**Cultural Rights/Colonial Legacies**

Over the span of my career, I have worked tirelessly to promote human rights and human flourishing across the globe by working on projects aimed at facilitating dialogue and trust between different stakeholders, disseminating knowledge to disempowered communities, and fostering economic and social opportunities for underrepresented groups including people of color and women and girls. I am deeply committed to social listening and to understanding culturally specific norms. I am also a firm proponent of recognizing and legitimizing lived experience.

Having worked for over 20 years in the international aid sector, as a Middle Eastern born, Muslim- American, I have first-hand experience of the colonial, patriarchal, xenophobic, and racist assumptions that are built into its architecture. Current international aid structures are eerily similar to colonial relationships, with decision-making power concentrated in the hands of the mostly male, Western, and Eurocentric elite. The structural control and oppression of people in low- and middle-income countries by former colonial powers is so deeply embedded in the everyday culture and working practice of those in the international aid sector that it has deeply affected mental health and social dynamics. Additionally, large international Non-Governmental Organizations, also shaped by this colonial mentality, work steadfastly if unconsciously to advance colonial paradigms by devaluing expertise in the global south, paying people from those regions less money, and generally exploiting in the service of reputation and financial gain.

Historically, many of these low- and middle-income countries that are beholden to the current international aid architecture fought for and won independence from colonial systems. And yet, these colonial structures have been institutionalized and mainstreamed into modern economic systems. Foreign aid continues to force low- and middle-income countries to sign onto deals which put them further in financial debt and trap them in cycles of dysfunction.

Multiple waves of COVID variants have only exacerbated the already glaring inequities between high-income and low- and middle-income countries. Governments, such as the United States in partnership with wealthy corporations and foundations, have implemented an approach to vaccine distribution reminiscent of earlier colonialist interventions, which were also justified in humanitarian terms. While Pfizer and Moderna have reaped massive profits, just over three percent of people in low-income countries have been vaccinated, compared to 60.18 percent in high-income countries.

At the same time, the growing climate crisis driven by high-income countries’ disproportionate energy consumption and pollution has produced especially egregious consequences within low- and middle-income countries, including food insecurity, health problems, migration, displacement, and war. Here again the very countries responsible for the problem claim to be the only ones capable of solving it.

Dr. Olusoji Adeyi (formerly with the World Bank) further reiterates this colonial legacy in regard to global health in his book *Global Health In Practice: Investing Amidst Pandemics, Denial Of Evidence, And Neo-dependency*. “The imperialist origins of global health were neither abstract nor finite in their consequences. Rather, they were rooted in the geopolitical and commercial self-interests of their time, and those themes remain relevant today.”

This “neo-dependency” Dr. Adeyi refers to may be directly linked to the economic, social, and cultural control former colonial and imperialist powers still hold over low- and middle-income countries throughout Africa, the Middle East and Asia. The international aid system largely assumes affected populations are vulnerable, ignorant, and in need of assistance. The reality is most populations in these regions have been experiencing climate change, natural disasters, and economic and social deprivation for many decades. As a result, they have first-hand knowledge of how to manage these crises.

In the past century, international aid has been gamified by the colonial powers, who spend a large portion of their budgets on countries that once were under their control in order to hold onto power. We see this in the language that is used by employees of these institutions where leadership by white males still dominates a majority of boards, and where frequently used terms such as “local” and “in the field” carry pejorative connotations and signal condescending attitudes toward the populations under consideration.

The [research](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jun/15/the-aid-sector-must-do-more-to-tackle-its-white-supremacy-problem) points to racism and xenophobia, so deeply embedded in the systems, structures and power dynamics of international aid organizations, that even those who are well-intentioned end up perpetuating the ongoing problem. Additionally, the recent social and economic toll migration and displacement have taken in Europe has further exposed the deeply xenophobic and racist values and beliefs within these regions. It doesn’t help that in their effort to address these problems, the leaders of these groups seem to only offer up piecemeal solutions with one-off diversity trainings that are organized more to diminish their guilt than to foster an inclusive environment.

Additionally, emerging global powers who are familiar with the colonial rules of the game, may also be influencing how the game is played. China, for example, the largest importer of African exports, has steadily worked to control development architecture throughout Africa, jumping on the opportunity to provide swift funds for development without the cultural imperialism imposed by Western and former colonial donors. Moreover, African leaders are keen to work with China and maintain their national sovereignty. To be clear, China clearly does not have these countries’ best interests in mind; but the corruption of Western organizations and the mistrust they have fostered, has created an opening that China is now exploiting.

We need to change the foreign aid system by decentralizing program funds, so they are overseen at the community level. Often, “implementing partner agencies” such as those in the United States, are charged with channeling USAID funds through country programs. The problem is these “implementers” are mostly Washington DC based contractors with little or no knowledge and cultural understanding of the people they claim to serve.

The process of decolonizing international aid structures must be truly based on human-centered design and participatory approaches. It must encourage inclusive and open-sourced dialogue, involve multiple stakeholders, and promote a futures strategy to organizational planning, with a goal of redistributing power through sustainable change agents.

Decolonizing aid also means that the focus should be on what people in low- and middle-income countries themselves identify as important based on social listening, cultural literacy and understanding lived experience. If donors only want visibility without inclusion, then the process will be fraught from the beginning. Furthermore, digitization and the use of advanced technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) (which are riddled with biases) may be useful for international aid organizations, but their limited accessibility and high costs undermine their effectiveness in certain regions.