

Workshop

Decolonise development cooperation and aid

Vienna, March 15, 2023, 10:00 – 13:00 (CET)

The panel discussion on 14th March 'African Rising. Can activism change the world?' was followed by the workshop on 15th March 'Decolonise development cooperation and aid'. More than 35 participants mainly from Austrian development organisations and African Diaspora as well as two representatives from Africans Rising attended the workshop. Other activists from the African continent participated online.

During the first part of the session, the aim was to collectively trace how colonialism is, until today, deeply enshrined in Western¹ development assistance. Specifically, the discussion explored to what extent it is part of Western neo-colonial policies that are not helping, but rather harming the population in the Global South.

Thereupon, for the second part of the workshop, the participants tried to find solutions to decolonize development cooperation. This would mean pushing for a whole new concept of collaboration, beyond the donor-recipient relationship, that is based on democratization, the recognition of and engagement with expertise from the Global South as well as local ownership.

Unveiling colonial continuities.

The workshop, which was moderated by environmental and development specialist Johanna Mang, started with inputs from activist and community organizer Mutemi wa Kiama, activist and film producer Katharina Weingartner, researcher Max Sibanda and activist Hardi Yakubu.

Wa Kiama, who is a Kenyan community organiser and board member of Africans Rising, established how 'development' evolved as a more subtle, more sophisticated form of colonialism. While Western resource extraction in Africa appears to many people as something neo-colonial and exploitative, development assistance is portrayed as something altruistic. However, as Sibanda and Weingartner both illustrated, in fact most Western development initiatives in Africa deal with 'solving' or 'helping' with problems the imperial powers themselves produced in the first place. Sibanda repeatedly urged that there is no rational explanation for where this 'helping' narrative comes from. Africans were and are not helpless. As exploration of natural resources continues at global scale, former and new 'colonizers' often collaborate with destructive and exploitative regimes.

Weingartner, in more detail, showed how the issue of Malaria is a prime example of how Western 'development' works. While Africans, initially, were managing Malaria with their own knowledge the Western pharma industry denied this knowledge, portrayed Africans as helpless and in need for medication produced by Western companies. But this Malaria medication was and is not affordable for all people, it doesn't reach many local communities affected and ignores the positive effects of

¹ The general term "Western World" was not explicitly defined. But it was used in the context of colonialism and with reference to countries located in (western) Europe and North America.

the existing traditional medicine. The “BigPhama” and the Gates Foundation could ‘social wash’ themselves in public while directing 95% of Malaria investments while nearby no funds are available for local research on traditional medicine.

Kayama, who attended the workshop via video call, also emphasized how the expansive economic colonialism Western corporations exercise is concealed and, therefore, stabilized by a massive ‘propaganda machine’ (e.g. BBC, CNN,...) reproducing the helping narrative.

After the speakers had vividly illustrated how global inequality is essentially reinforced instead of reduced through Western development assistance, the participants spread out into small buzz groups. They discussed what they found most striking about what they had heard and what other aspects they considered as important.

Key reflection points were:

- Participants felt ambiguity between personal motivation and ideals as development agents in organisations vis-à-vis to what most development organisations ultimately do.
- It is important to understand how and by whom development goals are defined.
- The current and mainstream development assistance does not assist recipients towards solutions to their self-defined needs and based on their own experience and expertise.
- The discussions on decolonization have started among progressive development actors around the Globe, yet not truly reached the mainstream development cooperation.

Part II: How can development cooperation and aid be decolonized?’

The second part of the workshop was dedicated to the question if and how development assistance could be decolonized and eventually turned into the humanist, progressive endeavour the participants (and many others) wish for.

Like for the first part, the second discussion also started with food for thought through inputs by another group of guests, namely Alexander Behr and Grace Atuhaire, both researchers and activists, as well as Jess Blijkers, Program Director of Light for the World. Behr called out the imperial lifestyle of Western people which would be fundamentally racist as it denies indigenous people’s rights. The new approach in development he urges, is radically different from charity. What would be needed is a global network of solidarity that enables a good life for all within the limits of the planet. As example he cited Afrique-Europe Interact which was founded to support rights of migrants but also collaborates with people in Western Africa who fight against land grabbing. Besides social movements, which can build up pressure, and development organizations, it would also need progressive political parties which put demands from the ground into legislation.

Atuhaire appreciated that suchlike conversations were happening internally in Western development organizations. However, eventually, very few would start acting accordingly. She emphasized that she and other experts and activists from the Global South would be happy to help Western organizations decolonize. Therefore, the continued exchange would be vital. Blijkers advocated that

Western actors should spend less time debating “whether” the colonial sector perpetuates systemic colonial and racist issues and more time acting. The aim is progress not perfection. Practically, asking ourselves questions around design and decision making, storytelling and language, funding, and who holds expertise are good places to start.

How exactly these practical steps along the process of decolonization could look like, was discussed in small groups, and then brought to the plenum.

Key suggestions are:

- **Local ownership and knowledge:** To overcome the paternalistic development assistance it would be vital to acknowledge and use expertise from the Global South. Development assistance must be seen as something where Western people learn from local experts and draw lessons from indigenous knowledge systems. The exchange and learning from each other is a key element for development.
- **Decision-making and participation:** The design of all activities, projects and programs need to be based on local knowledge and expertise from the Global South. And the decision-making process has to be participative with all involved. A concrete demand, therefore, was that Black, Indigenous and People of Colour of the diaspora must be involved in development organisations in the Global North, at programme level and board members of Western development organizations.
- **Transnational collaboration:** Western organizations should collaborate with social movements, share (financial) resources with activists in the Global South and provide protection if needed.
- **Media and images:** more attention should be given to towards important news that are not addressed in mainstream media and show positive local developments in African countries rather than focusing on catastrophes solely and creating stereotype images.
- **Space for new approaches:** New organizations and networks with a decolonial idea of development should rightly be built. However, as established organizations receive a lot of funding, individual persons within established organizations should push for structural changes in terms of their legislation (e.g. in the constitution) and in terms of technical questions (e.g. enable a more inclusive project conception by insisting on more time for planning).

All in all, it became clear that dreaming big is easy, it is now time take the much harder step into action. Hence, the exchange of knowledge and experiences across organizations, across movements and across continents is and will remain so vital.

The curator of the workshop, Franz Schmidjell from VIDC, proposed to continue a joint result-oriented dialogue. The objective should be to move from the slogan “decolonise” to changes in our work practices - but also on a policy level.