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Decolonizing health cooperation - Reflections on an upcoming transformation process

It is time to be more mindful of the demands of the beneficiaries

Quest for an inclusive approach to development cooperation

By A.H. Monjurul Kabir

Decades of top-down aid, exclusionary practices, and development policies have failed to address global inequity and object poverty for billions of world citizens. Unfortunately, we are also living in a world where both our bilateral and multilateral achievements, consensuses on human rights, public health, and social justice, and our resolve to public good are being tested like never before. Now, more than ever, we need to bring to life the values and principles of the globally accepted normative standards in every corner of the world. The vicious impacts of Pandemic due to COVID-19 since 2020 put international cooperation and governance framework under severe stress and additional challenges. Global Health governance is certainly a case in point. There are others too.



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Given my own personal trajectory in global policy, equality, inclusion and normative support, and cross-regional knowledge and partnership development, let me focus on aspects of sustainable development and consider whether we need to change and adopt any new approach to it to end extreme poverty, reduce inequalities, and, perhaps, rescue the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from exclusionary practices.

Development or Sustainable Development must be inclusive

In fact, inclusion is at the heart of Development Cooperation. Inclusive development is the concept that every person, regardless of their identity, is instrumental in transforming their societies. Development processes that are inclusive yield better outcomes for the communities that embark upon them. Multilateral system like United Nations (UN) was created to promote the rights and inclusion of marginalized and underrepresented populations in the development process and leads the global response to addressing the needs and demands of those in adversity and youth. All countries have seen a rise in inequalities in health and socio-economic status. The pandemic continues to expose and exacerbate inequities that already existed within and between countries and communities. Therefore, the UN and other multilateral actors implement activities that combat stigma and discrimination, promote empowerment and inclusion of marginalized or underrepresented groups, and improve the lives of populations in high-risk situations.

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It is, therefore, important that we also adopt this in institutional and management settings and be mindful of the demands of the actual beneficiaries of the development processes and initiatives.

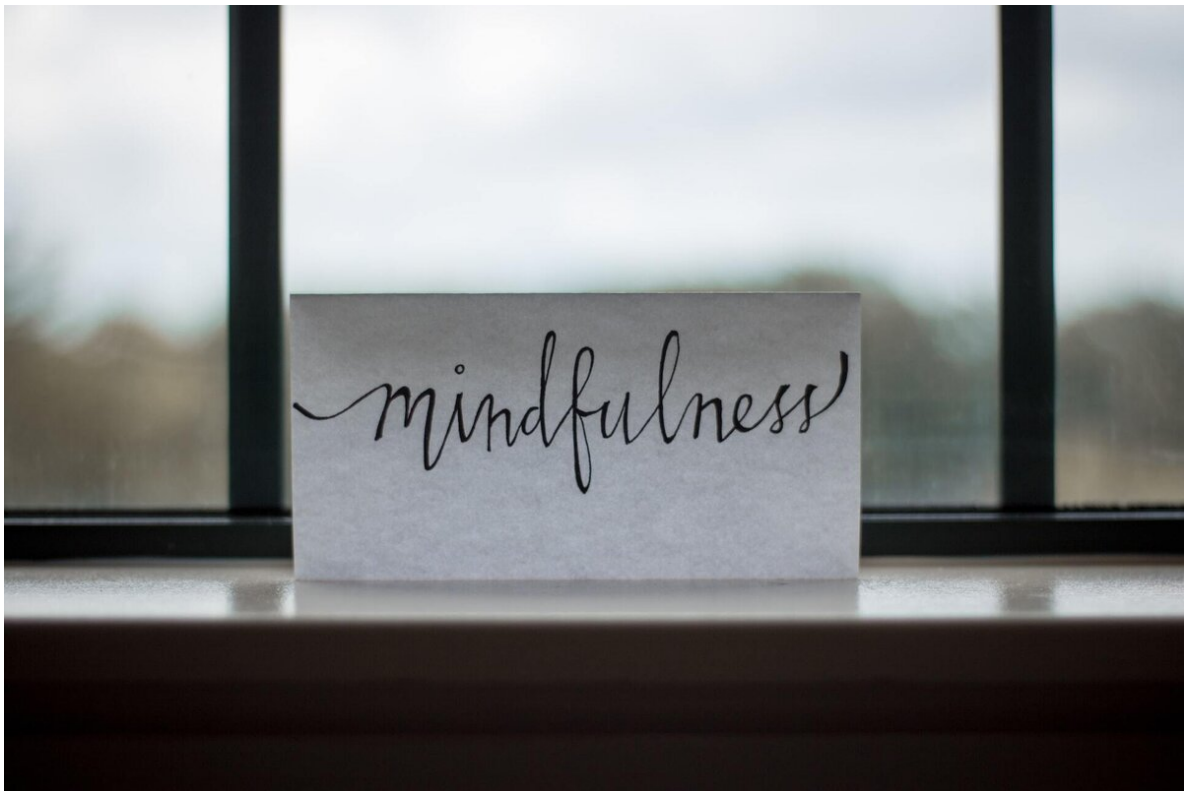


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Bottom-up and Locally Owned

Development and global management must be informed and driven by bottom-up processes. For example, international assistance to health tends to recruit technical expertise from high-income countries and impose a Northern and/or Western understanding of disease and health on the Global South. Fortunately, the principle like ‘Think globally, act locally’ counters this and outlines a different type of cooperation: For example, in case of addressing climate change challenges, it urges people to consider the health of the entire planet and to act in their own communities and cities. Taking action at the local level requires us to develop a nuanced understanding of intersectional processes. For multinational organisations that operate across a wide spectrum of localities, it is important to balance unifying global priorities with a respect for the needs, demands, desires, and identities of the diverse communities where they operate.

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So, the world and its challenges have become much more intersectional, which calls for a robust and intersectional approach to development cooperation.

Intersectional Approach

An intersectionality lens allows us to see how social policy may affect people differently, depending on their specific set of ‘locations,’ and what unintended consequences particular policies may have on their individual lives. By listening to the most marginalized and/or disadvantaged groups of a community, development organizations can help combat oppression at all levels of society and rebuild communities from the ground up. Take the example of Persons with Disabilities. They are not a homogenous group, and this should be reflected in our policy advocacy and communications by considering intersectionality—the intersection of disability together with other factors, such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, refugee, migrant or asylum seeker status. For example, a person with disability also has a gender identity, may come from an Indigenous group and be young, old, a migrant or live in poverty.

At both multilateral and bilateral development cooperation frameworks, it is time to adopt an intersectional approach in policy development and advocacy, programming/operational support, and planning and budgeting. An intersectional approach considers the historical, social, and political context and recognizes the unique experience of the individual based on the intersection of all relevant grounds. This approach allows the experience of discrimination, based on the confluence of grounds involved, to be acknowledged and remedied. Using an intersectionality lens to approach our development practice means moving beyond the use of singular categories to understand people and groups and embracing the notion of inseparable and interconnected sets of social ‘locations’ that change through time, vary across places, and act together to shape an individual’s life experience and actions. This would go a long way to contribute to the SDGs’ Leave No One Behind (LNOB) principle.

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New Media

New media, including mobile and social media, could help demystify international institutions and encourage participation. The new media is also critical to widen the breadth of accessibility for persons with disabilities or those who live in rural and/or remote, hard to reach areas. Alongside this, there could be more regular interactions by the leadership of intergovernmental organisations with multi-stakeholders including civil society, organisations of persons with disabilities, and the media, and the creation of accessible databases of statistical and other information and knowledge on their work.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the need to invest in health systems around the world. Still, however, many other challenges to public health continue to prevail, and it is important to have a clear view on which public health threats should be tracked and prioritized in 2023 and beyond. Notwithstanding the Ukraine war, work at the multilateral mechanisms continue. International community or global governance actors can and should continue to play a constructive role in both development cooperation, public health, crisis management, peace building, transitions, and post-conflict stabilization. It should continue to focus on crises from pandemic and ongoing conflicts in different regions (i.e., Afghanistan to Mali, Somalia to Ukraine, just to name a few). However, the international governance stakeholders must explore new and innovative and intersectional ways to support inclusive development and public health, climate justice and resilience, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and other global and regional key priorities. Otherwise, the SDGs will not be near to their desired destination in 2030 or beyond.

The opinions expressed within the content are solely the author's and do not necessarily reflect the opinions and official positions of the organisation(s) referred to.



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