

Guest Editorial

(Neo) Colonialist Attitudes in International Cooperation: Imposed, self-imposed or an easy excuse? Plus some suggestions to overcome them

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Guest Editor

For most of us, much of what we do is done in a certain way simply because we are used to doing it in that particular way. Whether from Austria or Australia, from China or Chile, we usually do not question how we do things because most people around us act the same way. That is all right until we meet someone who does things differently. This can be interesting or hilarious, except when we are convinced our way is better - or should be the standard. And even when both parties are convinced the other is wrong, there is not necessarily a problem – they can simply walk away and ignore each other. Problems arise when both parties have to work together and there is a power difference between them. A real or a perceived power difference.

Reinforced Concrete

Jessica is a Guatemalan architect living and working in the Netherlands. When she wanted to redo her house, she was shocked to find the walls did not include one reinforced concrete pillar every three meters or so, as that to her was how you build a decent house – in Guatemala. While it is not illegal to use reinforced concrete pillars in the Netherlands, it is much more expensive than to build brick walls with regular concrete pillars at the corners, at best. Soon Jessica realised that, as there are virtually no earthquakes in the Netherlands, it was not necessary to build an earthquake-proof house. But to her, as a Guatemala-trained architect, it did not feel right.

It also felt awkward for her to include large windows in her design. First of all, glass walls are almost impossible to construct in Guatemala because of the aforementioned reinforced concrete pillars, and students of architecture are not

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really taught how to construct them. While Guatemalans prefer to keep the hot tropical sun out, in the Dutch temperate climate sunlight is usually welcomed inside the home. Eventually Jessica appreciated the fact that architecture specific to the local circumstances was required. Currently she is very happy in her fully refurbished house.

Attitudes

Not only do we tend to do as we always did, our attitudes, norms and values are also shaped by our own societies and upbringing. A former colleague of mine, on one of his first visits to Africa, saw a man with a disability being transported by wheelbarrow. My colleague (let's call him Peter) felt this was degrading for a person with a disability (Ahmad – not his real name) as well as uncomfortable for Kofi, the friend transporting him. Fortunately, having been sent there as an expert in a development project focusing on people with disabilities, Peter was in a position to purchase a wheelchair to improve the situation. The shiny new wheelchair, a sign of modernity and a step forward towards independence for Ahmad, made everybody happy - initially.

Soon however, they all realised the wheelchair was actually a step back. The streets in the village were uneven, the sidewalks were high and hard to access, and in the rainy season the wheelchair's four wheels often got stuck in the mud. When that happened, Ahmad needed more than just one friend to free his wheelchair and push him to his destination.

While this is an interesting instance about the introduction of inappropriate technology, is it also an example of a neocolonialist attitude? And if so, by whom? The foreign expert was trying to help and did it in the way he knew: spend some money and purchase a wheelchair. Ahmad was happy to be helped by the foreign expert and looked forward to going places on his own. Kofi might have had some reservations about the practicalities of using a wheelchair for his friend to get by in his village but hey, the foreign expert not only suggested it (and after all he was the expert) but also paid for it.

Eventually realisation dawned that the problem was not the use of the wheelbarrow but rather the local infrastructure. If the infrastructure was improved, not only Ahmad but the entire community would benefit. The improvements would help in the fast and smooth transportation of goods, enable pedestrians and people with disabilities to move about, children could play outdoors safely, pregnant

women and the elderly could perhaps do with some benches, and cyclists or street vendors would be able to go about their business without being run over by buses.

Colonialism

Was the solution implemented by the European expert an example of (neo) colonial thinking (“I know best”)? Or, alternatively, was the acceptance of the solution by the two Africans mentioned in this true story, an example of colonial thinking (“He’s from Europe, he knows best”)? In order to answer those questions, let us first talk about the meaning of ‘colonialism’. Based on a common definition, we could say colonialism ‘is control by one power over a dependent area or people. It occurs when one nation subjugates another territory using military means with the aim of exploiting that territory’s resources (including people). In the process the colonial power usually forces its own language and cultural values upon the local people while actively oppressing the colony’s own interests.’

When speaking of colonialism, usually the European conquest of large parts of the overseas world comes to mind. However, the story is more complicated than that. The Russian conquest of Siberia (not overseas), the Japanese conquest of Korea (no European power involved) or the Aztec conquest of their neighbours in pre-colonial Mexico, to name a few, can all be called colonisation. Colonisation was often justified by religious and economic arguments. Having said that, there were different ways in which colonies were founded and managed, but they were all run with the best interests of the colonial power in mind.

Neocolonialism

In the end, many of the colonial rulers as well as many of those oppressed by them came to accept the superiority of one group (the colonialists) and the inferiority of the other group (the colonised). When the latter eventually kicked out the former, both groups had to come to terms with the idea of ‘equality’. Neocolonialism then refers to a situation where the former colonial power still tries to control the resources or politics of its former colony through non-military means, usually through economic or financial pressure on the authorities of the former colony.

It cannot be denied that, by and large, the citizens of erstwhile colonial powers are wealthier than those living in the former colonies. Many former colonial powers are still more politically stable and have better education and healthcare systems.

Yet the relationship initially forged through violence is still there. The ties between India and England, Senegal and France or Suriname and the Netherlands remain strong and diverse, ranging from speaking the same language, having the same religion, sharing cultural phenomena and, indeed, sharing a common history. But that does not necessarily mean, and here we come to the central message of this article, that one side still knows best or that both sides truly understand each other simply because they speak the same language.

For many involved in international cooperation for development, the donor's norms are still the standard and the exchange between partners is usually one-way traffic. Remember Peter, Ahmad and Kofi? Just as Peter did not take the local circumstances into consideration when he applied his own solution to Ahmad's problem, sometimes World Bank solutions do not work in countries where the local government is weak or absent. In other words, Ahmad wanted a fancy wheelchair and was not in a position to question Peter's solution. Kofi, Ahmad's friend, was hoping he could spend less time pushing Ahmad around so he did not challenge Peter either. In the end, Peter stayed around long enough to see his solution did not work and never looked down on wheelbarrows anymore.

It does not mean that any of the three people in this example acted 'neocolonial'. The activity was truly intended to benefit Ahmad – as well as Kofi and Peter (a good result to show for). If only Kofi had explained to Peter about the muddy streets in the rainy season, then the latter would have appreciated the (to him) uncommon use of the wheelbarrow more. This reminds me of a moment of personal 'intercultural' growth. While in Japan, my friend Tomoyoshi offered me a cup of green tea and. As I preferred black tea, I asked, "*Don't you have normal tea?*" To which Tomoyoshi correctly replied, "*This is normal tea*".

Six Goats in the Field

In other words, even **if** the foreign expert knows best, it is the local counterpart who has to implement the solution. The representative of the donor organisation may be a theoretical expert in a specific area (transportation, therapy, animal husbandry, etc.), but the local expert should be able to foresee whether a proposed solution is feasible or not. Usually the foreign expert is only 'in the field' for a relatively short period and consequently cannot know all the ins and outs of the local situation. Furthermore, he or she is usually under a lot of pressure to identify problems, come up with solutions and show quick results. But that does not mean the foreign expert, evaluator or controller knows it all – they just need

to receive correct and complete information, and that is where local expertise comes in.

Usually foreign experts are open to additional information about their field of interest, especially if that could improve their work. What they need are assertive, well-informed local counterparts as resource persons. The word 'counterpart' itself already implies a horizontal relationship, but in real life counterparts are often seen as mere contact persons. It is not that foreign experts intend to bypass local experts; it is just that they are under pressure (financial and otherwise) and so, all too often, they propose the same trick that worked elsewhere or that he/she feels is right - remember Guatemalan Jessica and her Dutch house?

Furthermore, local experts are not, by the colour of their passport, better informed or more open to input from the field. Frequently they are men from wealthy families and have no personal experience with poverty alleviation among women or community development. When I took an online course 'De-colonising evaluation' at a university in South Africa, one of the staff members commented, *"Local evaluators are often much more arrogant and more difficult to work with than European evaluators."* In other words, nationalising evaluations of international development activities is not the same as de-colonising these evaluations. A colonial attitude does not depend on one's nationality.

Arrogant or accessible, a foreign PhD or not, millions of dollars in the bank versus six goats in the field, in the end it is the local population that has to deal with the consequences of foreign interference. The days of thinking that outsiders know best are long gone. And while it is not true either that a local farmer always knows more than a United Nations expert, they should at least try to team up so that both sides can reap long-term benefits from foreign technological or financial interventions. Indeed, to many people in donor organisations, implementing organisations, recipient organisations and others, true collaboration at eye-level may still be uncommon. However, 'equality' and 'partnership' have officially been two of the cornerstones of international cooperation. So while there is no need to quarrel with their donor, recipients not only have the right but also have the professional obligation to stand up for their own ideas and solutions, in short: to be assertive. After all, it is their future that is at stake.

Assertiveness

While working for a donor organisation, I once visited Colombia. My local counterpart, Daniel, had to overcome a series of issues and expected me to come

up with the solutions. He was a true expert in areas like CBR and rehabilitation, while I was relatively new to these fields. I urged him to come up with solutions and proposals but he was very reluctant to do so. Especially, we both knew, since he was used to my organisation (and his superiors) telling him exactly what to do. So I wrote the word 'ASSERTIVENESS' in capital letters on a piece of paper, suggested he should stick it on the wall over his bed so he would see it first thing in the morning, and said that I needed him to come up with solutions. True, in the end it was up to me to decide on funding his proposals so Daniel depended on my decision. At the same time, for my work to be successful, I depended on Daniel's knowledge of local circumstances and his professionalism.

That evening we could have accused each other of a neocolonialist attitude (the 'dependent local counterpart' versus the 'know it all donor representative') but we did not. In the end we both realised we had to team up for the benefit of children and youth with disabilities, so we said goodnight and went to sleep. The next day it turned out Daniel had taken the message to heart. He took the lead in discussions at his office, came up with strong proposals and later it turned out that many of his local solutions to local problems actually worked! This was not only good news for Daniel's organisation and local beneficiaries, but also for my organisation and its financial supporters who got value for their money.

In other words, (neo) colonial attitudes are a factor in international cooperation but oftentimes good communication and professional, horizontal cooperation can overcome such attitudes.