



VOICE KEY HIGHLIGHTS

DECOLONISING HUMANITARIAN ACTION: SHIFTING POWER, VOICES, AND RESOURCES

BRUSSELS

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Introduction - Decolonising humanitarian action

This paper is a summary of the main ideas discussed during the event and does not necessarily reflect the speakers' or the VOICE network's opinions.

Colonialism is not confined to history. The imposition of a western centric model is still dominant on how the world is perceived, narrated.

Decolonising humanitarian assistance entails rethinking and reshaping the structures, practices, and narratives that underpin the global aid system to address the legacies of colonialism and power imbalances. The history of aid is deeply intertwined with colonialism, where many modern aid practices evolved from systems designed to serve imperial interests rather than address the needs of colonised peoples. Early humanitarian efforts often mirrored colonial hierarchies, with aid being delivered in ways that reinforced dependency and the superiority of Western powers. These colonial legacies persist today, as power and decision-making within the humanitarian sector remain concentrated in the Global North, often marginalising the voices and agency of those directly affected by crises.

Decolonising humanitarian assistance calls for a fundamental shift from paternalistic and externally driven interventions to approaches that centre local expertise, agency, and ownership. This process involves dismantling systems that perpetuate dependency, inequality, and exclusion, while promoting equitable partnerships, mutual accountability, and cultural relevance. Crucially, the ultimate objective of the humanitarian aid system is to render itself obsolete by building systems, capacities, and structures that empower communities to respond to their own needs independently. This requires not only a redistribution of resources and decision-making but also a commitment to addressing root causes of inequality and vulnerability, including systemic injustices and historical exploitation. By fostering a more inclusive, just, and sustainable model, decolonising humanitarian assistance seeks to transform the sector into one that genuinely supports resilience, dignity, and self-determination, paving the way for a future where external assistance is no longer a necessity.

This report delves into these controversial themes, drawing insights from the panel of experts who convened at the VOICE event 'Decolonising Humanitarian Action: Shifting Power, Voices, and Resources' in November 2024 in Brussels to open the debate on Decolonising Humanitarian Action. It aims to explore how to shift powers, voices, and resources, reflecting on the linkage between colonialism and the current framework for humanitarian while providing ideas for future steps to decolonise the sector.

Panel speakers:

- Tammam Aloudat, CEO, The New Humanitarian
- Alessandra De Guio, Senior Advisor for Humanitarian Capacity, Mercy Corps
- Michael Vincent Mercado, Voice and Insight lab Team Manager, Center for Disaster Preparedness
- Abimbola Ogundairo, Advocacy and Campaigns lead, Africa No Filter
- Marie-Rose Romain Murphy, Co-Founder and Board President, Haiti Community Foundation; President, RMC-Romain Murphy Consulting; Co-Chair, Pledge for Change Global Advisory Expert Panel

Moderator:

- Maria Groenewald, Director, VOICE

Closing remarks:

- Pauline Chetcuti, President, VOICE; Head of Humanitarian Campaigns and Advocacy, Oxfam International

Understanding the issue and challenges in shifting power dynamics

The understanding of the issue and challenged in the current framework humanitarian operators operate was at the core of the first round of discussion. Participants were invited to share their insights on the challenges in shifting the power dynamics.

Tammam Aloudat, CEO of the New Humanitarian, highlighted that the humanitarian system is deeply rooted in colonial power dynamics, perpetuating hierarchies and prioritising certain lives over others. This "Humanitarian Industrial Complex" often prioritises its own interests and maintaining existing power structures rather than truly serving affected communities. The concept of "neutrality" in humanitarian work is frequently a façade, masking political choices that maintain the status quo. Some solutions presented today are veneers applied to a defective system (e.g Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, localisation). Furthermore, dominant narratives in humanitarianism are often Eurocentric, failing to acknowledge and value diverse perspectives and local knowledge, hindering genuine community-led solutions.

The element of narratives was addressed by Abimbola Ogundairo, Advocacy and Campaigns lead at Africa No Filter. Dominant narratives in humanitarianism often perpetuate harmful stereotypes, portraying affected communities as passive victims and limiting their agency. Narratives impact on three levels: on community-level/personal level, it impacts their representation of themselves and are limiting the communities and the 54 countries to one single continent where it is known several contexts operate. On the continental level, we see an impact on the investments, narratives costs money, according to Africa No Filter, narratives are costing up to \$4.2 billion annually in interest payments. These narratives have significant consequences, including limiting funding, shaping international perceptions, and impacting the self-perception of affected communities. The "saviour complex," where international actors present themselves as saviours, reinforces dependency and undermines local leadership, hindering genuine community-led solutions.



Understanding the issue and challenges in shifting power dynamics

Marie-Rose Romain Murphy, Co-Founder and Board President of the Haiti Community Foundation, and Michael Vincent Mercado, Voice and Insight lab Team Manager at Center for Disaster Preparedness, spoke on how the humanitarian system is often dominated by external actors, marginalising the voices and needs of affected communities. Romain Murphy addressed this issue in the context of the Haiti earthquake in 2010. Decisions regarding aid and development were frequently made by external actors, with limited input from local communities. This lack of local ownership, coupled with existing power structures and aid modalities, often perpetuated existing inequalities and hindered genuine development or nation building. She highlighted it was not just about confronting external forces; internalized oppression within communities must also be addressed in order to dismantle the ingrained belief of inferiority and powerlessness within communities.

Following her intervention, Mercado highlighted the importance of addressing the root causes of vulnerability, particularly poverty. While humanitarian assistance is crucial during disasters, the foundation believes that long-term development solutions should focus on empowering local communities. This is achieved through community-led initiatives funded by solidarity funds, which allow local organizations to address their unique challenges without imposing external models. The foundation also critiques the Eurocentric approaches often imposed by INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organisations), emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of indigenous cultures and community dynamics. Trust is a key issue, as local communities often feel that INGOs impose reporting structures that prioritise external goals over real community needs. The foundation advocates for more localised, humanised partnerships where communities have a greater say in how development and disaster response efforts are implemented. By focusing on community participation and leadership, the foundation believes it is possible to build more sustainable and equitable solutions to poverty and vulnerability.



Understanding the issue and challenges in shifting power dynamics

Alessandra De Guio, Senior Advisor for Humanitarian Capacity at Mercy Corps, discussed the evolution of her organisation's approach to shifting power towards local communities, emphasizing the importance of centring community perspectives through equitable, long-term partnerships built on trust and respect. This involves internal cultural shifts fostering humility and inclusivity, operationalizing principles of equity, humility, complementarity, and accountability across all organizational processes, including recruitment, performance assessments, and learning. De Guio stressed that achieving a true power shift requires sustained effort, patience, a willingness to embrace new ways of working, and a fundamental rethinking of how organisations operate.

This part of the discussion was concluded by spontaneous intervention from Diletta Libenzi, Plan International junior ECHO partnership officer. She emphasised the importance of decolonising humanitarian assistance and acknowledges the privilege and influence that INGOs hold in this debate. Rather than offering a singular solution, Plan views this as a continuous journey of learning, collaboration, and sharing with local and national partners. The organisation prioritises equitable partnerships through its "Better Partnership Principle" regularly seeking feedback from local partners to improve practices. She also highlighted the need to rethink language within the sector, criticising terms like "beneficiaries" that foster dependency and create a "saviour" mentality. Plan is committed to addressing decolonisation as a structural issue, ensuring that children and youth advocates are central to these discussions and empowered to take part. Libenzi concluded by urging her peers to reflect on their position within the sector, asking how INGOs can create space for local actors and step back to allow others to lead in the process of change.



Future directions and next steps in decolonising humanitarian assistance

The second round of questions focused on exploring the future of humanitarian assistance. Attention was drawn to what concrete steps could be taken to decolonise practices and the sector.

Tammam Aloudat (The New Humanitarian) reflected on the importance of addressing systemic injustices with urgency and honesty. He criticised the expectation placed to discuss politely profound issues such as genocide, the rise of fascism, and the failures of Western liberalism. He called for the productive use of anger as a catalyst for change and boldly criticised the root causes of these injustices, including capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and historical inequities. True decolonisation needed to move beyond isolated efforts and the humanitarian bubble, requiring a global approach to challenging systemic power structures, he explained. He advocated for praxis—a collaborative, iterative process of learning and doing together—that rejected the exclusionary language of expertise and centred the voices of those most affected. He also emphasised the importance of solidarity across movements for social justice, warning against siloed efforts that could be easily undermined in the face of rising fascism and oppression. Aloudat argued that decolonisation had to happen through grassroots action and mutual learning, not imposed by those in power. He criticised the corporate models that perpetuate inequality and urged for a systemic and political approach that actively opposed injustice and oppression. This requires moving beyond Eurocentric models and embracing diverse perspectives, including those of affected communities. Furthermore, acknowledging that "neutrality" is a political choice necessitates a willingness to take a stand on issues of justice and equity. Finally, prioritising local leadership by empowering local organizations and communities to lead their own recovery and development efforts is essential for achieving true decolonisation in humanitarian action.

Marie-Rose Romain Murphy (Haiti Community Foundation) reflected on efforts to become increasingly strategic in addressing systemic issues. She emphasised the need to reinvent systems rather than merely improving outdated ones. Acknowledging the complexity of current crises, she pointed out that Western societies had often failed due to rigid structural silos, creating anxiety and stagnation. She highlighted her involvement in Pledge for Change, an initiative focused on building fairer ecosystems through principles like solidarity, equity, and self-definition.



Future directions and next steps in decolonising humanitarian assistance

Romain Murphy discussed her experiences working with global leaders to implement meaningful changes. She critiqued the inconsistency in applying equitable practices, often relying on personal goodwill rather than institutional accountability. She noted that despite progress, many organisations failed to integrate evaluations into their learning, leading to repeated mistakes. Through Pledge for Change, she sought to address these issues by fostering transparency, accountability, and collaborative problem-solving, while pushing for honest dialogue and practical action.

Romain Murphy emphasised the need to move beyond short-term projects and embracing long-term, sustainable approaches that support local development and nation-building is crucial. She expressed hope that Pledge for Change would serve as a forum for genuine, solutions-focused conversations and a platform for dismantling systemic barriers in aid and development practices. She ended her intervention by acknowledging and addressing the systemic issues that contribute to vulnerability and inequality, such as weak governance and lack of access to resources, is essential for achieving lasting and equitable change.

In the Philippines, the Center for Disaster Preparedness adopted an innovative approach to promote inclusive funding and community empowerment, acknowledging the country's strong oral traditions and diverse local contexts, explained Michael Vincent Mercado. By enabling organisations to submit proposals via video or in local languages, the initiative addressed barriers posed by limited access to formal education. Trust-building replaced transactional relationships, allowing many organisations to receive significant funding for the first time. This support facilitated accreditation, granting access to government funding, banking services, and other resources, thereby enhancing their legitimacy and capacity. A community solidarity fund of \$390,000 supported 32 organisations, which collectively mobilised an additional \$530,000. The flexible use of funds empowered communities to address their specific needs. Mercado emphasised the importance of preserving the spirit of volunteerism, countering the negative effects of external cash-for-work schemes that had eroded community solidarity. The initiative fostered collaboration and knowledge-sharing across sectors such as women, farmers, indigenous peoples, and LGBTQ+ groups, addressing the unique needs of coastal, mountainous, and island communities. Mercado stressed that learning was central to lasting change, with shared practices and experiences strengthening community-led solutions over time.



Future directions and next steps in decolonising humanitarian assistance

Alessandra De Guio discussed Mercy Corps' partnership approach, emphasising complementarity and valuing the unique strengths of each local partner. The aim is to structure shared work in a way that empowers each party and allows them to contribute meaningfully. Traditionally, INGOs have prioritised local organisations with management experiences, prior INGO collaboration, financial management expertise, and formal compliance procedures. However, De Guio argued that other capacities are equally crucial for project success, particularly those related to community engagement and accountability, acknowledging the importance of power dynamics. De Guio provided a concrete example from a FCDO-funded project in Kenya focused on reducing vulnerability to recruitment into violent groups. The project needed to work with small community groups who had direct access to the targeted individuals in hard-to-reach areas. These groups, despite having less experience in programmatic reporting, were ideal partners since the risk of working with more traditional NGOs who lacked this community access was deemed greater. Consequently, the project partnered with nine similar organisations and achieved significant success. This experience led to a shift in approach. De Guio explained their team is now mapping all local partners for future collaborations, focusing on their ability to engage with and be accountable to local communities, and whether they are representative of community interests. This mapping process is expected to broaden the types of partners, including community groups, they work with, ultimately shaping their work through the contributions and insights of these partners.

Finally, Abimbola Ogundairo emphasised the importance of shifting narratives to reflect a more empowering and collaborative approach to humanitarian assistance. She noted that the answers to pressing questions about consultancy and practices were already present in the room, citing prior discussions about collaboration, anger, and disruption as vital tools for change. Ogundairo highlighted the need to disrupt outdated narratives by replacing them with progressive ones, illustrating her point with an example of a musician who resisted misrepresentative charity narratives and rallied collective action for a petition. She stressed that narratives should showcase local agency and progress, rather than dependency or external intervention. Ogundairo urged the audience to be intentional in their storytelling, ensuring that it reflects their values—whether it be facilitating development rather than providing it, or recognising progress as stemming from local capacity rather than external aid. Ultimately, she tied the redistribution of power, voices, and resources to the transformation of narratives, advocating for stories that empower and truly represent those they aim to serve.



Key recommendations

1. Decentralise decision-making with community-led initiatives. By placing decision-making power in the hands of affected communities and local responders, moving away from top-down approaches.
2. Amplify local voices and deconstruct stereotypes. Narratives should be centered around affected communities, allowing them to tell their own stories and challenge dominant narratives and stereotypes of affected communities, putting emphasis on their resilience and agency.
3. Prioritise ethical storytelling. Moving away from sensationalised and often exploitative portrayals of suffering. Promoting respectful representation to ensure narratives are accurate.
4. Address colonial legacies by acknowledging the history and deconstruct power dynamics.
5. Reform funding structures to increase funding to local actors. One possible solution would be to have direct funding mechanisms, with no intermediaries. Adapting the proposal modalities to the local organisations.
6. Challenge the principle of "neutrality". Recognising the political nature of humanitarian action, neutrality in itself is a political choice.
7. Foster genuine Partnership with local communities and actors. Engage with local actors with greater access and accountability to communities.

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