

# Global perspectives on decolonising capacity strengthening

Compiled by Willemijn de Bruin and Rick James, October 2020

A colonial mind-set pervades so much of the aid system: one that values the ideas, skills, resources and actions of people in the North more than the ideas, skills, resources and actions of people in the South. Capacity building is not immune. Complex and unequal power dynamics continue to permeate the language and practice of capacity strengthening as many funders like Packard Foundation are well-aware [1]. The impact of COVID-19 on the aid system and development practice over the past six months, alongside the upsurge of the Black Lives Matter movement, which has surfaced issues of structural racism and inequality across all institutions and levels of society, provide an opportunity to 'build back better' and to take seriously the critical challenge of decolonising capacity strengthening.

How do we rise to this challenge? First we need to know:

- What does decolonising capacity strengthening really mean?
- How does a colonial mind-set affect capacity strengthening?

Then we need to look at the practical implications:

- What can capacity strengthening providers do personally to decolonise their own practice?
- What could donors do differently to decolonise capacity strengthening funding mechanisms and opportunities?

This paper synthesises global perspectives on these questions from capacity strengthening practitioners based in India, Ethiopia, Mexico, Canada, Indonesia, and the UK, and aims to present a range of views from people who experience and engage with the aid sector from different angles and in different ways [2].

[1] This paper was produced with funding from the David & Lucile Packard Foundation. This paper is the product of a conversation amongst capacity strengthening providers in September 2020.

[2] The presented questions and answers are excerpts of the discussion, they are highlighting some of the key points of the discussion but not all.

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## What does decolonising capacity strengthening mean to your work?



**Kaustuv**  
India

Colonisation exists because of some kind of imposed international development framework, and capacity building efforts are defined around those principles. But if you liberalise these frameworks, the capacity strengthening sector will look very different. That is what I would call decolonising capacity strengthening. We need to come up with a set of principles that would allow Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to define their own capacity needs and, based on their experience, come with suggestions of how they want to build those capacities. That is the starting point, and then we can jointly transform and define the framework from there. Capacity strengthening frameworks cannot be imposed, yet I can give many examples from the Indian and Asian context where donors and foundations impose frameworks upon the civil society sector. So, in short, the practice cannot change without changing the international development institutions themselves. It is a hard job but it needs to be done at some point in time!



**Hiwot**  
Ethiopia

Many of the challenges are institutionalized, it is in our systems. Much of this is related to funding, so I think it is very important to verify how funds are raised, dispersed and reported. This might give us some kind of idea of how the culture of inequality is embedded in our work. We really need to ask ourselves the questions of how contracts are managed, what protection and privilege are there, and who gets it? What behaviour is rewarded and what is penalised? What is permissible and what is not, and for who? Asking these questions will surface some of the inequality entrenched in the system and will help us understand how we can start dismantling it.



**Emily**  
Canada

Decolonising capacity strengthening is valuing different ways of knowing and different forms of knowledge, and bringing that into processes. It is also about giving value to relationships when working with organisations and people, and not only looking at technical solutions but really looking at relational issues and solutions, and surfacing those. So, when possible, and if there is openness to it, decolonising capacity strengthening is about discussing values and about investing time in co-creation processes and sharing experiences. In our work as capacity strengthening experts, we need to clarify at the beginning: what are we trying to do together? What is our shared vision? And what are our shared values?



**Mariana**  
Mexico

The first thought that comes into my mind when I think about decolonising capacity strengthening is that we have to get away from the assumption that somebody knows something, and somebody doesn't know something; the concept of teaching, which is unfortunately very embedded in the culture and the sector's work in Mexico. But at SACBÉ, when working with rural communities in natural protected areas we really go out there with the attitude that everyone knows something; something different, but something useful for the process. Decolonising capacity strengthening is a real challenge but I think that my baseline would be that everyone knows, everyone learns and everybody teaches.



**Lucy**  
UK

The questions mentioned by others are very powerful; and when it comes to decolonising capacity strengthening, we really need to ask ourselves: whose voice is shared? Whose perspectives are listened to, and acted upon? And who is the actual client when it comes to the capacity strengthening work? It is also helpful to pay attention to where the focus of any support lies. The tendency in international development and humanitarian work, is to look for the gaps and what is not working and search for weaknesses. But every organisation has strengths too, and there is real power in thinking about the assets that an organisation has, and how to build on these to generate momentum for change. Participatory approaches and action research can also be ways to shift more traditional power dynamics, when it comes to an organisational change process and to harness the knowledge and perspectives of the wider organisation, and communities.

## How does a colonial mind-set affect capacity strengthening?



**Hiwot**  
Ethiopia

International funds are very often tied up with some sort of agenda. But these agendas might not be the priority of these communities, or it might even conflict with their values. So, the mentality 'if you are paying the bills, you are setting the rules' is undermining decision making, talent, and innovation at the local level.



**Ibnu**  
Indonesia

There is considerable inequality between local, national and international organisations when it comes to resources. I usually find in my engagement in projects co-implemented by international, national and local organisations, that the majority of the funds are with the international organisation, and only a small minority is distributed to, for example, a dozen of their partners. This increases the inequality instead of decolonising the space.



**Mariana**  
Mexico

It is very hard to erase differences. Even here in this small zoom conference we are confronted with this challenge. We have bigger more international focused organisations, such as INTRAC, versus small local organisations like us at SACBÉ in Mexico. These differences exist in our daily work as well, when we are working with people who are vulnerable and hungry and experience differences in a more radical form than us.



**Kaustuv**  
India

What is also happening in our context, let's call it "corporatisation of capacity building", is another newer form of colonisation. Corporate social responsibility and social enterprise programmes are blindly copying corporate and business practices. So now we have a group of hybrid actors, who are trying to find solutions in the social sector based on their experience in the business sector. They are extrapolating their experience and answers to issues to a more complex context. I am not saying their sector is not complex, but the nature of the problems and the way you measure effectiveness of solutions in the social sector is very different. I consider this ignorance - rejecting over 40 years of civil society and social sector experience and trying to impose solutions in the name of innovation.

## What can capacity strengthening providers do personally to decolonise their own practice?



**Ibnu**  
Indonesia

For me, decolonising capacity strengthening is about how you can facilitate opportunities for the marginalized people to voice their concerns. Personally, it is also about asking myself: how does my behaviour contribute to the hierarchy in the sector and the structural injustice that I experience in communities that I work with here in Indonesia?



**Emily**  
Canada

At a personal level, a big part of it is about being aware of my own positionality and power as a practitioner in capacity strengthening. So being aware of this, taking time to reflect on it, but also actively bringing it out in order to ensure that people that I work with also get the opportunity to reflect on their positions. For me this is the start of the discussion, which is related to the whole idea of "inner work" and working from the inside-out as a practitioner.



**Hiwot**  
Ethiopia

I really echo and agree with this inside-out approach, where we as capacity strengthening experts start with ourselves and are aware of our own power and positions. We need to be willing to ask the bold questions, sometimes to others but certainly also to ourselves, and this requires a very conscious effort from all who are involved in this sector.



**Lucy**  
UK

I would like to share a quote that helped me the most in terms of reflecting on this issue recently. It is from Nikki Silvestri: "Look at the places you withhold the truth. That's where you contribute to our world staying as it is. That's the nonlinear nature of how culture shapes socio-economics. If you're tolerating that person you need to fire; if you're allowing that toxic relationship dynamic to go unchecked; if you're procrastinating on a necessary hard decision. Complicity in one area of life, in the micro, echoes complicity in the macro. Racism exists because our collective micro complicities snowball into societal complicities". For me, this was just helpful because it made it very personal; where do I not speak up where I should? And where do I not challenge when I actually feel something is wrong? It also relates to that inside out approach that others have described.

"Look at the places you withhold the truth. That's where you contribute to our world staying as it is."

## What could donors, like the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, do differently to decolonise capacity strengthening funding mechanisms and opportunities?



**Kaustuv**  
India

Let local civil society define what capacity is there already, and what capacity development is required. Don't give them 'the solution'. You really need to open up possibilities to interact with civil society groups, entering a conversation. It is not about grassroots teaching or giving a framework but making progress together through dialogue. Facilitate them without imposing. Don't push and stay patient; these processes take considerable time.



**Emily**  
Canada

I think donors should also be 'walking the talk', investing in reflection and dialogue about their own organizational culture – and consciously putting issues of power and inequality on the table as part of this. It is also about donors supporting transformative change when it comes to their capacity building support: this could involve exploring what supporting transformative change means for them as an organisation, as well as decoupling capacity building support from project funding, and supporting capacity building initiatives and change at multiple levels simultaneously. With that I mean internal or individual change; interpersonal relations; cross-institutional and network changes; and lastly systemic transformation. Finally, I think donors should commit to processes of co-creation and give voice to their partners by ensuring that there are mechanisms in place for grant recipients to provide ongoing feedback.



**Ibnu**  
Indonesia

It would be good if donors, in addition to other agreed capacity themes, ask each partner organisation what essential (internal) capacity they think they need to strengthen their organisation. But donors are unfortunately usually reluctant to support this. Also, funders could develop a checklist on decolonising capacity strengthening together with their partner organisations and invite all partners to jointly assess their relationship with them.

### Closing comments

Decolonising capacity strengthening is no simple task. Dysfunctional power dynamics still infuse our grant making and capacity strengthening. Colonial attitudes remain stubbornly embedded into our mindsets. But there is much we can do. We can ensure CSOs and local communities are actively involved in designing any interventions. We can encourage more open and honest dialogue between donors and civil society groups. We can revisit the purpose, practice and language of capacity strengthening and truly 'build back better'. Now, when everything is in a state of flux, is the time to put fine words into action.