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

A Donor Perspective

Is Cooperation at Eye Level Possible?

By Dr. Cheikh Mbacke Gueye

If money is power, then those providing it, i.e., donors are de facto influential stakeholders. This power, however, can serve as a catalyst to level out power dynamics that pervade the Development and Cooperation Sector.



MMS Symposium 2023. Photo: Christoph Engeli / © Network Medicus Mundi Switzerland

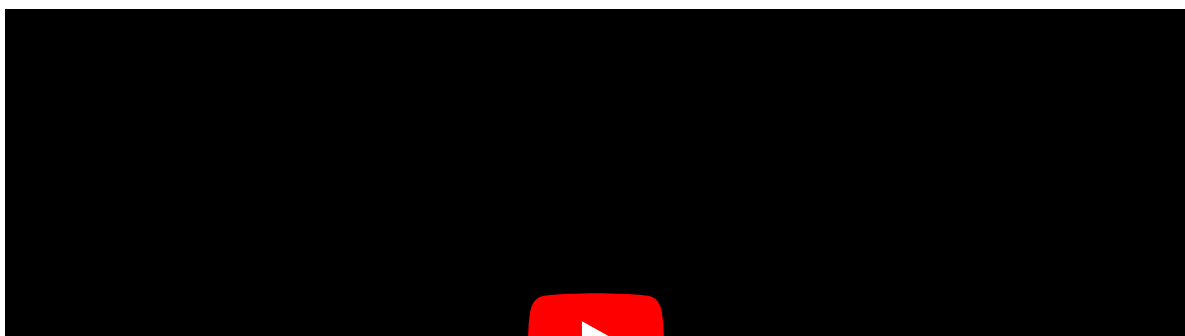
Text to introduce the video

I argue that cooperation at eye level is possible, despite the existing power imbalances. I offer here three pathways that donors could explore to positively contribute to a balanced cooperation:

- Donors need to be genuinely interested in the projects. Thus, they would critically and constructively engage with them. While assessing projects, donors should put an important focus on the following questions: Whose needs are being tackled by the project? Have the relevant stakeholders – particularly the local communities – been actively involved in the conception of the project? Is there an exit strategy? The answers to these related questions would provide valuable information about central issues such as ownership, participation, self-determination and sustainability.
- If human and financial resources are in place and provided its deed allows it, a donor organisation should contemplate the idea of funding not only projects, but also local institutions/organisations – where they need support. Yet, the path to institutional support would require divorcing from the widespread prejudice which places a “suspicion of incompetence” on local organisations in the Global South. Furthermore, there should be a readiness to bear the costs of such strategic decision: covering overheads and taking some risks – relevant mostly for private foundations that enjoy generally a bigger risk-appetite and more flexibility.
- The demand of cooperation on equal footing places a burden on donors as organisations. To respond to it, donors must embrace a culture conducive to change. This would require: A staff that is culturally sensitive/competent and able to display a systems and critical thinking; A culture of openness and introspection within the organisation: being able to speak transparently about failure/mistakes and encouraging partners to also report on things that did not work in a project. Finally, as an organisation, donors should revisit the language they use in order to break down inherited stereotypes and promote equitable storytelling and narratives.

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Speech by Cheikh Mbacke Gueye at the MMS Symposium 2023.

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Conclusion

Funding organisations can play a pivotal role in decolonizing aid by using their power to create a space of trust and mutual respect where partners could engage at eye-level.



MMS Symposium 2023. Photo: Christoph Engeli / © Network Medicus Mundi Switzerland

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