

Rethinking Humanitarianism

Episode 7

Decolonization of Aid

Kamala Harris

There are 1000s of people marching in the streets; in 50 states demanding meaningful change. The people are demanding action.

Clip (<https://www.voanews.com/episode/american-protesters-their-own-words-4309221>)

Our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, our cousins, our god-children are in danger because of the colour of their skin, and we must continue to show up for them.

Terri Sewell

George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, we say their names as reminders of their humanity.

Heba Aly

It seems a lifetime ago now, but last year the murder of several unarmed Black people by police officers in the US sparked a global conversation about race and inequality.

Jeremy Konyndyk

And the aid sector was no exception to that. Many aid agencies began discussing diversity and inclusion in their organisations, and coming to grips with some pretty unhealthy power dynamics.

Danny Sriskandarajah

And I think Black Lives Matter is a wake-up call around building the next generation of institutions that put equality, inclusion, racial justice at their heart, particularly in the development or humanitarian sector.

Heba Aly

But some activists argue that diversity and inclusion is just the tip of the iceberg. This period of reckoning over the past months has prompted a much deeper critique about the very roots of the humanitarian endeavour.

Degan Ali

I don't see people having these really important conversations about the structure, the architecture of the aid system, and how it's been designed on purpose to ensure inequities and to ensure that we don't get out of poverty. And this is part of the neocolonial imperialistic design.

Stephanie Kimou

A lot of the international development frameworks that we're working in are built on the backs of white supremacy culture that has inevitably left a lot of Black people and non-Black people of colour silenced, marginalised, and severely underfunded.

Jeremy Konyndyk

Those are hard words to hear for people who have spent their careers in the sector. But at the same time, I don't think they can be dismissed out of hand. In short, there is a fair bit of anger and frustration out there. And that is leading to growing calls to decolonise the aid sector.

Candace Rondeaux

It's time to take a sledgehammer entirely to the IMF, entirely to the World Bank, entirely to this structure of the UN Security Council that we've been living with for 70 years. It's not good enough.

Heba Aly

Over the summer of 2020, we saw the passion, the energy, tearing down statues and protests in the street. But a lot of movements falter when it comes time for policy change.

Jeremy Konyndyk

So, now comes the hard part for both the humanitarian sector and for its critics. How does this dialogue begin to move from slogans to actual change? In Washington D.C., I'm Jeremy Konyndyk, Senior Policy Fellow at the Center for Global Development.

Heba Aly

And in Geneva, Switzerland. I'm Heba Aly, Director of The New Humanitarian. We are your co-hosts for Rethinking Humanitarianism, a podcast series exploring the future of aid.

Jeremy Konyndyk

Before we dive in on today's topic, we wanted to share thoughts from a listener. In the last episode, we spoke to Fabrizio Hochschild-Drummond and Hesham Youssef about how UN agencies are governed and whether multilateral reform will ever be possible.

Heba Aly

In response, a UN staffer in Geneva contacted us with this thought:

If you want to do multilateral reform, you've just got to abolish the permanent members of the Security Council, brace yourself for the withdrawal of funding that that will result in as all of the,

shall we say, wounded permanent Security Council members hold funding hostage, and hope that the rest of the world steps up. Jeremy, what do you make of that?

Jeremy Konyndyk

I don't agree. I think that abolishing the permanent membership is a real minefield, both for the reasons that this person cites, but also I'm not sure it would be a good idea. I mean, ultimately, the Security Council is a place where realpolitik is meant to happen. And if you don't have the most powerful countries in the world as part of that process of realpolitik, then it becomes a sort of academic sideshow, even more than it sometimes is today. But also I worry about setting the bar for multilateral reform so high that if you say the only way anything will ever change is if we eliminate permanent membership on the Security Council, what you're doing in effect is kind of creating an excuse for not doing lower-hanging fruit reforms, which frankly could be done and could have an impact whatever the composition of the Security Council. I don't think that changing the Security Council is an unavoidable prerequisite to doing other forms of change.

Heba Aly

I think the counter-argument to that would be, it's all good and well to tinker around the edges, but nothing is really ever going to change until you tackle the fundamental power structures at the heart of it all. And even the UN secretary-general has acknowledged that if you want the powerful countries of the world sitting on the Security Council, you don't have them today. That no longer represents the powers of today. But I guess more fundamentally, I would say, no change happens without a degree of messiness, whether that's the Arab Spring, which you might argue hasn't ended very well. But that's also the case in US and French revolutions, where it takes years and centuries before some of these long-term changes really take hold, and there's a price to be paid in the meantime. And I think too often when we talk about change, no one's ever willing to acknowledge that some sacrifices have to be made. So, I believe that we're at a time now in which people aren't so concerned about what the price is, and they're just ready to take power where they believe they deserve it.

Jeremy Konyndyk

So I'm not sure that revolution is really the analogy that applies to how the Security Council would change if it were to ever change. Who are the protesters on the barricades looking to overthrow the Security Council? You know, this is not like a political revolution, this is a very different construct. And I think change happens there in different ways. In short, it changes through shifting ethics and shifting norms.

Heba Aly

So I would just say, I think the countries that are barging at the barricades are the Indias of the world, or soon enough, many countries in Africa. And we've already seen a revived push for Security

Council reform in multilateral fora. I'm not sure I agree that revolution doesn't apply in this case. I don't think people necessarily realise they're leading a revolution when they're doing so, it may well be the only way that this changes, but it's actually part and parcel of what we're going to talk about today. How do you go about this kind of fundamental change? Is it through revolution? And can it be done through evolution?

Jeremy Konyndyk

That whole dynamic of, how do you go from theoretical change to the mechanisms of actual change? You know, we've been hearing calls for the last few years now, but particularly loudly since June, to decolonise global health, to dismantle colonised aid organisations, to rethink or even defund the IMF and the World Bank. But for all those calls, there's a lot less clarity on what any of that actually means and how any of that would actually happen. What are the implications of decolonising? And what are some of the ethical dilemmas that that might entail?

Heba Aly

And when I sat down a few weeks ago to talk to longtime aid worker Tammam Aloudat about a new initiative he's launching to decolonise global health, I knew we needed him on the podcast. Tammam is a Syrian doctor and a senior strategic adviser to the Access Campaign of Doctors Without Borders, which tries to ensure access to medicines, not only for MSF, but for people around the world. And MSF is an organisation that of course has a mission to serve people in need of healthcare, particularly in humanitarian crises. But according to its own president has "failed people of colour, both staff and patients, failed to tackle institutional racism, and is part of white privilege culture".

Jeremy Konyndyk

And I know from my own conversations with aid organisations over the past half-year that a lot of them are struggling with exactly that kind of self-reflection. And so, from inside that culture as one of the few people of colour in the management of MSF – and frankly, one of the relatively few in the NGO sector generally because it is not nearly as diverse a leadership culture as I think it needs and aspires to be – Tammam brings a really unique perspective on what leading this kind of change looks like in a major aid institution.

Heba Aly

Welcome to the podcast, Tammam.

Tammam Aloudat

Thank you, thank you for having me.

Heba Aly

Maybe we can just start from the very beginning, Tammam. Why is global health and aid and humanitarianism colonised, in your view?

Tammam Aloudat

I think before we start defining terms exactly, it might be useful to draw an image of an imbalanced sphere. Let's call it a space that affects the lives and deaths of many people, whether that is a global health one or the humanitarian one. And that sphere has multiple actors and some actors have dominion over others, almost entirely and almost all the time. Without a qualification except that 50 years ago, or 150 years ago, someone started that organisation in a Western country. And that continuing, complete conviction that this domination and this ability to decide on people's behalf what happens to them is consistent. Now, whether we take the similes between a colonial space and a space where a dominant external force decides the lives and deaths of people while claiming a civilising saviour mission, to be literal or not, is up to debate. But before we discuss the similarities and differences, it is important to say that we have that imbalance and that people who are on top of that are hesitant to give up their place.

Jeremy Konyndyk

And I think it gets to one of the things that I struggle with, with the term 'decolonising', when we're talking about the aid sector is: colonialism was, as you say, a system of very deep power imbalances; and clearly, we have deep power imbalances within the humanitarian sector as well. But colonialism was also about exploitation and extraction. So some of the critiques and the critiques that we heard in the intro to this episode argue that that's true of the aid sector as well. In your view, can we disentangle the means from the ends in terms of how we think about colonialism and the aid sector?

Tammam Aloudat

Yeah, absolutely. I hesitate to call the aid sector a colonial power but I would comfortably call it a part of a colonial construct, which is not a necessity. It's not embedded in the nature of wanting to provide humanitarian aid. But it could be seen as the case in many situations now. So, the extraction and the exploitation is there, and the continuation of a colonial legacy of rich countries benefiting off the shoulders of poor countries, both in terms of resources they've extracted in the past, but [also] in the prevention of the use of other resources – I think, in a way, if you look at climate change and the reduction of industrial outputs, that is still resisted by some of the industrial countries that have benefited at the expense of countries that haven't. Hence prolonging their underdevelopment, while giving them token aid to feel that they are cared for – is one [of] unmistakably exploitative and extractive means. And the other part is, I would say that the industry itself is not the colonial power, but can be complicit in a colonial situation in the sense of, yes, there are plenty of people who benefit from the humanitarian aid as aid workers, but more so

people who get salaries, people who get futures, people who get guaranteed, you know, careers, who get self-respect, who get to brag about their work. And in that sense, yeah, maybe the humanitarian industry is not the empire, but it certainly sounds sometimes like the civil service of the empire. They wouldn't necessarily care to continue the exploitation and they try sometimes to minimise it. But there are definitely plenty of people who are making careers and lives and reputations and existence on it. And those are mostly white Western people.

Heba Aly

So I want to ask you – speaking of the white, Western people – I mean, Stephanie Kimou, who we also heard from in one of the clips off the top, she gives this definition of white supremacy culture as a specific ideology stating that white people and their ideas and their thoughts and beliefs and actions are superior to those of people of colour and Black people. And she then looks at the aid sector and says, okay, when you say that local people don't have the capacity or that they're corrupt or that they can't be trusted, and we need to do the work; when you have all-white leadership in major international NGOs; when you have different pay scales depending on whether you live in North America, or in the Global South; those are all examples of white supremacy culture at play in the aid system. I wonder how you see that?

Tammam Aloudat

So we can look at that anecdotally or statistically. You know, it's obvious, it was mentioned here, that the presence of people of colour or people from the [Global] South in the upper rungs, in that brass of the humanitarian sector, is meagre at best: There aren't many people who come. And to add to that, people of colour in those places, despite their rarity, are usually very well assimilated. It's not like they pick people who represent the communities they come from. And that applies to me as much as it applies to many colleagues who come from the South. We have to have proven once and again, our ability to fit seamlessly in a Western cultural context for us to be viable at any significant level in the organisations. I don't think that if I talked and dressed like a person who comes from my paternal village in southern Syria, I would be recruited in an interview. And it is fine for someone who's worked in the aid sector for 30 years to still speak English barely and with a thick accent. But you don't see that happening much with people from the [Global] South. The levels of discrimination, none of them is a smoking gun necessarily in itself, and everyone can be justified on a case to case basis. Add that together into a situation where, on the ground, most of the people that do that work are brown and Black people and most of the people who decide on their behalf – it's not only that they are white people, it's also they are people who have never been subject to the same risk and distress of emergencies other than externals, that they are making decisions on. And there is a significant difference between if you were bombed as you or whether you were bombed as an expat who has a safe room and a flight back home.

Jeremy Konyndyk

In my day job research at The Center for Global Development, one of the projects that I've been working on is looking at board of director composition across major NGOs. MSF actually is one of the ones we've been looking at, among others. And we tried to get at that question exactly: How many people can we see, can we identify, on NGO boards who have lived experience as a survivor of some kind of crisis; lived experience as a person who would be served by this organisation, not just a person who would govern this organisation? And across the 14 or 15 organisations that we looked at, which were the largest in the sector, you could count on one hand the number of people we were able to identify who had that kind of lived experience.

Tammam Aloudat

And that's not a surprise. And that isn't only in the boards of directors; it's in management teams, in country management teams. It's a recent phenomenon where you start seeing people being managers in their own countries. In most humanitarian organisations, the argument was they would be biased and unable to detach. However, once you have emergencies in European countries like in Greece or in France, when Calais was the case, no one argued let's bring a Congolese guy to be the Head of Mission in Paris or the Head of Mission in Athens. Because, by default, it seems that the Greeks and French and Belgians and others are capable of detaching from their national politics, which isn't a luxury that we have ourselves. So it's not only boards of directors.

Heba Aly

So if we have touched a bit on what colonisation means in this context, what does decolonisation mean in this context?

Tammam Aloudat

It's still hard to tell. No two colonial circumstances were similar historically. And they've ranged greatly from massively exploitative and brutal, to less exploitative and brutal, to some that claimed a mandate to protect, to others that were obviously extractive almost only. And in the same sense, decolonisation in the historical context has differed massively. There are countries like Haiti that paid their own slave price for 150 years to France – which France hasn't apologised for yet – and caused directly the underdevelopment of Haiti, to countries that fought back with guns, to countries that fought back peacefully. And no two situations are exactly the same. No one sat and said, "let's sit and design a polite and coherent framework for our decolonisation, before we talk about it." That is an unreasonable request. And the act of determining to erase the imbalance of power that people who are trying to do it are calling it decolonisation is in itself an act of understanding, an act of analysis, and an act of solidarity. So we have two issues, one on whether it's appropriate to use it. And I think this is a call that should be reserved for people who are trying to do it before anything else. Of course, critique is open and we can have a debate that is going to be endless, of course, but just like decolonisation, and I quote a researcher I admire, [Lioba Hirsch](#).

She said, no one expected all the colonisation efforts to be polite and mainstream and so on. And no one can blame them for using that means they've used. It sort of feels now that the immediate reaction from the system to any talk about decolonisation is "be nice, be polite, work within the system", and it's hard to not remember Audre Lorde – you can't use the masters' tools to demolish the masters' house. There is a merit in using an act, and a simile of resistance that doesn't demand to keep the status quo, that doesn't care to keep the system. That doesn't, however, mean to demolish the system, neither immediately nor ultimately.

Jeremy Konyndyk

I think that that's a really important distinction. I think it gets to the crux of what is challenging about the decolonisation term. It is intentionally provocative in the same way that sort of, you know, the calls to defund the police in the US are intentionally provocative and they're, you know, for the most part, that is a slogan that is somewhat overstating the substance of the policy agenda. So here too, my sense is that many of the calls to decolonise are kind of using a provocative term to kind of fire up a long-needed and long-ignored conversation and rethink. How do you think about that? What's your understanding of what's the balance there? And colonialism was an unmitigated bad, right? Colonialism was not something that was, you know, take the good, leave the bad. It was a system of extraction, it was an unmitigated bad. I don't feel that way about the aid system, even as I think it does need real change. So, how do you think about that?

Tammam Aloudat

First, I definitely don't think the aid system is unmitigated bad. In MSF and other organisations, we treat patients, we save lives. And if I thought it was unmitigated bad, and irreparable, I wouldn't have been working in it while making statements about the need to change. However, the colonialist system hasn't always been thought of as unmitigated bad, and in its time it wasn't seen as nearly bad by most people. And that's not only people who are perpetrating it, it is people on the receiving end. And that is very well described, and in my description is not academic, it's an image from George Orwell's *Burmese Days*, where the protagonist talks to the Indian doctor whose only purpose is to access the European club and be separated up towards the white people and away from the Burmese people. That image is almost identical to the expat house in most NGOs, that is exclusive to the expats that, you know, there is still a strata inside it and it's off limits to most of the national staff. But again, I was recently reading "Discourse on colonialism" by [Aimé Césaire](#). And he explicitly said, "we're not aiming to overthrow the culture and thought of Europe; we're aiming to overthrow the tyranny of Europe." And that is not dissimilar. No one is talking about throwing away a history of humanitarianism that has done well and saved millions. No one wants to keep its defects. The problem we face today is a bit stuck in what is considered an unchanging, scriptural description of how humanitarianism needs to be done that hasn't been examined in a long time. And many people will talk today about the humanitarian principles in the exact same terms that [Jean] Pictet used in [19]79 to explain them. And it hasn't been reformed.

And that is absolutely important. Is it unmitigated bad? Absolutely not. Is it far away from a perfect good? By a longshot, yes.

Heba Aly

But I think the question then becomes, would there be much left after it was decolonised? And there was a [piece recently in The Lancet](#), arguing, basically that if you decolonised global health, there wouldn't be much left of it. We similarly did a [survey in an event](#) we held just after George Floyd's murder. And we asked hundreds of participants, "was international aid inherently problematic?" And almost a third of them said, yes, it could never be divorced from its colonial roots. Surprisingly, almost half said no, that it could be reimaged in a way that isn't toxic. But I'd love to hear a little bit more about that. How much is left once you've decolonised?

Tammam Aloudat

I think there are two levels to this – a level that is important and pragmatic and immediate. I cannot take responsibility morally or in any way for a call to dismantle the global health or the humanitarian system immediately. And that is very clear. None of us has the moral grounds to say whoever dies, dies from the disruption of services, whoever loses their job, loses their job, as long as we achieve the greater goal while I sit here in Geneva and talk on behalf of people. That is not the point. And I think anyone who advocates for the immediate dismantling of the system is not thinking of the consequences wisely. However, what would stay? Would people still have solidarity and empathy and aim to help each other? Probably, yes. It has existed before Henri Dunant and will probably exist after the humanitarian sector. Will it be the same? Probably not. And that wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing. The difference here is we're not talking about the power holders reforming the power; we're not talking about the clichés of our job is to work ourselves out of a job – the privileged statement that is often repeated by development and humanitarian workers. The aim is to provide or to seize the control of power, and allow people to imagine a mutual aid and a solidarity, a humanitarian system, that serves their needs, that is affected by their desires, and that is capable of continuing without the oversight from donors and managers. Will that happen overnight even in the best-case scenarios? Probably not. And it shouldn't necessarily be the case. But the absolute resistance, the almost dogmatic resistance, to any change in the humanitarian sector as a challenge to its core values is also as extreme a position as the dismantling of that aid system altogether.

Jeremy Konyndyk

I grapple with how that change happens, or what's the pathway to that change. I could see some of the initial steps. And I think that things like diversifying management teams, diversifying boards of directors, bringing in different perspectives is a really important part of that. And I can sort of see a possible endpoint, which maybe looks like what we've seen in global natural disaster response where, if you go back 20 or 30 years, most big Western donors were financing large disaster

responses, and most of that aid was being delivered through the kind of traditional Western NGOs. Today, many – not all, but many – countries have built up really strong natural disaster management capacity. And you see much, much less of a role for the international system in that countries are running their own responses. There's also a lot less international money going into it, because it's, you know, it's less necessary; countries can cover it themselves. So, you know, that's a possible end phase for humanitarian response. But what I struggle with is that middle section – how do you go from the one to the other?

Tammam Aloudat

So just to talk about the end a little bit. You said that the call to defund police was overstating the policy content. Well [that] depends on what timeline you are looking at. In the end of the day, I hope many people don't see the police as a fundamental part of society that needs to exist forever. It is a stop gap in the best case, and an oppressive force in the worst. And to say that a society without police would be better off under appropriate circumstances is not a bad thing to say. Does that mean we should abolish police tomorrow? Probably not. But there is a wide space between immediate radical solutions and considered radical solutions. And that needs to be distinguished because most of the opposing views benefit from illustrating – as in the US – calls like that as crazy leftist stuff that are inapplicable. And it doesn't need to be. One of that, you know, Chomsky's, you could disagree with him on plenty of stuff and I disagree with him on plenty of stuff. I said very clearly he is one of the few remaining significant anarchist thinkers and he has said openly, I do not want governments to [be] abolish[ed] tomorrow. I want to be able to practise a life that leads there and be able to act on my principles as the system changes. And I don't see that as entirely different. Representation is important, as long as we acknowledge and understand that representation tokenism isn't going to be a solution. It is likely to move the clock but it's not likely to be a solution in and of itself. Because there will be a selection of people who sound and look and talk and behave just like the people they are replacing, except the skin colour or the passport colour. And that isn't a solution. There needs to be an acknowledgment of the failures of the system. There needs to be an acknowledgement of a possible different shape in the future, and then find solutions that are context-specific, that apply to organisations, that exclude the worst abuses immediately and work the rest gradually with appropriate participation. It's not enough to have different people in that management team if the management team is still the single decision-maker in an organisation. There needs to be a democratisation of humanitarian aid. And there needs to be a democratisation at all levels – anecdotes of sitting with elderly in a village square, and I am guilty of that as anyone else. And not only do we end up condescending to the people we talk to by hearing them as informants and never as sources of knowledge. But we also participate in the local power imbalances and enforce them. By only listening to people who are stamped with approval. We still have books that say, talk to community leaders and religious leaders who are usually men, old, and part of the...

Heba Aly:

... elite.

Tammam Aloudat:

Absolutely, in their own community. It's rare that you hear people going and listening to women or children or people who are poor or disabled people and so on, as a matter of norm, or as a matter of systematic approach. So it's not only that we practice our privilege over them, we enforce their privilege. And that in itself is a very colonial activity because it has been practised in almost every colonial context. So, there's plenty to be changed. And there are things that are obvious. What I do not think is appropriate is to say we will change our recruitment process to make it more possible to pick a few more people from the [Global] South and then we'll be fine. This is a step towards a vision; the vision is not yet clear. And that's probably the first step we have to go to.

Heba Aly

So what does that look like tangibly? I mean, you're working in an organisation that has had a very public struggle with racism. And a number of recent articles that we've published have shown what, on a very granular level, that kind of institutional racism looks like. What does it look like to try to change that from within an organisation like that? Where have you started in your own journey?

Tammam Aloudat

I think it's important to talk about this, absolutely. But it's also important to talk about how MSF ended up where it is. Part of why you got the information you got is because we still have a culture of dissent. It is still possible to have a controversial argument in MSF. So, I say that partially to credit my organisation when credit is due, but also to say that those you do not hear from aren't immune from the problem. There are likely to be positions where that problem cannot be raised. The other thing is, of course there are a wide range of opinions. Talking about white supremacy or structural racism and about colonialism – as it does everywhere – puts many people at a level of discomfort that prevents the conversation from going on. Because when you say structural racism, many people hear, “you are racist”, which is not the case, at least not the case as a generalisation, and not the intention. The change has been happening very slowly. And it hasn't touched, in the humanitarian sector and in MSF yet, on the two major issues that I think need to be addressed. One of them is the structural issue that the architecture of organisations – still MSF, and most other humanitarian agencies, most donors – exist in the West, exist on Western terms and see the world from a Western point of view; which is quite hegemonic and quite oppressive, even though many of the recipients – governments and communities – laud and accept that structure because there's no alternative and because that's the narrative that's available. So the structure needs to be different. We cannot be at this day and age and still believe that a bunch of people sitting in places like Geneva are the best ones, by default, whoever they are, of taking decisions that allocate billions of

dollars towards life and death. And this is not only choices within an operation, within the country, it is the choice between countries and between operations. It is massive power that no people should have by default. The second one is in principle. Humanitarianism has served a huge purpose and continues to do so. But just like any belief system where the lines between what is constant and what is not become too blurry and people start thinking that everything about us is a value that is unchangeable, it leads to stagnation, and we have to revisit our values. Now, you hear a lot of arguments about whether neutrality should be a fundamental principle of humanitarianism or not. I would argue we should revisit whether humanity, as it's described, is a fundamental principle of humanitarianism, because humanity implies that it is the prerogative of the giver to give; it doesn't give any agency or autonomy to the receiver. And that is a result – you do 150 years of that, and that's the result. We need to talk about who chooses to direct aid, at what criteria. It cannot be the gut feeling of people who have done it before. It cannot be their entire prerogative, unquestioned. And that applies to humanitarianism; that applies to global health; that applies to philanthropies and foundations that now determine a large chunk of the pie. No one deserves to have that much power over people's lives, and go unquestioned except arguing that they have the best intention.

Jeremy Konyndyk

I think in a way what we have in the system is a mix of a kind of set of colonial power structure habits, with almost a command economy or a supply driven economic model in terms of how aid is provided. So we're not driven by the demand signal from the people that are served, but rather by the supply preferences of the people providing. And those two really reinforce each other. And I don't see the path yet to what it looks like once we begin to break some of those things down. But I think we do also need to begin putting in place some changes that begin to do that without knowing fully where that's going to lead us, and I think that's okay. I think as we diversify the voices that we're hearing, as we shift more influence over aid priorities, you know, as you say, these are huge weighty decisions that are being assigned to people in far-off capitals. And certainly I felt that when I was managing a part of the US assistance budget. Every allocation we made came with trade-offs that we were making on the basis of imperfect information. And so I think we, you know, we do as a system also owe it to those that we're trying to serve to hear their voices in that process in a way that is less filtered than we're used to doing. But I don't know exactly where that will take us in the end.

Heba Aly

But Tammam, you've got this new initiative that you're launching, which does try to create a roadmap of sorts for how you go about decolonising global health. So what are the components of that?

Tammam Aloudat

So, calling it an initiative is a big compliment. And it still isn't, yet. There are ideas whose time has come. This is a result of a discussion before a panel at the Geneva Health Forum, where the host of the panel, who is a professor in the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, a British Pakistani professor called Mishal Khan, and myself had a long discussion. And we found that we agree on many things, and we've helped each other clarify it. And then we thought, well, you know what, let's write a few things about it. And then we thought, well, it shouldn't be two people, let's see if we can get a few people on board. So I tweeted about it. A single tweet doesn't explain anything. And before I knew it, there were 60 or 70 people who came and said, count me in. And it's interesting, because very rarely do you get people committing to something that still hasn't gotten a description. I got approached from a couple of people in universities in the [Global] North and the [Global] South, saying, "let's collaborate". And neither of us has credentials in the sense that, you know, it's not us as persons. It's not that the description is absolutely visionary. It is the fact that this is *the* moment for something like this to take place. And wherever it goes, it is important to hear the voices, to start building ideas. And when you ask me about, you know, Jeremy, what do I think should be done? I don't know. I really don't. And I'm, you know, coming from Syria and having been born and lived all my life under a dictatorship, I am definitely not a fan of prophets and leaders. And I don't think anyone has, you know, what it takes to do that single-handedly – draw a vision for humanity, and all of those who tried it ended up more likely being tyrants later than emancipators. I think people will figure it out, once we start, collectively, taking out the barriers towards it. How would a decolonised society look like? It looks different in Indonesia and in Iraq. It looks different in Congo and wherever you go. And so should global health and the humanitarian world. It's not a single space. It's not homogenous. It's not filled with people who think exactly the same just because they aren't Europeans. And they have to have that chance to give a voice. There are some people who will theorise, and they will make as many mistakes as they make correct statements. And then increased representation, dissolution of power, and I'm going to, you know, lovingly tell you, you said we should hear more from people, unfiltered opinions. And I think that statement is in itself problematic because it retains the decision at the end of the day in your hands. You hear, if you're nice enough, you listen and adjust, but you do not give any part of the power. And that is also a problematic position. I know it's a big step forward. But we have to acknowledge when it's still not, you know, enough.

Jeremy Konyndyk

Yeah. And I think, you know, I look at that as a very intentionally transitional step, right. I think in the long run, as I said, where we want to get to is this place where for the most part, this is unnecessary. Where this looks more like what we do with disaster response. Where it is run and owned by the people who are currently the foreign aid recipients.

Heba Aly

I was really struck a few episodes ago by an exchange we had in which Muthoni Wanyeki, a Kenyan activist, was saying, you know, I don't really feel like I have a well-formed vision for how this kind of local solidarity model comes to be. And then Paul Currion responded to her by saying, why should you? Why should you be expected to have a vision ready on a plate, you know. And so, perhaps there is an unfair expectation that those who are fighting for emancipation, if you want to use that word, have to have this perfectly clear vision before anyone can take them seriously.

Tammom Aloudat

And that wasn't the case for most of the humanitarian organisations themselves as they were created, right? I don't think Dunant, you know, went out of Solferino having a roadmap for the next 100 years of the Red Cross's life. And neither did those who created MSF, nor those who created many of the successful and failed attempts at providing aid, both health aid but also humanitarian aid. So it is unfair, it is unfair to expect people to do it. And within the system, it is, you know, within the confines of the system, as it is now, when they are complaining about the system itself. And it is unfair to expect a replication of the model of hierarchy and domination for us to be taken seriously – us, whoever is part of this to be taken seriously. But just to state, part of the problem now is that it is risky to do so. Not every place is a safe environment, and not everybody is going to speak out. And that is important to consider because it's not the job of people of colour, or people from the [Global] South, or people who are marginalised in any system, health or humanitarian, to overthrow the four centuries of colonialism and post-colonialism on their own so they can have a dignified career or life or ability to influence. This is something that has to be done more widely, and there are very well, existing and emerging alliances with people who belong to countries of the [Global] North. And that is a collective responsibility that all of us have to be part of. And it's not an animosity by definition, where every person of colour in a humanitarian organisation is against every white person. That is an oversimplification. That is not dissimilar to what, again, the right wing in the US uses against Black Lives Matter. It's not a hatred movement; it's an inclusion movement. And that should be understood. And just like there, there will be people of all parts, all walks of life in the humanitarian sector, hopefully, who will be part of this – with different capacities, with different visions, with different ways of doing it. What is important, you know, of things I've read, there is a sentence that never leaves me and although I wouldn't claim that I understand what the guy was saying entirely, but Paulo Freire talks about education about pedagogy, and he talks about dealing with people, not as objects to be acted on, but as subjects who act themselves. And I think that concept of sovereignty and autonomy, both of people we serve, but also people who work with us, is not always obvious. And it's not always taken seriously. That might be a huge change to seek, at least in the beginning.

Heba Aly

So at the risk of asking you then to present a very clearly formed vision, if you had one idea that wasn't weighed down by the constraints of politics and reality that would address all of these issues we've just discussed, where you can just dream as widely and wildly as you see fit. Does anything come to your mind?

Tammam Aloudat

One actually, I think not infeasible one, is for all aid organisations to refuse earmarked money. Understanding that donors have an interest in providing the money for multiple purposes, political and otherwise, as much as they aren't doing it purely for the goodness of their hearts. And that's evidenced. Priti Patel in the UK has talked many times about linking aid and trade, and getting benefits and trade agreements out of aid. That isn't only the UK, I've heard it from a minister in Holland. And it's pretty evident, they get political capital and actual one from providing aid. So we act as if we have zero leverage in controlling what donations go to and what donations were received. If there was a real alliance of a more decolonised and more decolonising humanitarian aid organisations, would stand up to donors and say, earmarked money is not right. You are forcing us to be complicit in violating our own principles. By accepting donations that do not go to where us and people we serve think is more appropriate. Now the second thing is: Shift it on its head. There's no reason or purpose for the massive concentration in Europe, for the leadership of humanitarians. I'm not going to pretend that sending all the headquarters to Africa is going to automatically solve the problem, or to the Global South. But having an absolutely hierarchical system, where in all humanitarian, where the bosses sit in a Western capital and the, you know, labour sits in the [Global] South is unfeasible. There are ways where you can have more representation. In Germany since the early 1960s, there is an obligation that each company publicly traded with more than 2,500 labourers has to have 50% of the board members from the unions. That is a feasible, immediate action that you can decide overnight. Have people unionise and be part of the decisions [of] their organisations, from biggest decision to the accountability of their managers. Have country officers rather than be reporting to the middle manager that reports to the boss, have them be federated, and have a democratic representative system whereby they have as much voice as the capitals have. We can find solutions for the technical advice, for the medical advice, or for you know, anything that is quite specific. But the representation and the choices of allocating resources and choosing who lives and who dies, and who does it at what level of authority, do not need to be hierarchical.

Heba Aly

Tammam, thank you so much for being part of this conversation and helping stimulate some of the thoughts that will go into whatever that vision turns out to be.

Tammam Aloudat

Thank you very much Heba and Jeremy for having me. I really appreciate it.

Jeremy Konyndyk

Such a pleasure. Thanks, Tammam. And if you have thoughts on how to decolonise aid or whether we should, tweet your comments or questions to us via [@CGdev](#) and [@NewHumanitarian](#) with the hashtag #RethinkingHumanitarianism. Or send in a voice recording to our rhpodcast@thenewhumanitarian.org.

Heba Aly

And if you're a regular listener, we'd really appreciate you leaving a review of the podcast to help others discover it. And as always, to learn more about the topics we tackle on the podcast, head to thenewhumanitarian.org or cgdev.org. Thank you for listening to the Rethinking Humanitarianism podcast. See you again soon.