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Expectations vs. reality

It's not too late to change the discourse of aid

When I stepped foot into the INGO world for the first time a good ten years ago, I was somewhat naive. Filled with good intentions to help, I believed that I could make a meaningful difference to countries and people most in need. This journey took me to many different countries, short and long-term, working different positions from bottom, to top, to middle – only to find myself ten years later with the courage to quit.

Before I share my experience, I would like to stress that, despite the frustrations and criticisms I will raise in this article, it would be wrong to ignore the progress made in this field and dismiss the efforts of many who work tirelessly to create meaningful change. Indeed, as the dialogue on development aid and its shortcomings opens up, as issues on colonialisation, racism and inequalities are brought forward, and as INGOs are increasingly asking what they can do better a slight shift in old rooted power relations can be witnessed. Furthermore, as mentioned above this article is based on personal experiences and opinions and I am fully aware that it merely touches the surface of the vastly complex issues within the development and aid sector.

So, why did I leave the sector? I noticed that I was walking on a path built with a white-saviour mindset, grounded in unequal power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South, which, more often than not, was weighted with a history of colonisation. I realised

that working in the INGO world made me become a part of a predominant idea in this line of work – the idea of saving others. The idea that “expatriates” are needed to save the so-called “underdeveloped” countries and their people. This idea is so widespread that it is continuously used to justify political decisions around aid which support geopolitical

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interests, impose overly vast ideas and concepts (such as “green” or “gender”) and enforce global neoliberal agendas. Large sums of money are lost to the administrative system rather than going to the people directly. This is most visible when seeing the number of more privileged people that get sent to the Global South with

completely disproportionate benefit packages. More on this later.

During my last posting on an island in South-East Asia, the reality of this saviour complex hit me particularly hard. The island gained its independence after decades of colonial violence and is now a sovereign state suffering from unequal power distribution, which the aid sector seems to feed right into. As a result, the small island nation has INGOs at every corner, each one claiming to be beneficial, ensuring that their “expertise”, “vision” and “mission” is what the country needs. These promises often fall short the moment catastrophes hit the island and the organisations’ lack of preparation means that locals have to take matters into their own hands, making ends meet with what they have and what they can give.

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Meanwhile, INGOs are most often feverishly discussing national needs at coordination meetings and drafting long and tedious project proposals, all the while trying to outsmart competing INGOS and pleasing the political agenda of the foreign donors. In other words, when it comes down to it, it is not us with our “expertise” that are the driving factor in crisis but the local people. They are, unsurprisingly, the true experts of their country and its people. But all too often they are neither heard, nor considered, nor included.

When I took the time to reflect on my journey, there were many aspects of the development and humanitarian sector that frustrated me over the years. Two key words came up time and time again – equality (or the lack of) and sustainability. The term equality can be seen on all fronts of INGOs; “we are an equality-based organisation”, “we promote equal rights, equal opportunities”, “gender equality” and so on. However, in the true sense of the word, equality is rarely fully integrated into the organisational values because the whole foundation of INGOs is on unequal footing; politically biased donors, the perception that the Global

North knows better, the notion that we are worth more than locals doing the same job and that paying locals higher salaries would only distort the local job market, to name just a few.

The system is based on the core belief that I, coming from a western country with a university degree and a few years of work

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experience, will inherently have a higher ability and more knowledge on what and how something needs to be done compared to my local colleagues. And as such, I am rewarded (and/or incentivised depending who you ask) with a largely superior salary and benefits, which include additional paid holidays to another country for rest and rehabilitation purposes (bearing in mind I was based on a tropical island),

paid annual flights back to my country of origin, fully paid housing (with imposed requirements to live in secured, approved and thus expensive housing), an expensive international health insurance as well as a monthly hardship allowance (again, I was based on a tropical island). My colleagues by contrast were on a minimum wage, very basic local healthcare coverage, legal minimum paid holidays and if lucky a short training to ensure that the INGO fulfil their “capacity building” duties.

How can such stark contrasts exist within the INGO world? Is it because donors and foreign governments want to have their people on the ground to further perpetuate this north-south power divide? I am sure there are many reasons out there. But the truth is that the conventional development and aid sector remains deeply rooted in colonial and racist power relations – with the rich westerners swooping in to save the poor. The decolonisation of aid continues to remain out of reach and will require many more open and honest dialogues between all actors to truly understand what can be changed and what decolonisation of aid means in action and not just in words.

Which takes me to the second key word that INGOs love – sustainability. It implies that the projects implemented should be done in a sustainable manner, i.e. materials are locally sourced, the project makes sense in the context of the community/country and is thus accepted as such, the project can extend beyond donor funding, etc. This also suggests that INGOs should be implementing projects with the sole purpose of working their way out of work, in other words of building an environment for local self-sustainability.

Sadly however, this is very far from the truth. INGOs rarely have well-planned or well-executed exit strategies because, I believe, many of them do not intend to leave. It would imply less money for the headquarters, it would imply less political access for donors and governments, and less jobs for us, right? After all, according to us, the Global South cannot not need the Global North. So instead, INGOs continue to brand their projects as sustainable, including key words such as local governance, local capacity building, local ownership with limited understanding as to what these concepts actually mean. Capacity building for example could aim to improve organisational performance, but who is assessing whether they have improved? Who is defining the criteria? Who is building the capacity and with what incentive? And, finally, are capacities ever actually built? The vague way these concepts are used allows INGOs to create their own definitions and set their own objectives of “success”, knowing full well that strengthening institutions, transferring technology, building capacity or whichever term we decide to use cannot be achieved in a two, three or even four-year project and thus the cycle of dependency continues.

Furthermore, donors are rarely interested in longer term projects with ambitions of building local capabilities and strengthening local institutions as this is time-consuming, expensive and cannot be captured in a photo for their own advocacy purposes, such as the construction of a new school or hospital. I believe, however, that with the right advocacy towards donors and the right mindset of INGOs wanting to create an equal platform for

the provision of aid, projects that truly seek to build an environment of equal opportunities, promoting equal ability and equal chances can be implemented. It would dampen the bias around capacity building only being possible from north to south and, given a long-term commitment by donors, given the skills and given the resources, could be truly transformational. There is an increasing understanding that capacity building is more than just a workshop or training and that technical expertise is not simply a north to south transaction but a multifaceted process that must take indigenous and local knowledge into account. But there is so much more that can be done.

When considering sustainability, it is not just a question of cherishing local knowledge and ability but also ensuring that the projects we implement are realistic

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within the country's context. In my time abroad, I unfortunately still encountered projects where simple items such as rice were imported from donor countries for projects providing school lunches, even though given the right support and time it could have easily been cultivated on site. It is precisely these narrow-minded errors that keep strengthening dependency on aid. This may sound simple but, if we were to ask ourselves questions like “Does this make sense in the context of the country?”, “Are the resources available in the country?” and “If not, how can we adapt to make sure it fits into the country's profile without imposing our need for unrealistic quality and ideals?” we could avoid so many mistakes commonly made in the sector. If we stopped having to work under deadline pressure to produce results defined by donors, that would already be a big step towards change within the aid sector.

As I mentioned earlier, I do actually believe that things are changing. There is an increasing number of strong local organisations, the South-South support is growing and the Global North within the aid sector is made increasingly aware of their responsibility and accountability towards the Global South. With this article I wish to continue this ongoing dialogue, because I do believe that the aid sector can – and more importantly should – be changed for the better.

The last few years have just highlighted to me that too many INGOs have strayed from their original purpose and vision. The pressure to perform, competing with other INGOs for donor money and meeting unrealistic deadlines will inevitably lead to the project itself suffering. Rather than focusing on the actual needs of the country at hand, the aid sector has become a battlefield for which organisation can paint the prettiest picture, whereby who receives money or not is judged purely on the final painting and not on the quality of materials used. But nobody stops to ask where the materials came from, if there was an actual need for the painting in the first place or what will happen to it once it is done.

By continuing to address core issues in the aid sector, by putting a stop to the monologues on the decolonisation of aid held so often by INGOs and instead making space for dialogues and discussions between the Global North and South, by reverting back to the true meaning of sustainability and equality and by holding INGOs accountable, we can start moving towards a sector that values quality instead of who paints the prettiest picture. ♦