

The imperial past and decolonised future of humanitarian action

William Plowright • Assistant professor in International Security, Durham University
(United Kingdom)

The humanitarian sector has not escaped the challenges posed by the decolonisation movement. While it is essential to face up to the relics of history, we must also be strong in what we stand for. This opinion piece will undoubtedly help to chart a course between these two requirements.

All social institutions are products of the times in which they were created. Humanitarianism emerged and grew during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in periods of imperialism and colonialism, and many aspects of that era persist in the structures of international humanitarian action today. In order to face the challenges of the present, an honest and thorough reflection on these legacies is necessary.

This article will frame contemporary humanitarian action by understanding its imperial past and attempts to decolonise assistance in the present. It will identify the elements of the colonial and/or imperial systems that persist in the present international system of crisis response. Discussion will then proceed to summarise the contemporary debate around decolonisation of the humanitarian sector, looking both at calls for change and critiques of them.¹

Humanitarianism's imperial past

It is impossible to ignore that humanitarianism grew in an era dominated by colonialism and imperialism.² Although often treated as synonyms, imperialism and colonialism have unique meanings. Political scientist Barbara Arneil has argued that whereas imperialism sought to conquer new territory and people, colonialism sought to segregate those people and save themselves from their own culture.³ Imperialism's aim is to conquer people colonialism's is to change them.

¹ See: Judith von Heusinger, Kerstin Zimmer and Thorsten Bonacker, *Localization in Development Aid. How Global Institutions enter Local Lifeworlds*, Routledge, 2016 ; Molly Sundberg, "National staff in public foreign aid: Aid localization in practice", *Human Organization*, vol. 78, no. 3, 2019, pp. 253–263 ; Raymond Apthorpe and John Borton, "Disaster-affected populations and 'localization': what role for anthropology following the World Humanitarian Summit?", *Public Anthropologist*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2019, pp. 133–155 ; Simone Lucatello and Oscar A Gómez, "Understanding humanitarian localization in Latin America – as local as possible: but how necessary?", *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2022 ; William Plowright, *Armed Groups and International Legitimacy: Child Soldiers in Intra-State Conflict*, Routledge, 2021.

² Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, Cornell University Press, 2011.

³ Barbara Arneil, "Colonialism versus Imperialism", *Political Theory*, vol. 1, no. 31, 2023, pp. 1–31.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

There is an ever-growing body of research that questions the politics of humanitarian assistance in terms of theory, principles and practices. This includes research which has increasingly sought to question the roots and structures of the international humanitarian system and the way that power influences or biases outcomes and has negative, exclusionary or counterproductive impacts.⁴ Whereas it might be convenient to imagine humanitarian assistance as an antidote to empire, or even as a moral salve to treat its ills, empire and humanitarian assistance have historically had a symbiotic relationship. Humanitarian justifications were used by European empires to conquer and impose outside rule. For example, historian Padraic X. Scanlan demonstrated how in the nineteenth century, the British empire used anti-slavery humanitarian campaigns to conquer new lands in West Africa.⁵ Hunger and food insecurity have also been used as justifications for empire expansion, while the treatment of food insecurity was used as a moral mask to hide the crimes of imperial expansion and conquest.⁶

Colonialism went a step farther and sought to change conquered peoples in order to save them. French, Spanish and Portuguese empires assigned themselves the *mission civilisatrice* (“civilising mission”) to expand into Africa, Asia and the Americas, claiming that they were doing so in order to save the indigenous peoples there. By conquering you – so the imperial argument went – we can save you and teach you to jettison your backwards cultures, religions and identities. It is not difficult to see the parallels between such aims and those of humanitarianism, which have historically asserted white saviour narratives to justify a paternalistic approach to humanitarian assistance, in which knowledgeable experts from Western capitals tell locals in zones of crisis how they can be saved.⁷

One of the most obvious ways that imperial and colonial relationships have been maintained in the present can be seen by analysing where aid comes from and where it goes. It is not considered surprising that French organisations are more active in Francophone Africa, or Belgian ones in the DRC, or any other former European imperial power in its own former colonial “backyard”. The majority of humanitarian organisations – such as the International Committee of the Red Cross/International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Save the Children, *Médecins Sans Frontières*, *Médecins du Monde* and all United Nations agencies – remain headquartered in Western countries far from the Global South. Oxfam is an exception, as an organisation that in 2017 uprooted its headquarters from a former imperial country – the UK – to Nairobi, Kenya. Dylan Matthews observed that the maintenance of European headquarters offices are “one of the most visible and entrenched manifestations of structural racism” in the humanitarian sector.⁸ Other legacies that persist include power differentials between headquarters in the West and actors on the ground in the Global South and between “national staff”, who work in their home country, compared to international staff, who are globally mobile and typically paid much higher.⁹ Although many organisations

⁴ Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Government: Protecting Aborigines across the Nineteenth-Century British Empire*, Cambridge University Press, 2014 ; Michael N. Barnett, *Paternalism beyond Borders*, Cambridge University Press, 2016 ; Meera Sabaratnam, *Decolonizing Intervention: International Statebuilding in Mozambique*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017; Mark Duffield, *Post-Humanitarianism: Governing Precarity in the Digital World*, Polity Press, 2019 ; Polly Pallister-Wilkins, “Saving the souls of white folk: Humanitarianism as white supremacy”, *Security Dialogue*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2021, pp. 98–106.

⁵ Padraic X Scanlan, *Freedom’s Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution*, Yale University Press, 2017.

⁶ Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

⁷ Michael N. Barnett, *Paternalism beyond...*, *op. cit.*

⁸ Dylan Matthews, *Are country offices preventing us from decolonising development?*, Bond (UK network for organisations working in international development), 2021, <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2021/05/are-country-offices-preventing-us-from-decolonising-development>

⁹ Olga Shevchenko and Renée C. Fox, “‘Nationals’ and ‘expatriates’: Challenges of fulfilling ‘sans frontières’ (‘without borders’) ideals in international humanitarian action.” *Health and Human Rights Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2008, pp. 109–122, <https://www.hhrjournal.org/2013/09/nationals-and-expatriates-challenges-of-fulfilling-sans-frontieres-without-borders-ideals-in-international-humanitarian-actio>

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

claim to help reduce these inequalities, they persist for complex reasons, including simple economic ones related to the cost of living in Western countries.¹⁰

The centralisation of power and decision-making in white Western countries is one of the more obvious legacies, but there are many more. Racist and exploitative images of people in crisis continue to be used for fundraising and for self-justifying the humanitarian enterprise, stripping supposed beneficiaries of autonomy, humanity and dignity in the process of claiming to save them.¹¹ The centralisation of power in Europe, in disproportionately white Western hands, combined with the pejorative view of people in the Global South as racialised recipients of aid, are but a few of the legacies of humanitarianism's imperial past.

Humanitarianism's decolonised future

When most people think of empire's legacies, they are perhaps likely to imagine the pervasiveness of racist individuals or practices. However, an over-emphasis on racist *attitudes* and problematic individuals can risk overlooking racist *structures* and problematic *systems*, which can persist even when people may not wish them to.

Recently, attention has turned to racism within the humanitarian sector, questioning the extent to which it has been built into the structures of the architecture of the international system of aid.¹² In response, groups of humanitarians, scholars and activists have increasingly called for a decolonised approach to the study and practice of humanitarianism. Such an approach would involve asking challenging questions about the assumptions and principles behind humanitarian aims but also the manner in which they are carried out in practice. In its simplest definitions, decolonised approaches involve undoing colonial attitudes and structures and adopting anti-racist approaches to contemporary issues.¹³ However, there are deeper meanings as well. A decolonised approach goes beyond simply addressing the historical legacies of the colonial and imperial past and involves taking active steps to value alternative forms of knowledge and experience, especially those of marginalised groups. It further involves critical analysis of who is granted space to speak and on what subjects. Even this article is reflective of historical inequalities, as it is written from the perspective of a Western heterosexual male working in a Western research institution. The question of whose voice matters and who decides about the process of decolonisation is a very real and complex one, as discussed by Tammam Aloudat.¹⁴

¹⁰ Tobias Denskus, "The salary gap between expat and local aid workers – it's complicated", *The Guardian*, 19 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/apr/19/the-salary-gap-between-expat-and-local-aid-workers-its-complicated>

¹¹ Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno, *Humanitarian Photography. A History*, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

¹² For examples, see: Decolonise MSF, *Open Letter to Senior Management and Colleagues in MSF: Beyond Words to Anti-Racist Action* (2020), 2020, https://docs.google.com/forms/d/16TF7CTAP3S8BoV4MUOrZxYclUk-qT_MUYxSQKhThDU/viewform?edit_requested=true ; Tammam Aloudat and Themrise Khan, "Decolonising humanitarianism or humanitarian aid?", *PLOS Global Public Health*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2022 ; Polly Pallister-Wilkins, Hanno Bankamp, Elisa Pascucci *et al.*, "Humanitarian Futures", in Katharyne Mitchell and Polly Pallister-Wilkins (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Philanthropy and Humanitarianism*, Routledge, 2023, pp. 292–304 ; Erica Johnson Edwards, "Philanthropy in France and colonial Haiti: Bienfaisance, Paternalism and Race" in Katharyne Mitchell and Polly Pallister-Wilkins (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook...*, *art. cit.*, pp. 281–291.

¹³ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor", *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–40 ; Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery. Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*, Duke University Press, 2018.

¹⁴ Tammam Aloudat, *Who gets to decolonise humanitarianism?*, Centre for humanitarian action, 2021, <https://www.chaberlin.org/en/blog/who-gets-to-decolonise-humanitarianism-2>

When applied to humanitarian action in general, decolonised approaches have pushed for a move away from Eurocentrism, apoliticism and for a stronger link between humanitarianism and social justice.¹⁵ Heba Aly noted the need to support local organisations and intermediaries, as well as a conscious aim to shift narratives and languages.¹⁶ Lucy Morris and Andres Gomez de la Torre have stressed the importance of honest reflection, difficult conversations and a commitment to change from top to bottom, from leadership structures, to programmes, to how we use language and images.¹⁷

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the decolonisation agenda is not a panacea for all of humanitarianism's ills, and not all see a decolonised approach as able to tackle the unique challenges that humanitarians face. The process of challenging structures involves disrupting power, and it should be no surprise when power pushes back. Whereas some may be opposed to the decolonised approach in general, what is more common are apprehension towards the actual changes being made and how they are enacted. Whereas the overall aims of the decolonised approach are certainly laudable, the process of how changes are made will inevitably involve debate, discussion and a times even contention.

For example, though we might praise Oxfam for moving its headquarters to Nairobi, some have raised question about moving headquarters out of Western democratic states, noting that having headquarters in non-democratic states or in states experiencing crisis, humanitarian NGOs are more susceptible to pressure from those states. Others have pointed to the high costs and logistic challenges of such moves, while also noting that separating organisations from their historical sources of funding could have very long-term costs.¹⁸

Larger debates can be seen around other aspects of the decolonised approach to aid, which include the core aim of ensuring that power and resources are placed into local hands, through localisation. Although many support the process of localisation, there are very real challenges to enacting it.¹⁹ In many contexts, local organisations lack the training and professionalism that international organisations have. Local organisations in Ukraine are more likely to be professionalised than those in Chad, for example. Some question the aims of localisation in general, preferring that humanitarian assistance remain in the realm of the international as an act of apolitical solidarity. In violent contexts, local NGOs may have no desire to be neutral, but expecting them to be may also put them at much greater risk to local belligerents.²⁰

¹⁵ Tammam Aloudat and Themrise Khan, "Decolonising humanitarianism or...", *art. cit.*

¹⁶ Heba Aly, "Ten efforts to decolonise aid. Changing practices around funding, leadership, narrative and identity", *The New Humanitarian*, 12 August 2022, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2022/08/12/10-efforts-to-decolonise-aid>

¹⁷ Lucy Morris and Andres Gomez de la Torre, "How to decolonise International Development: some practical suggestions", Oxfam, 18 December 2020, <https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/how-to-decolonise-international-development-some-practical-suggestions>

¹⁸ A fuller discussion of INGOs relocating headquarters is available in Sebastien Forsch, "Moving to the Global South: an analysis of the relocation of international NGO secretariats", *St. Anthony's International Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2018, pp. 159–186. For discussion on obstruction of humanitarian assistance, see William Plowright, "Obstruction", in Katharyne Mitchell and Polly Pallister-Wilkins, *Humanitarianism, The Routledge International Handbook...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 259–270.

¹⁹ Catalina Russu, "The advantages and disadvantages of localization in the humanitarian sector. Experts' Opinions", *Development Aid*, 15 November 2021, <https://www.developmentaid.org/news-stream/post/120994/localization-in-the-humanitarian-sector>

²⁰ William Plowright, "Ukraine: aid workers were forced out of Syria – the same thing could happen in this war", *The Conversation*, 23 March 2022, <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-aid-workers-were-forced-out-of-syria-the-same-thing-could-happen-in-this-war-179781>; Ed Schenkenberg, *Emergency Gap Series 03: the challenges of localised humanitarian aid*, Médecins Sans Frontières, November 2016, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/emergency-gap-series-03-challenges-localised-humanitarian-aid>

Although the title of this article notes a decolonised future, the process of decolonisation is very much an activity of the present. Although debate and discussion will continue over specific policy prescriptions related to racism and historical inequality, without a sincere understanding of the past and present, and a dedication to change in the future, these historical injustices will persist.

Biography

William Plowright • William Plowright is a social scientist and humanitarian worker, currently assistant professor in international security at Durham University (UK). His research spans two areas: the dynamics of contemporary armed conflict, and the politics of humanitarian assistance. He is the author of the book *Armed Groups and the Pursuit of International Legitimacy: Child Soldiers in Intra-State Wars* (Routledge, 2021), for which he conducted extensive research among armed groups in Syria and Myanmar. He is also the author of *The War on Rescue: The Obstruction of Humanitarian Assistance in the European Migration Crisis* (Cornell University Press, forthcoming). Additionally, William has worked in the management of humanitarian operations for almost ten years, including in Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan and Central African Republic, with a focus on operational management, staff development and training, and security.

Reproduction prohibited without the agreement of the review Humanitarian Alternatives. To quote this article:
William Plowright, “The imperial past and decolonised future of humanitarian action”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, no. 25,
March 2024, pp. 112–121,

<https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2024/03/20/the-imperial-past-and-decolonised-future-of-humanitarian-action/>