Opinion – Decolonizing Development Will Take More than Moral Imperative

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In 2018, I arrived in Afghanistan as a 26-year-old to lead a team of 40 staff and a $9 million grant. I did not speak the local language, I had never been in Afghanistan, and I was young, but I had been trained to manage challenging grants and I had a fresh master's degree from a highly ranked school. It did not take long for me to feel the discomfort of supervising Afghan men and women who were much more experienced and knew the cultural context way better than I did. One of my supervisees told me he had hit the glass ceiling: years in the same position, excellent reviews, an ability to make wise decisions in an unstable environment…yet he would never become a manager because he could not write in English and did not understand Excel. I made it my mission to advocate for my team and to invest in their professional development as much as possible.

Despite working with an organization that highly valued capacity-building, shifting power dynamics felt like trying to move a mountain. As an American-born employee, I had access to job opportunities, the privilege of speaking the same language as our funders, and the ability to travel to trainings and conferences across the world to further my professional growth. I knew I owed much of my professional success to my citizenship. As I watched my Afghan co-workers have their visas denied and struggle to communicate their expertise in a language that was not their own, I grappled with the reality of development and the power structures that are upheld.

The international development sector entered a much-needed period of self-reflection after the death of George Floyd, recent human rights abuses, and a host of bad press. Advocates for change have highlighted the unequal power dynamics and neo-colonialist tendencies that exist in the development sector, and have called for decolonization. These changes are necessary, but there has been little acknowledgement of what this will require. While neo-colonialism is certainly a result of white supremacy, it is more specifically a result of one-directional cash flows, structural barriers to training and employment, poor capacity-building, and grant management that favors Western skillsets over local expertise. Confronting these nuanced challenges is more important now than ever, and will require more time and resources than we may be acknowledging.

Some sector leaders have started to make efforts to de-colonize and shift power dynamics. Grand Challenges Canada (GCC), a significant donor with over $58 billion in grants awarded in FY20, launched a Transition-to-Scale program that funds innovators from low and middle-income countries to directly implement their global health ideas. GCC works with recipients to provide technical assistance and support monitoring and evaluation, which allows for due diligence while capitalizing on recipients' natural talents and creative ideas. The National Institute of Mental Health's SMART Africa Project is a "transdisciplinary collaborative partnership to engage stakeholders from academia, government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local communities" to address health challenges in African countries. These projects are donor-initiated and build capacity for project management while also celebrating the unique benefit of local expertise and what partners contribute that we ("the West") cannot.

USAID, one of the largest aid funders in the world, has also made recent efforts to partner with in-country organizations. USAID uses their annual Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index (CSOSI) to report on "the strength and overall viability of the civil society sector" in countries receiving aid, and this informs partnership and funding decisions. However, locally-directed agencies in conflict-affected or fragile settings, like Afghanistan, are

ranked lower and receive less funding. These are the areas where the de-colonization of development is most needed.

It can feel like a dichotomy to uphold strict development standards while also reflecting on the white supremacy embedded in it. Is requiring meticulous financial management, robust program evaluation, and foolproof safeguarding and protection mechanisms a necessity in development or a byproduct of racism? How do we fight racism from within the aid sector while also working with local partners to build project management skills that would enable promotion, growth, and task-shifting?

My experience in Afghanistan taught me that the process of decolonizing development is a*"yes, and*" phenomenon. *Yes*, the cash flow from the Global North to the Global South is problematic and reminiscent of colonialism. *Yes*, requiring local staff and local partners to become proficient in English and Microsoft Office in order to manage grants feels unfair when many in the Global North grow up developing these skills and can integrate them naturally. *Yes*, it also feels unfair when the languages, cultural awareness, and networks of local staff and partners are undervalued when those are key attributes to successfully implementing development programs. *And,* at present, countries like Afghanistan are grappling with constant security threats with an impending withdrawal of U.S. troops, millions of out of school children, under-resourced hospitals, and still require substantial amounts of aid in order to deliver services. Funding will continue to flow from the Global North to the Global South, and therefore, certain skills will continue to be critical for project management. Decolonizing development and shifting power dynamics need to entail capacity-building efforts in a manner that empowers grant management while providing space for local partners to use their unique skills.

It's a noble endeavor to demand the decolonization of development work. It's a more noble endeavor to make daily, unglamourous investments to build capacity, shift power, and give credit where credit is due. The latter will likely feel like pushing against a mountain and may take significantly longer than the radical change we want, but it may be the only way the mountain of colonization ever moves.

About the author:

Laura Bond is a doctoral student in Boston College's School of Social Work. She has worked as a program manager with a large international NGO in Lesotho, Afghanistan, India, and Nigeria, with community-based organizations in Uganda and Chile, and with refugee resettlement in Washington DC.