



Humanitarian Aid and Development: Reckoning with our colonial past

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Abstract

This working paper examines the humanitarian aid and development sector through a postcolonial lens, tracing its historical roots to colonial power structures and the modernisation theory that underpins mainstream practices. It explores current transformations—including shifting donor priorities, the rise of neoliberal management, and increasing calls for locally-led and decolonised approaches—as signs of both sectoral unravelling and potential renewal. Drawing on the case of Timor-Leste, the paper argues that the sector’s persistent failure to engage with postcolonial realities results in unsustainable outcomes and marginalised local voices. It calls for a fundamental shift in how aid and development are conceived and implemented: from top-down interventions toward respectful, adaptive co-creation with communities. The paper proposes that instead of retreating, practitioners should step in with humility to build equitable relationships that allow communities to define development in their own terms.

Introduction

The humanitarian aid and development sector has undergone significant transformation in recent years, marked by shifts in funding priorities, evolving geopolitical dynamics, and the increasing involvement of the corporate sector. In early 2025, the U.S. Government's decision to drastically reduce its foreign aid budget led to the dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), resulting in the termination of numerous humanitarian and development programs worldwide, affecting millions who relied on U.S.-funded services for humanitarian aid, food, health care, education, and other services (Ainsworth, 2025.)

The abrupt cessation of aid has led to operational disruptions for many organisations, forcing some to shut down or scale back their activities significantly. While perhaps not as swift or as drastic as its policy changes, the U.S. Government is not alone in shifting funding and political priorities. Other donors have also been following a similar trajectory. The European Union, for instance, has proposed linking foreign aid allocations to migration control, requesting recipient countries' cooperation in repatriating their citizens (Schacht, 2022.) The UK Government has also shifted their funding priorities, significantly reducing aid budgets and aligning funding policies more closely with donors' national interest, with less focus on development ambitions for recipient states (Popkins et al., 2025). In Australia, the Government's aid & development and foreign policy departments were merged in 2013, followed by an ongoing hollowing out of development policy capacity since, with a significant portion of the work outsourced to private contractors (Moore, 2019). This global trajectory is not linear. For example, Australia's 2025-26 budget saw an increase in aid funding, accompanied by a clear statement of intention to rebuild the Government's development capacity and work to be a reliable partner in the Indo-Pacific region (DFAT 2025). Nonetheless, when viewed on a global scale over a longer period, and with 25-50% of official development assistance likely to be withdrawn by 2027 (Davies, 2025), the trajectory becomes clearer, signalling a potential unravelling of the sector.

In addition to global shifts in donor priorities, there are also other changes contributing to this potential unravelling. On the one hand, the increased involvement of corporate partners as managing contractors for donor agencies have brought increased neoliberalism to the sector. On the other hand, voices pushing for localisation and decolonisation of the sector—a movement that was strengthened during COVID-19 travel restrictions, which essentially forced international actors to hand decision-making power to local organisations (Centre for Humanitarian Leadership, 2021)—have shone a new (but also old) light on the underlying tensions that have always existed in the sector.

This working paper examines the humanitarian aid and development sector through a postcolonial lens, tracing its historical roots to colonial power structures and the modernisation theory that underpins mainstream practices. It explores shifting donor priorities, the rise of neoliberal management, and increasing calls for locally-led and decolonised approaches—as signs of both sectoral unravelling and potential renewal. Drawing on the case of Timor-Leste, the paper argues that the sector's persistent failure to engage with postcolonial realities has resulted in unsustainable outcomes, and that a fundamental shift is needed: from top-down interventions toward respectful, adaptive co-creation with communities.

Cycling Power Dynamics

The competition between the mainstream (and increasingly neoliberal) aid & development sector, and alternate movements pushing for a more inclusive approach that embraces local voices is not new. This competition has characterised the sector from the beginning. The field of international development essentially began in 1945, following the end of World War II (WWII). This marks the formation of the United Nations and the progressive ending of colonisation for many countries. As these former colonies became independent, the professional field of international aid & development began to take shape.

While non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and charities existed well before WWII, they then took on a new role as they began to engage with the UN and donor governments. This new international aid & development system embraced modernisation theory, which set out and articulated a linear path to development based on ideas inherited from nineteenth century European political theorists such as Max Weber and Ferdinand Toennies. Development, following the modernisation agenda, was to proceed on the pretension of a 'universalisation' of Western principles, transmitted by 'science, technology, economics and the mental outlook on which they all rested: the values of progress' (Latouche, 1996: 17).

The presumption behind modernisation theory was that if these former colonies - often referred to as developing states - could reflect Western principles of progress in their economic, social and political systems, they would become more similar to 'developed' states - their former colonisers. Of course, this way of thinking that separates 'developed' from 'developing' is fundamentally flawed. It ignores the basic reality that developed states were able to develop primarily through the acquisition of resources from their colonies and through the enslavement of their people. It also ignores current realpolitik that donor governments use humanitarian aid and development programming as a means to pursue national interests via the exercise of soft power. As Latouche (1996) describes it, while the previous colonists gave up their direct administrative power, they still retained a great deal of influence by their control over

knowledge and development principles: in the words of Latouche (1996), 'decolonisation took the jackbooted missionaries of the West off-stage, but 'the white man' was still in the wings, pulling the strings' (17).

There has always been an anticolonial movement or set of movements running alongside mainstream humanitarian aid & development. There have been times when the movement has gained sufficient force to create change in how development is done. During the 1960s, for example, a group of states from Asia, Africa, and Latin America formed the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as a means of protection against Cold War dynamics, and to progress their agenda of development on their own terms, based on respect for sovereignty, world peace and security, and recognising and protecting the diversity of NAM member states. While the Cold War has ended, NAM continues to exist with over 120 member states today. Similarly, in the academic world, scholars in the Global South and their allies have always questioned the underlying modernisation and neoliberal assumptions of the sector, calling for approaches that recognise the sovereignty and agency of previously-colonised people, communities, and societies. But while these voices have gathered enough momentum at different times to force change in mainstream approaches to aid & development, invariably the power dynamics have flipped back again. This has created a cycling between top-down and bottom-up approaches to how development is thought about and done.

Development as an Essentially Contested Concept

It is perhaps inevitable that this cycling between top-down and bottom-up approaches exists, because development itself is an essentially contested concept: a term in which 'there is no one clearly definable general use of ... which can be set up as the correct or standard use' (Gallie, 1955: 168). While it is generally accepted that the provision of basic services to people who need it is a positive contribution, the mainstream sector typically avoids critical underlying questions that also need to be asked: whose 'development' is it? Who has designed its scope and end-goal? Who will carry it out? Who will benefit from it? If development is understood as progress—moving from one state of being to a presumably better state of being—what should 'better' look like? Who gets to decide?

Doing development is an exercise in power, with very real implications for how institutions are formed that govern how people behave, which ideas and beliefs are prioritised, which are undermined or ignored, and how resources are distributed, used, shared and controlled. But a community is not a blank slate: people are already exercising their own power, sharing ideas and values, and using, controlling and sharing resources. Sometimes different sectors of the community are in conflict with each other over how resources should be shared and used, and how power should be exercised. Local politics is serious business, and when a development project enters

a community, it becomes part of that community's system. Resources, ideas, values and philosophy that are part of the project begin to interact with those from the community, with sometimes unpredictable outcomes.

The result in Timor-Leste, for example, is a high project failure rate once the funding comes to an end, with communities commonly blamed for their dependency due to their inability to continue to invest in activities or maintain infrastructure that could make a positive difference in their lives. Sometimes there are technical reasons for this lack of sustainability, which can be fixed; sometimes the reasons are social, which are more challenging to address. In meetings with government, development partners, NGOs, and other organisations, there will inevitably be at least one person who presents the need to 'build in a sense of local ownership' for an initiative to work. However, ownership is not a sense, nor is it an emotion—and it cannot be built into a project or initiative as an afterthought. Put differently, people cannot be 'tricked' into thinking that something is theirs when it is not. This is the underlying reason why alternate voices often argue for bottom-up, community-driven approaches so that local ownership is incorporated from the start.

However, a fully bottom-up approach cannot meet all needs. The resources or technical skills required to meet a particular necessity might not be present in the community. Many communities are impoverished or under stress due to historical legacies of colonisation and conflict. And even in those communities that appear to be functioning well, there are invariably different sectors that remain marginalised; simply taking a hands-off approach and expecting local leaders to navigate competing local priorities is likely to result in the initiative reproducing existing inequalities, further marginalising already disenfranchised groups. In order to move past this bind, a new understanding and approach is needed.

The Long Tail of Colonisation

If we return to the historical legacy of aid & development, we can see that the power dynamics that are embedded in development processes form the long tail of countries' colonial past. When projects are brought into a community from the outside—even if they are based on good data, smart planning and the best of intentions—it creates an 'othering' where people are split into two camps: those who are giving or carrying out the project, and those who are in receipt of the project (see, for example, Tuhiwah Smith, 1999). This process carries the hidden message that communities need to be "repaired", and that those working in the aid and development sector are the ones best-placed to carry out this work. But what if they do not need repairing? And in carrying out development this way, what voices or perspectives are being marginalised, ridiculed, or ignored? This is our entry point to considering an alternate understanding and approach.

Just as First Nations or Indigenous people in countries that are still inhabited by their colonisers (such as Australia, New Zealand, or Canada) ‘represent the unfinished business of decolonisation’ (Wilmer, 1993: 5), so do communities where the colonisers have left—such as Timor-Leste. The history of Timor-Leste is a complicated one, encompassing almost five hundred years of foreign occupation: first by the Portuguese as a colonial territory; followed by Indonesia as their ‘27th Province’; and then through the UN transitional administration (UNTAET), until full independence was handed to the Timorese in 2002. However, underlying this history of external rule, customary governance and value systems have continued to guide the daily lives of the Timorese (Trinidad, 2020). Through the various stages of Timorese history, these customary governance systems ran in parallel with the governance structures of the external rulers, at different times being either reinforced or undermined by the imposed power structures. This has resulted in various forms of political hybridity with the interface between customary and state-based systems of governance existing most obviously at the local *suku* (village) level of governance (Boege et al., 2009; Cummins, 2015). The interface between the two systems is porous: just as the overarching political structures have influenced these pre-existing customary governance systems in various ways, so too have customary systems and hierarchies influenced how state-based systems play out at the local level—including how development projects are received and engaged with by communities.

What is coming next

The aid & development sector comprises people from many different backgrounds, who bring to the work a broad mix of perspectives, approaches, ambitions and values. While many will argue otherwise, there is no single view or approach to doing development. What is referred to as mainstream aid & development in this paper is a mix of people with their different perspectives and approaches, who are all working in a sector that is defined by power relations inherited from colonial times. And while there are undoubtedly pockets of success, we must conclude that this sector has performed poorly in its engagement with these postcolonial realities.

Current transformations in aid & development include shifting donor priorities and increasing neoliberalism. At the same time, there are more powerful voices calling for locally led development and decolonisation. These, combined, appear to signal an unravelling of the sector. What this means in the long-term is still unclear: while these changes are uncomfortable for many, they may also be an opening to something new, as disruption can also lead to opportunities.

Most literature on locally-led development and decolonisation is pitched either at high-level, strategic policy guidance, or on organisational change within international NGOs so they can better partner with NGOs from the global south (see, for example, Tawake

et al., 2021) However, if the aid & development sector represents the long tail of colonisation—clearly expressed at the local level in Timor-Leste, where community members cross daily between customary and state-based systems of governance (Cummins, 2015)—an alternative may be to negotiate new relationships with communities that go beyond what has been tried so far. This is not a call for those working in the sector to step back from the communities they are involved with (even though that may be needed on occasion). It is a call to step in, with curiosity, humility and openness, and to establish new ways of thinking and working that bring us to deeper and more respectful relationships. By its nature, this type of work where both the sector and communities are potentially transformed is a highly political activity, situated within local and outsider politics at the same time.

What this might look like will vary from one situation to another, yet, one thing remains clear: the ability to adapt and co-create with communities so they can centre their own concerns, worldviews, and do development on their own terms, is necessary. The time for planning and implementing a project without properly involving those whose lives will be affected by the initiative is long past.

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About the author

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