yes, it is of utmost importance to decolonise and shift the power, she agrees. “But we have to be extremely careful in [our quest for] decolonisation and [ensure] that it does not lead to a situation in which we say ‘hands off, let people manage their own affairs, they do not need us anymore’.” It has been said in all foregoing sessions and cannot be stressed enough: we must prevent throwing away the baby with the bathwater. We must work towards a system in which we get rid of the colonial and save all the good that humanitarian and development interventions are bringing. The key, Hilhorst argues, is a *global politics of international solidarity*. How do we realise this? What does it entail? “I think that is another series of debates,” Hilhorst concludes. “A series that we have to start tomorrow.”

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## Capturing (de)colonisation

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

### Smruti Patel

Smruti Patel presents three images, all shedding light on the power imbalances in the current funding system, that she hopes 'bring discomfort'. The first image shows painfully clear the way in which current aid funding is flowing: Along the road – from the white, powerful, male-dominated rich countries down to the most marginalised – much of the funds are being siphoned off, eventually leaving little to spare for those who really need it. The second image, presents the 'formal' side of the story, showing clearly the inequity of the current aid system on organisational level. Finally, the third picture – a 3.5 metre tall bronze sculpture titled 'Survival of the fattest', depicting a fat woman from the west, sitting on the shoulders of a starved African boy – signifies the ongoing unequal distribution of resources in the development sector. Still, most of the funding goes to the big organisations from the global North, while local actors – those who are doing the heavy lifting – are receiving only a small percentage of the money and resources going around in the system.

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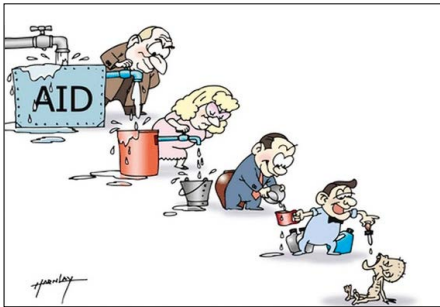
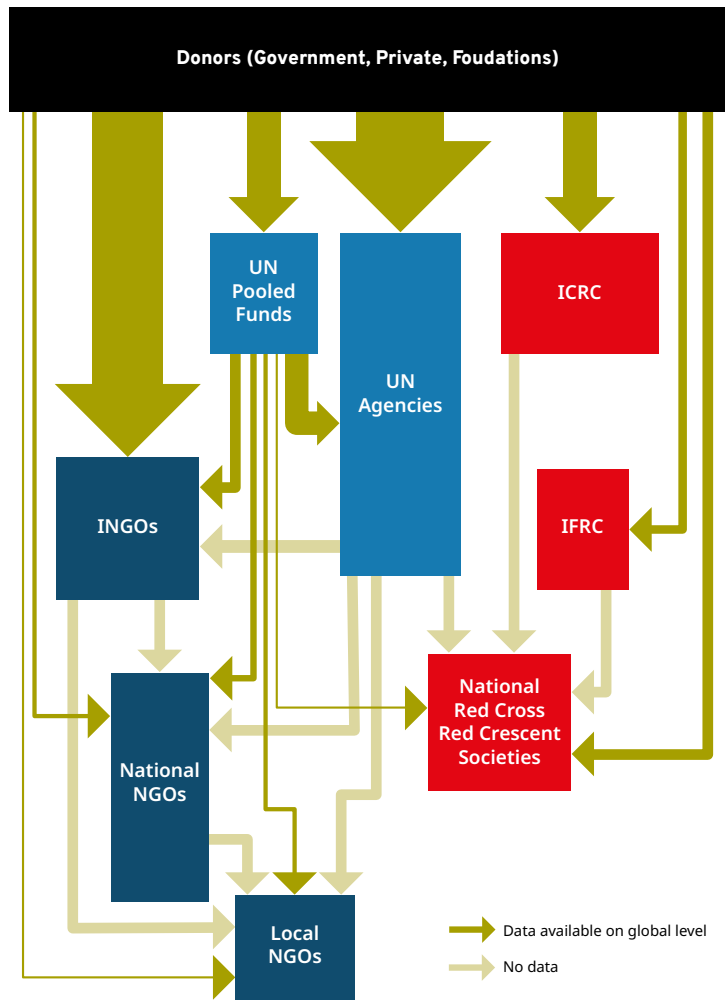


Illustration: Harnlay; Vale Harn Lay



Survival of the Fattest, Jens Galschop 2002.

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**Dirk-Jan Koch**

Dirk-Jan Koch shows participants a video-still of an advertisement by an aid NGO. For him, it shows clearly the result of donors giving their grantees free reign in their advertisement campaigns. "There are still agencies that try to mobilise funding by appealing to the 'White saviour syndrome.'" Koch argues that donors should take their responsibility and set criteria to their grantees to use ads that are empowering rather than falling back onto old colonial stereotypes.



## Biographies

### Dialogue #1 (12 May 2021): a historical perspective

**Arua Oko Omaka**, Historian at Alex Ekwueme Federal University (Nigeria). Arua Oko Omaka specialises in war and society. His PhD research was focused on the international humanitarian response in Biafra (1967-1970). He taught at the University of Toronto and afterwards, he started working for the Department of History and Strategic Studies, Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu Alike Ikwo, in Nigeria. Arua Oko Omaka has published articles in well-known journals, including War in History and Medicine, Conflict and Survival. Library Journal Reviews listed his book The Biafran Humanitarian Crisis, 1967-1970: International Human Rights and Joint Church Aid (2016) as one of the best sellers in African history in 2017.

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**Bertrand Taithe**, professor of Cultural History at The University of Manchester (United Kingdom).

Bertrand Taithe is founding member and was executive director of the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute of Manchester University. Taithe started his studies in Montpellier and Sorbonne (France), but moved to Manchester. Since 1994, Bertrand Taithe has been editor of the European Review of History (Revue Européenne d'Histoire) and is editor of the Journal of Humanitarian Affairs. He has published widely on the history of humanitarian aid. His most recent books are co-edited reflections on contemporary politics and history of humanitarian aid: [Amidst the Debris, Humanitarianism and the End of Liberal Order](#)<sup>20</sup> and [The Charity Market and Humanitarianism in Britain, 1870-1912](#)<sup>21</sup>. He has recently launched a [Humanitarian Historical Archive](#)<sup>22</sup> at the John Rylands Research Institute and Library.

### Dialogue #2 (2 June 2021): a development cooperation perspective

**Tulika Srivastava**, human rights lawyer and Executive Director of Women's Fund Asia (Sri Lanka).

Tulika brings together a range of experience from working with rural women at

the very grassroots, as well as undertaking litigation for individuals and groups of individuals; to negotiating international procedural treaties, and supporting implementation of substantive treaties. At present she brings a political lens to understanding power and resources, particularly in the context of shrinking civil spaces and resourcing women and trans\* human rights movements are concerned. These interventions aim on enhancing and strengthening access to human rights. She is the co-chair of Prospera, The International Network of Women's Funds, the vice-chairperson of the Women Deliver Board and the founding Managing Trustee of the Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiatives; a feminist advocacy centre based in Lucknow, serving the Hindi belt in India.

**Lydia Zigomo**, Global Programmes Director of Oxfam International (United Kingdom).

In April 2021, less than two months before she participated in the decolonisation dialogue, Lydia Zigomo became Global Programmes Director at Oxfam International. Since 2017 she worked for Oxfam International as Regional Director Horn, East and Central Africa. Before Oxfam she had a focus on water, sanitation and sustainable environmental management in development cooperation, working for WaterAid, as East Africa Head of Region. Lydia Zigomo holds a Master degree of Civil Liberties and Human Rights law (University of Leicester) and was National Director for Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association (1998-2002). She is a current member of the Deputies Forum of the UN coordinated Inter Agency Steering Committee.

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### Dialogue #3 (23 June 2021): a humanitarian aid perspective

**Tammam Aloudat**, Managing Director at the Global Health Centre of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (Switzerland). Tammam Aloudat is a Syrian medical doctor and public health professional, who has far-reaching experience in global health, programmes in emergencies, programmes in epidemic control, conflict and natural disasters and medical and health policy. Furthermore, he has a record of performance in programme and people management as well as strategy development in the International Red Cross and Médecins sans Frontières. Currently, Tammam Aloudat works at the Global Health Centre as Managing Director. Here, he develops the activities

of the institution. Furthermore, he also strengthens the centre's 'Open Global Health' strategy.

**Regina "Nanette" Salvador-Antequis**, Director at Ecosystems Work for Essential Benefits - ECOWEB (Philippines)

Regina "Nanette" Salvador-Antequis has about 30 years of experience in peace, development and humanitarian work. Salvador-Antequis has founded ECOWEB and she has helped to organise multiple developmental NGOs, sectoral organisations and networks. Within ECOWEB she is focusing on engaging stakeholders and creating partnerships to start humanitarian response and developing resiliency of communities. From 2015 to 2022, Nanette Salvador-Antequis serves as the sectoral representative of the Victims of Disaster and Calamities to the Philippine government's National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC) and consequently to the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC). Additionally, she is currently the lead convener of the Community-led Empowering Actions for Resilience Network (CLEARNet), co-convener of Philippine DRR Network, a member of Global Coordination of Charter for Change, a Member of the Governing Board of the Loop Charities, an Advisory Group member of HPG and a member of the international coordination of the Alliance for Empowering Partnerships (A4EP).

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#### **Dialogue #4 (29 September 2021): an ethical perspective**

**Aarathi Krishnan**, Researcher at Harvard University (New York, USA) and Strategic Foresight Advisor for UNDP Asia Pacific.

Within her work, Aarathi Krishnan focusses on designing and institutionalising foresight through an applied systems approach. This way, she wants to help to improve anticipatory capacities and decision making. This is done with the intention to manage and respond in short and long-term risk signals, policies and investments. Additionally, Aarathi Krishnan is an Affiliate at the Berkman Klein Centre for Internet and Society at Harvard University and a Technology and a Human Rights Fellow at Harvard Carr Centre for Technology and Human Rights. She also has supported multiple international humanitarian organisations including, amongst others, the UN Resident Coordinators, the World Bank, MSF and UNHCR.

**Hugo Slim**, Senior Research fellow at University of Oxford and at Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government (United Kingdom).

Hugo Slim is a Senior Research Fellow at the Las Casas Institute for Social Justice at Blackfriars Hall at the University of Oxford, and also at the Institute of Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict at Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government. His career has combined academia, policymaking and diplomacy and he has worked for Save the Children, the United Nations, Oxfam GB, HD Centre, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). His recent books are *Solferino 21: Warfare, Civilians and Humanitarians in the Twenty First Century* (Hurst, 2022) and *Humanitarian Ethics: The Morality of Aid in War and Disaster* (Hurst, 2015).

#### **Dialogue #5 (13 October 2021): the role of the donor**

Smruti Patel, founder and director of the Global Mentoring Initiative (GMI) (Switzerland) and one of the founders and member of the Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP), a network of local and national organisations, advocating for locally led action.

Smruti Patel has been active in humanitarian action since 1995. She was a member of the Tsunami Evaluation team and one of the authors of the report on Multi-Agency Thematic Evaluation: Impact of the international response on local and national capacities (2006). Since then has been an active advocate for locally led response and accountability to affected population. She is involved in co-creating spaces to accompany international organisations and donors in the change processes for better partnering and collaborations, focusing on shifting power, attitudes and behaviours; keeping equity, inclusion, anti-racism and decolonisation at the centre of the discussions. She was involved in the research to develop localisation framework for the Start Network, to assess and measure their progress towards localisation. The "Seven Dimensions Framework" is now being used and has been adapted by many organisations and Humanitarian Country Teams. She is a member of the IASC Thematic Expert Group on PSEAH. She accompanies and mentors many local leaders. She is a board member of INTRAC.

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**Dirk-Jan Koch**, special professor of International Trade & Development Cooperation at the Radboud University Nijmegen (The Netherlands). As special professor in Nijmegen, Dirk Jan Koch studies the unintended effects of international cooperation. In 2009 he finished his PhD on geographical choices of international development NGOs. After this, he lived in the DR Congo for five years and two years in Kenya. Here, he worked as a regional director at Search for Common Ground (a peacebuilding NGO), a Professor at the Catholic Church of Kinshasa and as a diplomat. Currently, Dirk-Jan Koch is working as the Chief Science Officer of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

### **The dialogues were co-facilitated by:**

**Thea Hilhorst**, professor of Humanitarian Studies at International Institutes of Social Studies, Erasmus University (The Netherlands).

Dorothea (Thea) Hilhorst is specialised in development in areas affected by conflict, disasters, fragility or political collapse. Thea Hilhorst has a special interest in intersections of humanitarianism with development, peacebuilding and gender-relations. Her current research programme has a focus on humanitarian governance. For more information see: [www.dorotheahilhorst.nl](http://www.dorotheahilhorst.nl).

**Kiza Magedane**, writer and policy entrepreneur.

Kiza Magedane is a political scientist, policy entrepreneur and writer. In his work, he focuses on identity, globalisation, the position of Africa, technology and citizenship. As a knowledge broker focussing on international sustainable development, he worked at The Broker in the Hague (2019 - 2022). He is a columnist for the leading Dutch daily NRC and an affiliated writer for Groene Amsterdammer (a weekly magazine). Kiza Magedane was born in DR Congo, lived for many years in a refugee camp in Tanzania, from where he moved to the Netherlands in 2007. Recently, he published the book 'Met Nederland in therapie' (In therapy with the Netherlands), in which he reflects on his experience of becoming a Dutch citizen.

## Partners

### International Institute of Social Studies

The International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University engages in critical education, research and engagement on global development and social justice. The ISS contribution to the series was enabled by funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no 884139). The booklet coming from this partnership was funded through the Royal Dutch Academy of Science engagement fund.

### KUNO – supporting *Local leadership*

KUNO is the platform for humanitarian knowledge exchange in the Netherlands. A membership organisation supported by 14 humanitarian NGOs, 7 knowledge institutes and Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands.

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As a learning platform KUNO supports *Local Leadership* and initiates fundamental and critical policy discussions about the role of local actors in humanitarian aid. For this, KUNO initiates training, workshops, public debates, and studies to strengthen local leadership. Giving platform to local actors, during all its activities, is an important goal for KUNO.

Activities initiated or (co-)organised by KUNO include:

- Monitoring investments in Local Leadership by the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) from 2018-2021. The DRA is the coalition of Dutch humanitarian NGOs supported by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- [Shifting minds and setting the course](#)<sup>23</sup> (2021). A study on the strategic priority on localisation of the DRA as input for the new DRA Strategy (2021-2025).

- Policy discussions and public debates on topics related to local leadership including: The [representation of local actors within the Grand Bargain](#)<sup>24</sup> – with the Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP<sup>25</sup>, 13 July 2020); [Risk management](#)<sup>26</sup> with Charter4Change and others (June 2020); The [future of humanitarianism](#)<sup>27</sup> with Heba Aly, director of The New Humanitarian (June 2019); [Game changers for localisation](#)<sup>28</sup> with Jamilah Mahmood of IFRC (April 2019); and The [future of international NGOs](#)<sup>29</sup> with Michel Maietta of IARAN (September 2018).
- Facilitating workshops for humanitarian practitioners on localisation, diversity & inclusion, and humanitarian standards that aim to support local actors.

Supporting *Local Leadership* will remain a priority for KUNO in the years to come. Following on from this decolonisation series, KUNO will explore through policy discussions and research, how new funding mechanisms and different ways of resources allocation can be strong incentives for decolonising aid and empowering local leadership.

If you want to stay informed, please register via [our website](#)<sup>30</sup> (at the very bottom) or send an email to [kuno@kuno-platform.nl](mailto:kuno@kuno-platform.nl).

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### Partos 'shifting the power'

[Partos](#)<sup>31</sup> is the Dutch membership body for organisations working in international development. Partos brings together a membership of more than 100 Dutch development NGOs which it connects, strengthens, and represents in the field of advocacy, communication, learning and innovation.

For several years, Partos has been a driver of change through its 'shift the power' work. It pushes for more equal power relationships within development partners. Below is an interesting suite of projects and initiatives that Partos has led or supported:

- The [Dream paper: Shifting Power](#)<sup>32</sup>, synthesis made by the Community of Practice on how we can genuinely shift power.

- The [Power Awareness tool](#)<sup>33</sup> to assist development organisations uncover potential internal power imbalances.
- The [Future Brief on Shift the Power](#)<sup>34</sup> which helps readers navigate the vast amount of information out there on shifting the power.
- The [Publication: Joining Forces, Sharing Power](#)<sup>35</sup>, Civil society collaborations for the future.
- The [Re-imagining the INGO \(RINGO\)](#)<sup>36</sup>, a two-year social lab where international thought-leaders develop and launch prototypes to transform INGO institutions and systems in which they function.

In the upcoming years, Partos will scale up its efforts to accelerate the shift of power dynamics within international development cooperation. Together with its members and constituency, Partos aspires to:

- Co-create **policy recommendations** for members and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign affairs through their [Community of Practice Shift the Power](#)<sup>37</sup> and Strategic Partnership Lab;
- Pilot **practical solutions** for systems change with the RINGO social lab;
- Co-create more **inclusive narratives and communication** approaches for the sector alongside communication experts;
- Develop an **inclusion & diversity benchmark** to support members in their journey to become more inclusive & diverse; and
- Continue to improve the '[Power Awareness tool](#)<sup>38</sup>, create knowledge products like the [Future Brief](#)<sup>39</sup> and organise dialogues and debates such as the [Decolonisation of Aid series](#)<sup>40</sup>.

If you like to stay updated register for the newsletter from the [Partos Innovation Hub](#)<sup>41</sup>.

If you like to become involved, please email [info@partos.nl](mailto:info@partos.nl).

## Links

- 1 <https://www.partos.nl/about-partos/>
- 2 <https://www.kuno-platform.nl/>
- 3 <https://www.iss.nl/en>
- 4 <https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/>
- 5 <https://www.eur.nl/people/thea-hilhorst>
- 6 <https://www.linkedin.com/in/tammamaloudat/?originalSubdomain=ch>
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- 9 <https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/transformational-solidarity-the-journey-towards-decolonising-development-cooperation/>
- 10 <https://views-voices.oxfam.org.uk/2021/03/institutional-racism-in-the-aid-sector-and-how-oxfam-is-responding/>
- 11 <https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/taking-a-historical-perspective-on-the-decolonization-of-aid/>
- 12 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/6/10/Grand-Bargain-international-aid-commitments-localisation>
- 13 <https://a4ep.net/>
- 14 [http://a4ep.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/The-Grand-Bargain\\_A4EP.pdf](http://a4ep.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/The-Grand-Bargain_A4EP.pdf)
- 15 <https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/transformational-solidarity-the-journey-towards-decolonising-development-cooperation/>
- 16 <https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/taking-the-right-path-an-ethical-perspective-on-the-decolonisation-of-aid/>
- 17 <https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/transformational-solidarity-the-journey-towards-decolonising-development-cooperation/>
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- 20 <https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/amidst-the-debris/>
- 21 [https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/the-charity-market-and-humanitarianism-in-britain-18701912\(12f60f76-7356-4c45-868e-1f46a6d41586\)/export.html](https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/the-charity-market-and-humanitarianism-in-britain-18701912(12f60f76-7356-4c45-868e-1f46a6d41586)/export.html)
- 22 <https://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/rylands/special-collections/exploring-guide-to-special-collections/humanitarian-archive/>
- 23 <https://www.kuno-platform.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Shifting-Minds-Setting-The-Course.pdf>
- 24 <https://www.kuno-platform.nl/events/the-perspective-of-local-actors-on-the-grand-bargain-annual-meeting/>
- 25 <http://a4ep.net/>
- 26 <https://www.kuno-platform.nl/events/towards-risk-sharing-perspectives-on-localization-and-risk-management-in-the-context-of-covid-19/>
- 27 <https://www.kuno-platform.nl/events/ceo-meeting-dra/>
- 28 <https://www.kuno-platform.nl/events/making-room-for-local-aid-organisations-to-lead-debate-about-localization/>
- 29 <https://www.kuno-platform.nl/events/future-ingos-2030/>
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- 36 <https://rightscolab.org/ringo/>
- 37 <https://www.partos.nl/werkgroep/community-of-practice-of-shift-the-power%e2%80%af/>
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- 40 <https://www.partos.nl/publicatie/series-of-conversations-decolonisation-of-aid/>
- 41 <https://thespindle.us3.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=0f2c724b9567f7a629e76dc7a&id=d86a4f1f3b>





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KENNISUITWISSELING OVER  
NOODHULP \ HUMANITARIAN  
KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

This booklet presents the harvest of five dialogues on the decolonization of aid. Looking from a historical, development, humanitarian, ethical and donor perspective, the experts came across challenging questions: What do we mean by decolonisation? What should it achieve? What role can actors in the field of development cooperation and humanitarian aid play in bringing about this much needed change? What are the risks? What can we gain? And: who should decide?

Travel along with twelve prominent thinkers and doers as they attempt to answer these questions and raise new ones, and be inspired by Arua Oko Omaka, Bertrand Taithe, Tulika Srivastava, Lydia Zigomo, Tammam Aloudat, Nanette Salvador-Antequis, Aarathi Krishnan, Hugo Slim, Smruti Patel, Dirk-Jan Koch, Dorothea Hilhorst, and Kiza Magedane.

There is a world to win.

