



MMS Bulletin #168

Decolonization in international health cooperation: Are we ready for it?

Reflections on an Outstanding MMS Symposium Are We Ready for Decolonisation?

By Carine Weiss

*In 2023, a powerful MMS Symposium entitled *The Changing Role of CSOs in International Health Cooperation and Global Health* took place in which the member organisations shared a mutual need to challenge the biases within ourselves and the institutions in which we work. If we want to get to the heart of the impact these biases are having on both the Global South and the North, it is necessary for us to undertake an ongoing process of reflection.*



Foto von Etienne Girardet auf Unsplash

In one of our monthly MMS Newsletters, Martin Leschhorn asked the following: “The decolonisation debate has the potential to make international health cooperation sustainable. But are we non-governmental organisations, state actors in international cooperation and donors ready for this?” This question was then addressed at the 2023 MMS Symposium.

The “we” in Martin Leschhorn’s question refers both to those granting or delivering aid and to those receiving it. For equitable partnerships to function effectively, an understanding of the local politics, civil society and social organisation in the target country is imperative. This requires an ongoing critical reflection by those involved and an awareness that power is always multi-layered and multi-dimensional.

Embarking on a process of critical reflection together with our partners in the Global South, it became evident that the question should perhaps not only be about how to operate on an equal footing but more about developing a shared practice with the goal of exercising “less” power overall.

Cheikh Mbacke Gueye from the Medicor Foundation discussed whether an equal footing in cooperation was possible at all. For it to become so, we need to continuously engage with our own mindsets and reflect honestly on the work we are doing and how we are doing it. This includes an open discussion when things go wrong so we can learn from our mistakes. He also made the point that we should engage with ‘cultural interpreters and translators’ to grasp the complexity of a society in order to achieve sustainability beyond funding. According to him, cultural sensitivity is at the heart of all sustainable projects.

Embarking on a process of critical reflection together with our partners in the Global South, it became evident that the question should perhaps not only be about how to operate on an equal footing but more about developing a shared practice with the goal of exercising “less” power overall.

—



Foto von James Eades auf Unsplash

Are We Ready for the Past?

Tackling decolonisation also means facing and acknowledging the past in order to move forward. Being critical of power when considering colonial legacies implies being critical of racism.

Recent unprecedented anti-racism protests across the globe, triggered by George Floyd's death in 2020, shone a spotlight on the deeply ingrained historic and systemic racist attitudes and racial discrimination that deny people their fundamental human rights. They also challenged us to consider our own blind spots. The protests have – finally – created an opportunity for us to speak openly about racism in the 'humanitarian' and wider aid sector. This is a sector where underlying attitudes of superiority and discrimination, and negative narratives including beneficiaries being labelled as corrupt, incapable, unable to be principled, or as high risk and untrustworthy, undermine the quality of relationships between international and local and national organisations and stymie progress on localisation (Bond, 2021).

Racism remains a structural element in the mindsets of aid-providing countries that see themselves as 'developed', and in the institutional practices that shape international aid and 'development cooperation'. It ignores how this development has been enabled through colonial plunder and ongoing post-colonial resource extraction that shifts much more wealth to the West than it returns to the Global South in terms of aid funding.

Racism remains a structural element in the mindsets of aid-providing countries that see themselves as 'developed', and in the institutional practices that shape international aid and 'development cooperation'.

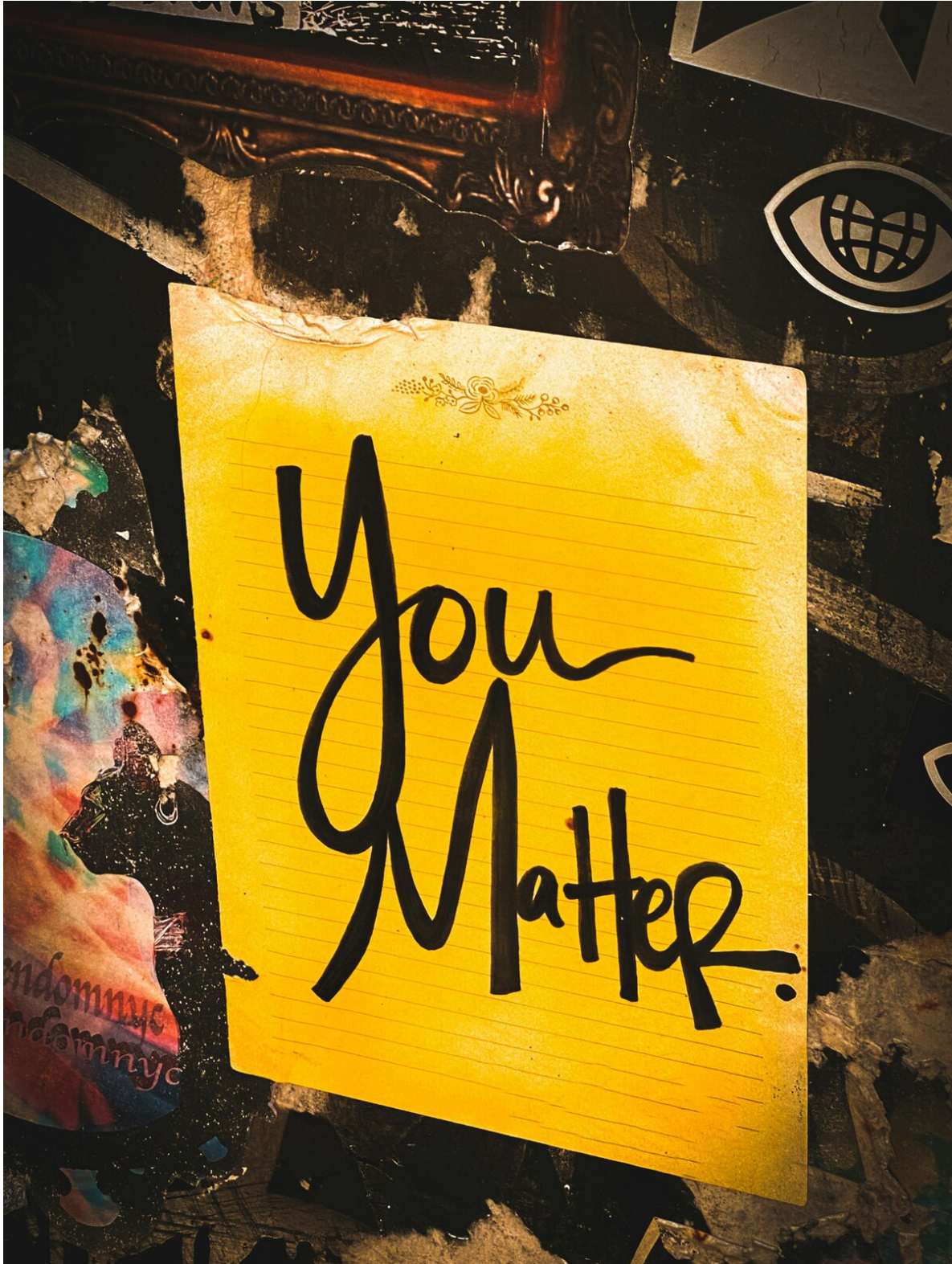


Foto von Jon Tyson auf Unsplash

Conclusion

To sum up, at the 2023 MMS Symposium we developed a visionary position and an honest review of the current situation. The majority of MMS member organisations would like to see international health cooperation based on partnerships on an equal footing, solidarity, resource sharing and the exchange of knowledge. The spirit of the Alma-Ata Declaration will continue to be our guiding principle as we keep the Medicus Mundi vision of “Health for All” alive.

Challenging and changing long-established communication practices requires creativity and innovative approaches, contextual and local know-how, and an ongoing critical reflection on our own views on decolonisation as well as those of donors, in the hope that human development will be rooted in transformative solidarity, compassion and true respect.

On the “Money is Power” panel, we also discussed what the future will look like and how it is necessary for us to face the fact that monetary support for the Global South will gradually decrease, while climate change and armed conflicts will determine the need for increased funds in countries of the North. Nevertheless, it is more important than ever to empower communities and increase their capacity and skills to help themselves.

References

- Bond (2021). Racism, power and truth - Experiences of people of colour in development. <https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/racism-power-and-truth/> (accessed February 2024).



Carine Weiss has been project leader at Medicus Mundi Switzerland since September 2014. She holds a master's degree in clinical psychology and a master's in international health from the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute where she worked for over seven years. She has worked in the field for three years, spending six months in Cambodia, six months in Haiti and two years in Myanmar (2010 – 2013). Email

Kontakt

Deutschschweiz

Medicus Mundi Schweiz
Murbacherstrasse 34
CH-4056 Basel
Tel. +41 61 383 18 10
info@medicusmundi.ch

Suisse romande

Medicus Mundi Suisse
Rue de Varembe I
CH-1202 Genève
Tél. +41 22 920 08 08
contact@medicusmundi.ch

Bank details

Basler Kantonalbank, Aeschen, 4002 Basel
Medicus Mundi Schweiz, 4056 Basel
IBAN: CH40 0077 0016 0516 9903 5
BIC: BKBBCHBBXXX

