

Beyond Labels and Cultural Wars-Thoughts on Decolonizing Aid Imagery and Narratives

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Before I begin, I must make two disclaimers. First, while the topic I was asked to speak about concerns decolonising images and narratives in the aid sector, my comments and observations will be limited to the sector as it relates to the African continent.

Secondly, I'd wish to add a recognition of the fact that the word "decolonisation" also tends to be co-opted into other cultural wars going on globally. Some conservatives for instance think of it as just another expression of the 'woke-ness' and an unwarranted attack on Western culture. Many progressives on the other hand think of it as a legitimate demand to undo policies, systems and approaches to people of colour that are inherently racist or colonial. Of course that's a very basic way of putting it as there are conservatives that would agree with the second interpretation of the word and progressives who do not see the need to decolonise anything. My personal position on the matter is aligned to the progressive line of thinking.

Bottom line however, is that there is no consensus among scholars as to the definition or conceptualisation of decolonization. "Decolonization", as Sium, Desai and Ritskes put it, "is a messy, dynamic and contradictory process."

It is messy, dynamic and contradictory because the postcolonial realities of continents, regions, nations and individuals is a complex combination of colonial influence, institutional and individual agency, globalisation and so many other socio-economic and political factors. Think for instance, of Uganda where I'm from. We are a collection of over 54 ethnic groups, most of which operated as independent nation states, some as far back as the 1400s. None of these people played a part in determining who made the cut to be included in this entity called Uganda. That decision was made by the British, largely based on their own interests rather than the local context. And so you have entire communities that were arbitrarily separated by an imaginary border decided upon by a bunch of European men-most of whom had never been- at a conference held over 6000km away (Berlin) for reasons that had nothing to do with the welfare of those affected. Once that decision was made, it held a certain international legitimacy that left these communities with no choice but to think of themselves and their history in binary terms; before colonialism and after colonialism. There was no third choice. So before colonialism, the Sebei lived around the Mt. Elgon community and conceived themselves as just that; Sebei. After colonialism, they had to think of themselves as Ugandan Sebei and Kenyan Sebei, depending on what side of Mt. Elgon they lived. So you have a Ugandan come first in the London Olympics marathon and a Kenyan come third. Their names: Stephen Kiprotich and Wilson Kiprotich. They speak the same language, are from the same ethnic group, along trails on the same mountain, share relatives, but run for different countries. How do you decolonise that? Where do you start from? Who is responsible for initiating the process? The coloniser? The colonised? Both?

Messy, dynamic and contradictory.

Some of you may be wondering, what has this got to do with humanitarian agencies and the language or images they use? Well, my response would be this: everything. Here's why.

When we talk of international development, we often seem to think of it as an exercise in human virtue and charity. But there is nothing international about the power dynamics in development discourse. It has always been mostly about the global North "helping" the global South achieve what the former considers development. Who amongst you have ever heard of the development agenda for Europe? Or America? The focus is always on the Global South.

However, when we have international conferences on international development, who gets to define the agenda? Who is it that gets to be listened to at the G8 or the COP27 or the World Economic Forum? Is it a leader of the Yanomamo people of the Amazon talking about the needs of his people or Joe Biden talking about his vision for the world?

We tend to conceptualise development and humanitarian agencies as separate from government and politics, but the reality is, they are a consequential part of both. Charities like Oxfam or World Vision for instance, have annual budgets that are larger than entire countries or even regions. In Africa particularly, International NGOs hold more sway on the development agenda of many countries than the governments elected by the people. In fact, some have argued that international aid is directly responsible for the perpetuation of underdevelopment. Here's how a former journalist and Ugandan social commentator, Andrew Mwenda put it:

The problem in many African countries is that governments look for revenue not in the domestic economy but in the pockets of international donors. Rather than listen to investors and other constituencies regarding their policy and institutional needs, many governments find it easier to negotiate with international creditors for foreign aid. In that manner, foreign aid impedes the emergence of a mutually beneficial relationship between the government and the citizens. It also encourages a dependence mentality among politicians and bureaucrats, so that every time there is a fiscal shortage, they are inclined to look for aid, rather than for policies and institutions that favor economic growth. Aid thus undermines long-term growth (Mwenda 2006:4)

The similarities between this unequal distribution of power and that of colonialism cannot be overstated.

The picture Mwenda paints can be extended to the language and images used by aid agencies in their advocacy efforts and marketing campaigns. In a very real sense, INGOs hold an ambassadorial position on behalf of the Global South to the Global North. Research has shown that when an African president or official is quoted by Western media, a Western source is usually relied upon to qualify, justify or provide context. Very often, that source is a spokesperson of a charity working in that country. Western media is far readier to accept Oxfam's narrative of what is happening in Ethiopia than the country's foreign affairs minister. And so are Western audiences.

We could debate the merits and demerits of this, but the point I wish to make here is that what charities say about the places they work in matters and significantly impacts on Western audiences' conceptualisation of these places, which in turn impacts on both Western governments' policy towards developing nations and therefore, international development programmes aimed at them. When charities communicate about Africa as if it is a country and the media unquestioningly gives prominence to these narratives as factual (ie without contextualising the information), what we end up with is the very same domination of Northern assumptions over Southern realities that saw John Speke claim he 'discovered' the source of the Nile or Columbus America. The prevalence of these kind of narratives also makes it easier for the Global North to continue prescribing to the South what constitutes development. Nothing could be more colonial than the notion that some experts sitting in Geneva, Paris London or Washington are the best placed to determine the direction and development agenda of a farmer in Kayunga, my home district in Uganda.

So, fully acknowledging that there isn't necessarily consensus around this, here is my definition of decolonisation.

Decolonisation for me is the process of realigning power, agency and legitimacy from the external (coloniser and collaborators) to the local (colonised and impacted communities).

On the question of how decolonisation can be applied to images and narratives in international development, I would like to offer some concrete examples and suggestions. They are not exhaustive and may not be fully representative of the sector, but I believe they provide a clear indicator of what is happening and how we could change it.

A few weeks ago I bought a bottle of water from the Co-op, a huge British supermarket chain. It was branded along with a message that said, "Together, we are on target to raise over £10m to support clean water projects in Africa, helping over 1.8m people."

There are some that may look at this and say, "What's the problem with this?"

Well, for starters, Africa is not a country. It is a continent 14 times the size of Europe with 54 countries and home to 1.5billion people. The programmes Co-op supports exist in only 6 African countries and impact just over 0.1% of the African population. In both general and absolute terms, this can't be representative of the continent.

And yet, when charities speak about 'our work in Africa', they solidify Western conceptualisations of Africa as a country. When they speak of "hunger in East Africa" with photos of malnourished children in the Karamoja region, what Western audiences conceive is an entire continent of starving children whose only hope is the £5 per month being asked of them with the promise that it will help feed an entire family.

Without necessarily meaning to, charities and the language they use perpetuate extremely simplistic narratives which, in the context of the colonial legacy, sustain racial stereotypes.

And I must emphasise here that the point here isn't to bash charities or the work they do. As someone who has worked in the sector and been at the frontline of humanitarian emergency

responses in East and West Africa, I know that the work they do saves lives and the desire to do good is sincere.

But one can be sincerely wrong.

Good intentions do are not enough. The missionaries that branded indigenous names demonic and Western ones “Christian” probably had the best of intentions. The billionaire that lectures a peasant on family planning and what it should mean probably has good intentions. It doesn’t negate the arrogance and patronage inherent of these actions.

Going back to the wording on the bottle, it is not that what the Co-op is saying is completely incorrect. Their projects are in Africa and they impact millions of people. What this narrative is guilty of, is what Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie calls ‘the danger of a single story’.

So how might charities cure this lacuna?

Well first, by communicating with specificity. What the Co-op is doing, is working to ensure millions of people in Malawi, Kenya Rwanda and Ghana access clean water as well as emergency programmes in Liberia and Sierra Leon. Or more succinctly, building safe water sources in 6 African countries. The more precise we are with the language we use in development, the better.

Secondly, charities must push back on the media logic that tends to strip stories about their work in the Global South of nuance and context. This shouldn’t be too hard when you consider how similar stories are treated when those affected are from the Global North. No charity is characterising what is happening in Ukrainian as ‘war-ravaged (Eastern) Europe’ or the energy crisis simply as people being too poor to afford gas. There’s a context to these crises and that context matters. Similarly, things like famine, civil unrest and disease don’t just happen in Africa. They have socio-political and economic causes that deserve to be explained.

Lastly, but perhaps more importantly, charities need to foreground the voices of those they seek to serve. Not just in fundraising and advocacy campaigns but in planning, implementing and monitoring development programmes. We must work towards realigning power, agency and legitimacy from the global or so-called international community to the local communities.

These three suggestions speak to the similarities between international development and colonialism. At its core, colonialism too was blind to the unique identities of the colonised and in most cases replaced their culture, religion and economic activities with those deemed fit by the colonisers. Until fairly recently, development was largely something that happened to communities in the global south, having been conceived in the global north. The tide however is changing. USAID for instance has over the past few years invested in what it calls the localisation of development. Western agencies such as Oxfam and Action Aid have moved their headquarters to Nairobi and South Africa respectively while many other charities are giving their national offices in the Global South more authority to decide what programmes to implement, how to implement them and even how to communicate about them.

I suspect none of these charities would be keen to call what they are doing decolonisation. I do, and I’m here for it.