



MMS Bulletin #168

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

Interview by Carine Weiss with Labila Sumayah Musoke and Thomas Schwarz

How to Respond to the Call for Decolonization?

By Labila Sumayah Musoke, Thomas Schwarz and Carine Weiss

The Network Medicus Mundi Switzerland has embarked on the discussion of what decolonisation means for its members and for international health cooperation for several years. From the debates it became clear that there is a need for more in depth discussions and support in order to move forward and make shifts in this rather complex topic.



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Medicus Mundi Switzerland mandated Labila Sumayah Musoke and Thomas Schwarz from the Medicus Mundi International Network to analyse how the civil society members of the Medicus Mundi Switzerland Network have taken up the call for decolonization and, more particularly, for decolonizing international cooperation, and what can be done to push this process much further. The results of this analysis can be found [here](#).

This interview highlights background thoughts and views of the authors which were not covered in the study, and which give further insights into this complex matter. Some references were added to the text of the interview during its editing.

Labila & Thomas – Why did you propose yourself to Medicus Mundi Switzerland to conduct this study when you heard about the call?

Labila: In light of my positionality as a young female global health activist based in the global south - Uganda, I perceived the call as a unique opportunity to contribute to the decolonial discourse while gaining a nuanced understanding of the global north perspectives. My decision to undertake the study was further reinforced by my prior engagements at the Kampala Initiative and Medicus Mundi International spaces where the need to decolonize international health cooperation had taken center stage. Recognizing the multifaceted and contested theoretical and applied approaches to decoloniality, I believed that an honest conversation with Swiss NGOs engaged in international health cooperation would foster respectful and inclusive dialogues, thereby catalyzing collective resistance against existing neo-colonial regimes within the current international aid space.

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Thomas: Institutionally, the answer is easy. The promotion of a critical reflection of international health cooperation has become a core field of attention and work for MMI for ten years now. In 2016, we published a discussion paper on “Health Cooperation: Its relevance, legitimacy and effectiveness as a contribution to achieving universal access to health”. After a series of workshops on this topics, we convened, in 2019, a workshop in Kampala on “How to

advance cooperation and solidarity within and beyond aid” which led to the creation of the “Kampala Initiative” with its distinctive claim “DECOLONIZE health cooperation - DECOLONIZE the critique of aid - DECOLONIZE the promotion of solidarity”.

This is also where I met Labila. Personally, I am approaching my retirement, and I thought that the study, and the related interactions with colleagues working in international cooperation, would be a great opportunity to harvest some of my experiences - and learn more - in this field that has kept me busy and alert for a long time.

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Related to the study, and in your work, you have had your own lens on coloniality and decolonization. When you interviewed members of Medicus Mundi Switzerland, have there been any surprises for you, statements that made you rethink what you previously thought and learnt about decolonisation?

Labila: The various conversations I had with the network members were insightful. The willingness of the majority of the respondents to engage in self-reflection and honestly acknowledge how their respective institutional practices have unconsciously entrenched colonial legacies. Notably, positive shifts were identified, particularly in communications, where efforts were underway to right harmful stereotypes that portrayed the global south as needful and helpless.

However, a surprising revelation emerged when respondents acknowledged a conflict of interest between their individual beliefs and institutions' position and their reluctance to merge their beliefs with the institutions missions and values. This contrast was evident in their reluctance to engage in conversations about altering their governance structure to incorporate global south partners into key decision-making positions at the headquarters or even entrusting them with financial management responsibilities of projects/programs.

This revelation emphasized the need of all decolonial activists to pay attention to not only the visible changes but also the underlying structures that perpetuate unequal power dynamics within international health cooperation.

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— *Labila Sumayah Musoke*

Thomas: Not really surprised, but I indeed learnt a lot. As we have written in the introduction, our work helped us to get a better understanding of the honesty and courage it takes for organizations based in Switzerland to fully engage in a difficult conversation that touches on the core of their work and existence and in which there are no easy answers. So, one of the interesting pieces at the margin of the study was to match analysis demands as expressed in the broad literature on decolonization with what we heard from Swiss actors. We

added a chapter “The broader picture” to the text of the report, but only at the end, not to distract from the core of the paper, our interaction with representatives of Swiss NGOs and what we learnt from them.

As part of this “broader picture”, you will find a section on “More radical perspectives on decolonizing solidarity” with some challenging pieces that ask, for example, if decoloniality can even be achieved within the patterns of aid or cooperation, or what would be a more radical way for civil society organizations from the Global North to engage in linking realities and struggles for promoting the change we want to see when we talk about decolonization. But in the study itself, and in the report, we focused on the question of how international cooperation can do better and how Swiss NGOs can position themselves as part of the solution, and not the problem.

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Are there any stories and perspectives expressed by the interviewees that are particularly striking and still resonate in you?

Labila: Certainly, yes. One particularly striking position came from a respondent who believes that the global south should lead the struggle for decolonization. According to this respondent, letting the global south lead the decolonization movement is central to minimizing the reoccurrence of historical patterns where the global north conceptualized and controlled various narratives, which in the end entrenched power dynamics. The resonance of this perspective underscores the notion that for true decolonization to occur, it is imperative to shift the locus of influence and power to countries that have lived-experiences of neo-colonialism in all its manifestations.

While I find my personal beliefs aligned with this position to some extent, Audre Lorde's expression of '*destroying the master's house using the master's tools*' comes to mind. I can only imagine the global south's audacity and the amplification of such a shift considering the current privilege and influence of the global north. This mixed aspiration spotlights the challenges and opportunities for both the global south and global north in the struggle to overcome colonial legacies in international health cooperation.

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— *Labila Sumayah Musoke*

Thomas: O yes. There were such stories in almost each of the 18 semi-structured interviews we had with 21 representatives of the MMS Network. For me, the most striking element was the honesty of the willingness and engagement of everybody to overcome colonial patterns within their respective organizations and work, based on their biography and career path. I still remember a colleague saying, looking at her early work, "At that time, I really wanted to save Africa".

As we wrote in our conclusions, the people we interviewed have the power and potential to be agents of change within their organization, but also within the broader MMS Network where they can inspire others to open up themselves for a conversation on coloniality and change

and to jointly shape instruments for collective learning and reflection across a broader team of engaged institutions. At the end of the day, change will rely on people, but needs to be achieved by institutions.

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Have there been any challenges or blind spots which you were not able to address in this study?

Labila: I observed that some respondents had reservations to sharing certain information openly citing institutional sensitivity. This cautious approach might have obscured nuanced perspectives into certain aspects of decolonization. I recall one respondent expressed that Switzerland, having not colonized any state, has no business in the decolonial movement. This

reaction, while valid, underscores the tensions inherent in navigating decolonization in different contexts. In light of the above, there emerges an urgent need for further research, dialogue, and continued reflectivity within the decolonial movement.

Thomas: Well, we only spoke with the “converted”, if you want. After a questionnaire the secretariat of MMS sent out to all members, Labila and I were a bit overwhelmed by the number of people who expressed their interest to talk to us, and the 18 interviews we did were just about what we could manage within the terms and timeframe of our work. But we do not really know about the “silent” ones, those who did not react to the call.

This also means that the directions we collected from Network members still need to be validated and agreed upon by the broader membership of the MMS Network, and that the Network needs to find ways to broaden the team, and the conversation. This is part of what we concluded as recommendations to the Network.



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May I dare to say “black and white” team, with an old male Swiss and a young female Ugandan view on this topic – did this have any influence on your views and on your collaboration in this study?

Thomas: Well, not really. But let me see how Labila responds. I am used to working in mixed team, and I love all the colors rather than the black and white. I got inspired by Labila in many ways, and I loved her engagement in the study and appreciated the smooth teamwork.

Labila: Ha-ha... Carine, imagine this; a fusion of the Swiss Alps and the Uganda Rwenzori! The duo's diversity in perspective and background spiced up the research mandate. Thomas and I didn't just work together, the respectful collaboration created a safe space for executing our research mandate. It is amazing how our diversities seamlessly blended. I would not have asked for a better research partner than Thomas. To more collaborations (a toast to Thomas and the MMS family).

Do you have any expectations regarding the follow-up on your recommendations now that the results are published and shared at the MMS Symposium 2023?

Labila: The aspiration of MMS and its network members to dialogue the Swiss Development Cooperation considering its inherent or sometimes invisible power and influence over national NGOs, is particularly exciting. I am positive that our detailed report and its recommendations will spark honest bold conversations and actions within the SDC aimed at righting its historical oversights.

Lastly, my fingers are crossed for the proposed decolonization community of practice taking shape. I pledge to make significant contributions to the community, right from where I am.

Thomas: No. This is in the hands of Medicus Mundi Switzerland. But we are happy that the Board of MMS already has taken up one of our recommendations and decided to set up a community of practice in this field, together with Medicus Mundi International and hosted by the MMI Secretariat as part of our intensive cooperation. This is good news, and I very much look forward to engaging in this project to be launched in the coming months.

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Thank you so much for taking part in this interview!

Here you can find the report of the Analysis: “Swiss NGOs engaged in international health cooperation: How to respond to the call for decolonization?”



Labila Sumayah Musoke is a health and human right lawyer. She has had the good fortune to work in fields that interest her. Labila firmly believes in accountability, equity, and justice. She exudes confidence, and is not afraid to network to broaden both her personal and professional networks. She perceives everything in terms of its place in the system, its inclusion or exclusion, and how to ensure that the system works for everyone. This perception guides her to respectfully appreciate other people’s views, values and beliefs. [Email](#)



Thomas Schwarz is the former Director of Medicus Mundi Switzerland and, since 2008, has been working as Executive Secretary of Medicus Mundi International - Network Health for All. Thomas describes himself as an experienced and trusted civil society manager, networker, facilitator and advocate in the fields of global health governance, international health cooperation, universal and equitable access to health care, and the social, political and economic determinants of health and health policies. He likes to explore, initiate, and facilitate new, and often financially hopeless, civil society initiatives. [Email](#)



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](#)

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