



MMS Bulletin # 168

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

Experience with decolonity in terre des hommes schweiz
Decolonisation: From Rhetoric to Action

By Tayson Mudarikiri and Hafid Derbal

From promoting gender equality to ensuring the participation of marginalised groups, the development sector has always been known to acknowledge and confront injustices that permeate the sector. Although many successes have been registered in this regard, recent calls to challenge the ‘deeply rooted systems of dominance and power of international, mostly Western organizations and institutions’ has brought to the fore an injustice that remains glaring - a development cooperation approach with structural power inequalities predicated upon the superiority of Global North actors over their counterparts in the South.



Although there is growing consensus that contemporary development cooperation models are relics of an ugly global history of colonialism, the jury is still out on what works in decolonising international development work. In this article, we share our journey and experience with decoloniality in terre des hommes schweiz.

terre des hommes schweiz is a middle-sized youth-serving international NGO headquartered in Switzerland. As an organisation, through funding and capacity strengthening, we support local organisations in nine countries in Africa and Latin America to implement projects that tackle violence and promote good health and sustainable livelihoods.

Over the years, in this work, we have learnt several critical lessons for decolonising our work. We do not purport that these lessons learnt are prescriptive since each organisation is unique.

Here is what we have learnt:

Start by acknowledging unequal power structures and develop a roadmap

In our experience, the beginning of the decolonisation journey is in acknowledging that, as a donor organisation with an international headquarters in Switzerland, we are in a position of privilege compared to our counterparts in the countries where we implement in Africa and Latin America.

As a result, we needed to develop an internal course of action that guides our journey to decolonisation.

In 2021, we crafted our Organisational Strategy 2030 institutional strategy with a deliberate intention to shift power from our head office in Switzerland as well as to enhance co-creation and collaboration with local actors in the Global South.

Although we have always been conscious of power dynamics inherent in our work, especially between us and the local actors in the countries we work in, the Organisational Strategy 2030 was a monumental milestone in acknowledging that we needed structured action to continue our transformation as an organisation.



The “Knowledge Hub” is a community of practice around SRHR in collaboration between terre des hommes schweiz and lamaneh schweiz partners in Southern and West Africa. Photo: © tdhs

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Trust locals

Over the years, terre des hommes schweiz’s strength in attempts to shift power have manifested in the setting up of local offices. We have made efforts to support our local partners and projects through local offices staffed by individuals who are familiar with local cultures and contexts. As a result, our organisations has over 25 employees in 7 countries across Africa and Latin America.

Along our journey, we have also learnt that having local staff is mere localisation of a foreign agenda unless we de-concentrate power from the head office and shift power to the local staff. Consequently, as part of our Organisational Strategy 2030, we have expanded the decision-

making powers of our national offices to allow them to respond effectively and expeditiously to their changing needs and realities. Not everything needs to be decided at the headquarters.

As we continue to seek ways of empowering our local staff, we have recently established and, currently piloting, a joint lead arrangement through a co-Programme Coordinator position that ensures that key decisions on our country strategies and programmes are shared between the head office and local staff in the South.

However, it is important to ensure that through setting up local offices, international NGOs from the Global North, do not take responsibilities that crowd out local NGOs. With their stronger systems and financial backing, it is easy for Western NGOs to think that they can go alone in the communities and overlook partnerships with local organisations. In this regard, another cardinal colonial sin is to unfairly compete with local organisations for funding.

For terre des hommes schweiz, we recognise that local partners have better knowledge of the context, relevant capacity as well as proximity to the target groups and all we do is to complement that with long-term financial support and demand-driven capacity strengthening.

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Systems of power are complex

Power manifests in different forms and at different levels in development work. Decolonisation is not just about dismantling systems of power through redistributing power between head offices and local offices or merely from international donor organisations to local partners.

Through our journey, we have learnt that empowering the often marginalised ‘beneficiaries’ of our work is a critical piece of the puzzle because of the tendency by elite local representatives to monopolise spaces, falsely claiming to be the ‘voices of the voiceless’. As a result, efforts to genuinely shift power must seek to address not only the relationship between the North and the South but also other complex inequalities by age or sex for example.

In terre des hommes schweiz, we are harnessing the power of the youth as our primary target groups to inform our strategies and daily work. To this end, we have set up an international youth network that brings together youth from across our countries and communities to engage regularly and influence our programming. Through a process called 'Youth Speaks' our upcoming programme strategy (2024-2028) is founded on grassroots consultations with the youth in many of our programme countries.

In the process, we feel confident that we are giving up power to decide and enhancing the impact of our interventions, collectively with our partners and communities.

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Manuels and approaches for youths should be youth-friendly. This is why tdhs supports partners in reviewing their methods by involving their youths. Photo: © tdhs

The journey continues

Decolonisation is a continuous transformation process. Learning is a continuous process. Hence, we recognise that there is still a lot to do, and many questions still need to be answered and new questions might come up. Is a headquarters in Basel still appropriate today or shouldn't such structures be better decentralized? What internal know-how can already be positioned in the countries today? How can you ensure that the voices of young people, local

partners and employees are given the weight they deserve when making strategic and programmatic decisions? Basically, when is what we are doing enough or more can still be done?

There are no easy answers to any of these questions. But it's important that you don't be afraid to ask them and answer them together. Always being aware that this is a process.

Our Organisational Strategy 2030 is a process that will ask many key and critical questions about how we want terre des hommes schweiz and the development sector to operate in the future. And we are committed to ask relevant questions around shifting power and decolonizing our work.

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A call to action

Do we share this story because we believe that we have succeeded in decolonisation? By no means! We share this story because we are convinced that although we are not where we want to be, we are definitely not where we were yesterday.

We will keep taking incremental steps and if you are an organisation similar to us and have not yet embarked on the decolonisation journey, why not come walk with us. We also want to learn from you on this journey.

Decolonisation is a sector-wide effort and it is our collective small steps that will change the face of development work. This is an urgent and imperative call for all changemakers.

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