

Decolonising consultancy

Online, 21 September 2023

Introduction

Decolonisation has been one of the watchwords for civil society in recent years – but how does this apply to the commissioning and practice of consultancy? What needs to change, and how can this happen? And what roles do different actors in the system need to play?

To discuss these questions, INTRAC brought together five experienced practitioners on 21 September 2023. This was the fourth in INTRAC's series of online events which began in 2022. Our online event on decolonising consultancy attracted over 220 participants from around the world. They listened to short talks from our speakers, submitted questions for a Q&A, and joined breakout groups to discuss the issues themselves. This event summary captures some key points from these activities, and contains links to the full event recording and a playlist of highlight videos.

Event agenda

- Welcome and opening remarks from Suzanne Hammad, event chair and member of INTRAC's board of trustees
- Four brief talks from:
 - Nancy Kankam Kusi (WACSI)
 - Rob Lloyd (Itad)
 - Elena Gillis (Adeso)
 - Alaa Shaheen (Beit Al Karma)
 - Sam Varley (Comic Relief)
- Q&A session with questions from attendees for the panel
- Breakout for discussion in groups
- Summary and closing remarks from INTRAC Principal Consultant, Rick James

Speakers and hosts



Nancy Kankam Kusi
(WACSI)



Rob Lloyd (Itad)



Elena Gillis (Adeso)



Alaa Shaheen
(Beit Al Karma)



Sam Varley
(Comic Relief)



Suzanne Hammad
(INTRAC)
Chair



Rick James (INTRAC)
Closing thoughts



[Click to watch the full event recording](#)

[Click for a playlist of highlight videos](#)

Welcome and opening remarks

Event chair Suzanne Hammad welcomed everyone to the session, and set it within the context of INTRAC's event series, which began in 2022. She explained that all of the events are run in the spirit of the shift the power movement, and INTRAC's commitment to progressive practice, as well as to INTRAC's own process of change. She also made some introductory remarks about the topic and outlined the webinar's goals:

- To stimulate discussion and reflection on what decolonising consultancy means in practice
- To demystify what decolonising consultancy means, what needs to change, and how that can happen



Some institutions are themselves are still trapped in this mindset of "we need someone objective from outside" or that expertise is better from the North. This is slowly changing and I've seen it with some of the donor communities in Jordan and Palestine in the MENA region. But where are we now?

Short talk 1 of 5: the decolonising advisory platform

I will speak from the perspective of what we are doing at the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) and also the work of the RINGO project. What we are actually looking at and the conversation that we are speaking to is: how do we dismantle where knowledge, capacity building, and resources sit in the development space?

There is a colonial and historical narrative that knowledge largely sits in the North - that capacity building is mostly driven by the North. We are looking at creating the spaces and opportunity to disrupt this narrative. What we want and expect from our global partners is for them to join in in that manner. So practically, what we are doing is that we've created the space and opportunity to change this - by creating the decolonizing advisory community.

It is an online space where we are seeking to bring together advisors, consultants, experts, and individual civil society activists who are in the global South. It will be a hub for knowledge capacity, and resources on how to decolonize, and all related issues with regards to decolonisation and development change. What we'll be offering is the ability to meet global South experts who are also committed to dismantling that narrative about where power and knowledge sit. They are experienced, they have the local context, they have the knowledge and the portfolio to support global North organisations, institutional funders and INGOs, who are genuinely interested in decolonizing their practices, their policies, and their ways of working,

Suzanne Hammad
(INTRAC)

Chair



Suzanne is a sociologist, consultant, and a member of INTRAC's Board of Trustees since 2021. She is a British-Palestinian and has lived and worked in Jordan, Jerusalem, Egypt, the UK, and is currently based in Qatar. Prior to relocating to Qatar, Suzanne was one of INTRAC's Principal Consultants. She holds a PhD in Sociology from Queens University, Belfast and an MA in Social Policy and Administration from the University of Nottingham.

Nancy Kankam Kusi

WACSI



Nancy is a development practitioner and social science researcher with experience in international development, development research and knowledge management. Nancy is the Programme Officer for Knowledge Management at the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI).



It's not only going to be a space to facilitate capacity building and knowledge sharing, and support to global organisations and INGOs. It will also be a core space for global South advisors to connect and engage as a community.

Short talk 2 of 5: what decolonising consultancy means to Itad

Itad is a global consulting consulting company. We support clients to use evidence to make beter decisions and strengthen their impact. Really, the core of what we do is monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL). We're often delivering quite large, multi-country MEL assignments where we're gathering evidence, we're using this to support learning and informing decision making lots of different levels. In doing this, we build consortia and teams from across the globe, with consultants and partners both from the global North and from the global South.

For me, the key shift that decolonizing consultancy requires is that the design and the delivery of consulting assignments is done in a way that prioritises much more the knowledge, the experience, and the skills of consultants embedded in a particular context. It means moving towards a model where those from a region or a country lead the work. There's three shifts that needs to be made. One is working equitably. The second is learning to play a different role. The third is really feeling more comfortable about feeling uncomfortable. Because I think a big part of moving this agenda forward is feeling okay with not having all of the answers at this point.

Short talk 3 of 5: the Adeso approach to decolonising consultancy

I am representing the organisation Adeso. It is an African organisation with its roots in Somalia, founded by Fatima Jibrell, and now run by her daughter Degan Ali. It's an organisation that has pioneered a lot of solutions to drive power and resources to communities in which aid is taking place.

Adeso began to do consultancy around a year ago. When we got started, one of our first conversations was with a peer and a friend of Degan's. She asked us "how will you do consulting differently?". We've been grappling with that ever since. At this point, our answer is three ways. Firstly, our consulting generates income for Adeso as a social enterprise to contribute to a future of independence from grant funding as an organisation. The second is that we work with institutions implementing or funding programmes in communities, to guide them in decolonizing their organisations. Third, we centre our services and how we operate in values of decolonization.

We have been challenging the power dynamics, that and the traditional Western, consulting models and approaches. We find that some are really excited about it, and others are really struggling with it. To me, it just shows who will move this effort and decolonization forward and those who will remain behind.

Rob Lloyd
Itad



Rob Lloyd is managing partner of Itad - a global consulting company supporting clients in international development to use evidence to make better decisions and strengthen their impact. He has worked in consulting for over 15 years, and has supported a wide range of governments, foundations and not for profits to engage with and use evidence in their decision making.



Sharing and shifting power is difficult. It's messy, it takes time. And it very much requires you to feel your way forward.

Elena Gillis
Adeso



Elena Gillis works with the organization Adeso, known for its global advocacy on and alternative solutions to decolonize aid. She manages one of Adeso's social enterprises focused on consulting and training for global north INGOs, donors, and individuals in practical ways to decolonize their organizational culture, programs, decision-making, and resourcing.



We enable flexibility from the start in our contracts because we know that decolonization is not a step by step process and it will consistently change as the client gets to know us and we get to know the client.

Short talk 4 of 5: a perspective from the MENA region

I am from the region from the Middle East and North Africa - based in Egypt and Palestinian originally. I'm heading a consulting firm called Beit Al Karma Consulting, and we do the same as any consulting firm. But still, we need a lot of help in terms of thought leadership and solutions to implement.

This doesn't mean that we don't still have to get experience from the West - but we need to adapt what we have learned to our local situations in terms of our political, cultural, and religious contexts. We need a collaborative relationship. It's not about taking power from someone, or giving power to someone else. It's more about collaboration, co-design, and co-owning, in terms of the way we work in this region. There is also the issue of accountability. We are accountable to our own people, we are accountable to the people we serve. We should have more stress on that, more so than our accountability to the funder who is paying.

To decolonise, we need really equitable relationships between funders and organisations in the South, which are based on genuine support that extends beyond the lifespan of particular projects.

Short talk 5 of 5: the role of Comic Relief in decolonising consultancy

Our understanding of decolonised consultancy is freeing consultancy from the cultural and social effects of colonisation and eliminating colonial influences or attitudes - meaning power symmetries, systems and terms based on Northern, White needs and priorities. We all agree on why we need to change, so I'll focus on the how.

We believe that we need some collective visioning and a shared understanding of the end goal of what decolonized consultancy looks like. This is because there's a big difference between making the system we have a bit better, versus deconstructing it and building a whole new system - which is linked to the conversations that WACSI and RINGO are contributing to.

Comic Relief is a donor and commissioner holding considerable power in this space. We need to acknowledge this and make real strides to model humility. If we want something written in English for us, for instance, we should provide resource for this. Consultants should focus on outputs that are useful to funded partners. We are changing perceptions of risk and compliance, transforming compliance into confidence, and being mindful of the language around it because there is power in our language. Overall, our approach is to make it personal and take practical action - those systems won't change unless the people sustaining them are power aware.

Alaa Shaheen

Beit Al Karma



Alaa Shaheen is Country Director and Founder of Beit Al Karma Consulting. He has supported Consulting firms, NGOs and public agencies to achieve disciplined business development, proposal development, monitoring, evaluation and learning processes.



In my view, funders and INGOs need to work with organisations in the global South as partners - understanding their strengths and weaknesses, and supporting them with both.

Sam Varley

Comic Relief



Sam Varley has worked across the international aid sector (humanitarian, peacebuilding and development) for the past seven years in both MEL and fundraising capacities, and they recently joined Comic Relief as Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Manager within the Social Change and Impact team. Part of this role includes commissioning consultants mostly for Comic Relief's collective learning work but also programme evaluations.



What we can do as a visible and relatively high profile organisation is advocate for change, demonstrate what we're doing, share our successes and failures and learn from others.

Closing thoughts from Rick James

For me, one of the key questions in any consultancy process is: who is the client? We tend to think it's the commissioner, it's the one who pays us that is the client. But what if the community was the client? If we're doing a theory of change, it's good that it's not being done in the North. It's better that it's been done by the local partners, but actually, it should be done by the people who are meant to be served. We need to go beyond national partners and recognise that any intervention is going to be a negotiated process between different stakeholders. If we really want to get community voice in, we need to do that at the beginning, not just at the end.

If we're talking about national consultants experts, then actually, we've lost it right from the start. It's not about replicating that top down expertise that comes from outside and solves an organisation or a community's problems for them, it has to be the other way around. Elena talked about being brave and committed and honest. If we can take the personal challenge, and really take it personally to work on genuine humility, and genuine courage - I think we'll be getting there.

Rick James

INTRAC



Rick James is an organisational change specialist with more than 30 years' experience working with over 100 NGOs in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Europe. He joined INTRAC in 1992 and is a Principal Consultant. He has a PhD in NGO Management and is a Senior Teaching Fellow at Bayes Business School (formerly Cass), City, University of London.

At the end of the session, participants were asked to share three words that "best describe what progressive funding means to [them]". Their responses are captured in the visual below.



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