



Decolonising economic development: the role of development sector



About Bond

Bond is the UK network for organisations working in international development. We connect and champion a diverse network of over 350 civil society organisations to help eradicate global poverty, inequality and injustice. We work to influence governments and policymakers, develop the skills of people in the sector, build organisational capacity and share expertise.

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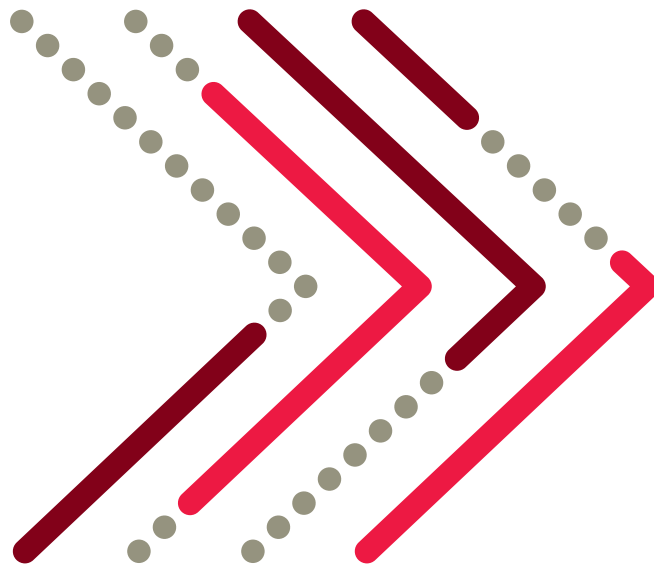
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Foreword

In recent years, there has been a growing interest among international NGOs (INGOs) in the decolonisation of “aid” and development more broadly, driven by the recognition that this arena remains highly shaped and influenced by the practices, attitudes, and relationships that characterised the colonial era.

INGOs have primarily responded to this decolonisation imperative by rethinking their approach to development through various actions and initiatives broadly labelled as “localisation,” “shifting power,” anti-racism, equity, diversity, and inclusion. These efforts have focused predominantly on exploring ways in which INGOs can reform their operations, relationships with communities, and governance—all worthwhile pursuits on which much more needs to be done. However, there has been less focus and thinking around the structural drivers of poverty and inequality, and the sector’s understanding of and contribution to economic development in lower-income countries.

By showing greater recognition of the links between colonialism and the inequities and injustices reproduced by the current economic system, we can surface issues such as continuing dynamics of wealth and resource extraction, exploitation, economic dependency, and the preservation of unequal power relations that continue to hinder development efforts in lower-income countries. A renewed focus on exploring these issues and how INGOs and others can address them is urgently required in the international development sector as part of our efforts to create a fair, just, sustainable, and equitable global economic system.

With several INGOs recently marking their centenaries, and many more, together with the concept of Official Development Assistance (ODA), having passed their 50-year milestone, it is time to revisit the role of “aid” and the international development sector within the wider economic and political system. Is it about continuously fixing the holes in a broken, unequal, and unsustainable economic system to keep it stable and make it somehow work? Or is it about shaping and driving the broader and fundamental changes to the economic system required to eliminate systemic “externalities” such as poverty, hunger, inequality, debt, and global power imbalances, thereby creating a more balanced model based on justice, equity, human rights, solidarity, sufficiency, recognition of planetary boundaries, and the importance of shared global public goods?

To explore these questions further, Bond has commissioned research undertaken and presented here by economists Surbhi Kesar (SOAS) and Ingrid Kvangraven (King’s College) to make an original contribution to the public debate on decolonisation, focusing specifically on economic development as one of the key areas of intervention for the international development sector. By interrogating the history of debates and policy orthodoxies on economic development and analysing how international development

organisations have approached this agenda, we can build a deeper understanding of the roots of current global economic challenges and contribute to critical reflection on how we create a more equitable and just global economic system. Moreover, we hope this report will stimulate further conversations about the future role of INGOs and the broader international development sector in promoting sustainable economic development.

The key objectives of the report are:

- To provide a historical overview of economic development theory and the role of INGOs within it;
- To present a framework for decolonising economic development, offering a critical perspective on addressing structural aspects of development;
- To analyse the sector’s alignment with the decolonisation agenda;
- To provide avenues for change.

This research does not necessarily represent Bond’s position and views, but it is presented to promote further debate on this important set of issues. We also note that the findings of the empirical analysis about the work of INGOs around decolonisation cannot be generalised for the sector, as the participation of INGOs in this research through surveys, interviews, and focus groups was voluntary and self-selected. We hope this research will inspire rich discussions and reflections, and more importantly, motivate change both within UK INGOs and beyond, as well as within the broader international development community—think tanks, academia, policymakers, and financial institutions.

We are thankful to all the Bond members who supported this research by participating in the survey, interviews, and/or workshop where we shared our preliminary findings. Finally, we thank Ingrid and Surbhi for their commitment, intellectual rigour, care, and passion in supporting this important debate.



1. Introduction

At a time when ‘decolonisation’ has become a buzzword in the international development industry and beyond, it is an opportune moment to assess what a decolonisation framework for the international non-governmental organisation (INGO) sector would entail and where on this journey UK INGOs are.

While INGOs as development actors have a long and checkered history that is often traced back to the colonial period, INGOs often position themselves as critical of the neoliberal establishment and as ‘alternative’ voices for change. To what extent INGOs support resistance to a colonial or neo-colonial order is a pertinent question.

In this report, we lay out what a framework for decolonisation entails, building on anti-colonial, post-colonial and anti-imperialist scholarship, primarily originating in the Global South.¹ The framework put forward identifies development and key elements of underdevelopment as common historical processes and aims to uncover and challenge the power structures that have created these linkages. This framework recognises that key elements of poverty and exclusion are not imperfections in the development process to be fixed, rather they are outcomes of how the development process is structured and it is the structural process of uneven development that needs addressing. This framework suggests that a Eurocentric approach to economic development ignores the common historical processes that produce both the markers of development and aspects of underdevelopment on a global and national scale, to focus only on the ‘lack’ of an individual or institution that an INGO can step in to fill.

Such interventions could involve providing skills-training to people, providing them with access to finance that could aid entrepreneurship or aiming to fix local institutions, such as schools, without addressing the broader structures and processes that produce these issues to begin with. Scholars of post-colonial capitalist development have called such an approach ‘governance of the poor’, as it entails stepping in to support those not included in the growth and development process, and thus contributes to stabilising the socio-economic system (Sanyal, 2007). But it fails to address the underlying economic processes that produce such exclusions to begin with.

To study the extent to which INGOs contribute to ‘governing the poor’ through Eurocentric interventions, and the extent to which INGOs challenge existing economic processes and institutions that contribute to underdevelopment for some and development for others, we analysed the INGO sector

1. We use the terms ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ here to indicate the hierarchies that exist between what can be thought of as the global, developed, capitalist centre and the ‘underdeveloped’ global periphery. Any category of differentiation is, of course, political, but we prefer to use Global North/South because of the long tradition of scholarship and activism that uses this categorisation as progressive political categories (Wiegratz et al., 2023). This also allows us to avoid the connotations of the ‘developed-developing’ binary. See Sud and Sánchez-Ancochea, 2022 for a recent discussion of the political meanings of such categories.

in the UK affiliated with Bond. Specifically, we explored the websites of 122 INGOs that work on issues of economic development to evaluate their stated aims and achieved impacts, we surveyed 38 INGOs on various aspects related to their approach to economic development and understanding of decolonisation, we carried out six qualitative interviews with INGOs, and discussed our preliminary findings with a focus group of INGOs hosted by Bond.

What you may expect such an exercise to find depends on what you see as the role of INGOs in society. If you consider INGOs as supporters of the status quo system where the Global North dominates, you might expect INGOs to take a thoroughly Eurocentric approach to development and limit their interventions to filling gaps left by the withdrawal of the state and providing support to people living in poverty to control and limit resistance to the violence of the system. If you consider INGOs to be institutions that can provide an alternative to the status quo and help to shift the balance of power towards groups that have been marginalised, you would expect INGOs to take a more decolonised approach.

The results of this research suggest Eurocentrism dominates the INGO sector as a whole. But crucial interventions are being made by a few INGOs that attempt to tilt the scale against global capital and exclusionary processes embedded within the process of economic development. With this report we hope to highlight what the role of an INGO could be if it were to align with a decolonisation framework, to ask what extent this may be possible given the historical role of INGOs, and to open up space for more informed and critical discussion about the role of INGO interventions in how the current development model is structured.



2. Economic development through history

Economic development as a project, and the role of INGOs within it, has always trod a contested terrain. In this section we outline the dominant approaches to economic development from the colonial period up until now, with a focus on how development has been understood and practiced by actors in the Global North, including INGOs. In the next section, we delve into how such approaches can be considered Eurocentric and what a decolonised view of development could look like.

The colonial roots of economic development and INGOs

The origins of International non-government organisations (INGOs) are often traced to social movements in the 19th century, when the industrial revolution had led to visible and widespread poverty and inequality. This was when the negative socio-economic impacts that accompanied the development of capitalism were coming to the fore of public consciousness. Many factors combined including individuals organising themselves to advocate for social reforms, and humanitarian initiatives and big corporations beginning to pursue philanthropic initiatives in response to their practices and power being critically scrutinised (Davoudi et al., 2018). In the late 19th and early 20th century, humanitarian endeavours became especially prominent as organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Salvation Army were established and grew in importance and relevance. These organisations were focused on providing relief to victims of crises, such as wars or natural disasters.

In terms of the role of INGOs in the international domain, historians have undoubtedly considered INGOs as a project of Empire, even if they were reshaped and reconfigured in the post-colonial period (Hilton, 2018; Schmitt, 2020). In the beginning of the colonial period, colonial powers provided basic needs for colonial subjects; first to maintain a labour force for companies from the colonising country, and then to ensure legitimacy for the colonial project, and with it political stability (Schmitt, 2020). INGO interventions became especially important when the colonial government sought to expand social welfare provision in the colonies in the 1930s (Hilton, 2018). Indeed, historical evidence suggests that Britain strongly involved NGOs and INGOs in their colonial development endeavours (Becker, 2020).

However, many of these relations – between Global North and South and the role of INGOs within it – were restructured as colonial domination began to dwindle after World War II and newly independent Global South economies started to emerge. All through the 1920s and 1930s, governments of Global South countries were making calls for aid interventions, financial transfers and a global development governance structure (Thornton, 2023; Dutt et al., 2025). However, once the development project was launched, the kinds of development interventions put forward were given a

very specific direction because they were conceived within a framework put forward by the Global North.

The post-colonial project of modernisation and developmentalism

With the Global South countries gaining independence and charting their path towards political and economic sovereignty, the idea of how to economically develop became a critical concern among governments the world over, as well as within UN institutions and INGOs. The specific concept and framework for economic development that became dominant was pushed forward by the Global North, as illustrated by the US President Harry Truman's speech of 1944, and was designed in the shadow of colonialism and imperial domination (Rist, 1997). Considered as a watershed moment, President Truman's speech gave a very specific view of what the 'development project' should look like, which shaped the coming decades:

"...we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery...Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas...The United States is pre-eminent among nations in the development of industrial and scientific techniques. The material resources which we can afford to use for assistance of other peoples are limited. But our imponderable resources in technical knowledge are constantly growing and are inexhaustible..."

President Truman's speech took place in the context of international development institutions, such as the World Bank and the IMF, being established. Both institutions have been instrumental in framing the dominant understanding of development in our time, along with INGOs and other Global North institutions.

In this framing, which was later reflected in many theories of economic development, the role colonialism played in creating deep-seated development challenges for the economies of the Global South and contributing to technological progress in the Global North was completely absent. The shared history of these two states – what came to be known as development and underdevelopment – was obstructed. Instead, a hierarchical binary was created in

which the 'abject poverty' of the Global South was deemed a result of its 'primitive' or 'traditional' economic processes, and the progress of the Global North to its industrial and scientific techniques (Rist, 1997; Dutt et al., 2024).

In the period following President Truman's speech on modernisation, which took a strong stagist approach² to development, developmentalist scholars increasingly gained momentum, pointing out that passing from the stage of underdevelopment to fully industrialised economies would not be so simple and would require bold interventions from the state to facilitate such a structural transformation. However, a depoliticised narrative of how development and underdevelopment came into being and the factors that helped drive development continued to remain at its core (ibid.).

This vision of economic development was formalised in economic theorising through the Economics Nobel laureate Arthur Lewis' (1954) work on characterising underdeveloped economies and the path of development via a transformation of their economic structures. Lewis saw an underdeveloped economic structure as one comprising of a large traditional, non-capitalist sector that absorbed the vast majority of the working population and a much smaller modern, industrialised, capitalist sector.

The traditional sector consisted of economic processes organised around kinship and family relations rather than wage-labour relationships. This sector was seen as low productivity, employing primitive technologies and mainly governed by the logic of survival. The modern industrialised sector, on the other hand, employed wage labour, was driven by the logic of profit-making and expansion, and was more productive and technologically advanced. Economic development, Lewis argued, was the process of expanding the modern industrial sector of the economy to absorb those in the traditional sphere and shrinking the traditional subsistence-driven sector. The eventual goal was to transform into a homogenous modern economic structure, akin to the economic structure of the advanced capitalist – or the so-called developed – countries of the Global North. This is what is often called structural transformation, and it was expected to be brought about by large scale investments and massive state intervention, supported by international institutions.

The various political aspects associated with such an understanding of structural transformation were actively depoliticised. Instead, economic development was equated with a capitalist transition and the colonial roots of development-underdevelopment were hidden. The narrative remained that development in the Global North was simply produced through growth, investment and technological advancement and could easily be replicated in the Global South through policy fixes. This narrative did not leave space for Global South economies to imagine their development on their own terms.

2. Stagism in economic theory assumes that economies move through stages, starting with 'traditional' and ending in 'modern'. Such theories will tend to assume that Global South economies are simply at a later 'stage' of development than economies of the Global North.

The role of INGOs was reborn in this period, although there are also important continuities between the ideologies and practices carried out by INGOs during colonialism and the interventions they carried out in the era of modernisation and development (Skinner and Lester, 2012; Mazower, 2009). British INGOs naturally became a part of the modern aid industry in the 1960s, particularly in Africa where country after country was gaining its independence (Hilton, 2018). With financial retrenchment in the 1950s, when the British government had to cut back on its own direct commitments to aid projects, African countries turned to assistance from within the Commonwealth using a multilateral aid system, and with government officials increasingly turning to INGOs to implement development policies (Hilton, 2018). As such, the close colonial ties between British aid and INGOs continued in this period, however the relationship was reshaped. During this time, INGOs became a key part of the transnational community of official and non-official actors that were collectively defining economic development. This meant that INGOs were less like partners that brought an alternative plan for development and more like agents embedded within and supporting the dominant system for international development.

The developmentalist mindset was prevalent among INGOs and other development institutions from the 1940s until the 1970s (Cooper, 2005). In the immediate post-colonial period, humanitarian charities had been recast into INGOs, focusing on small-scale initiatives tied to long-term official development planning. For the former coloniser, INGOs were considered important for stepping in when the government retreated. For the newly independent countries, INGOs represented suppliers of funds from the Global North that would help to support social services so that governments could focus on investing in industrialisation and structural transformation. Post-colonial governments in this period deliberately left gaps in social provisioning for INGOs and other donors to fill. During this time there was a general optimism around the importance of INGOs for tackling poverty, despite relatively little evaluation of aid initiatives at that time (Hilton, 2018). As a result, INGOs were receiving substantial impetus to align with this new development project, which was a top priority for UN institutions, the World Bank and the IMF (Hilton, 2018).

For example, between 1959 and 1964 Oxfam quadrupled in size, and by 1964 it was providing substantial funds to long-term overseas aid and development projects to former British colonies. By 1967, the amount of aid Oxfam was providing made up nearly one third of the UK government's official spending through the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund. Development efforts took many forms, including dam building forestry programmes, school feeding schemes and providing medical services to remote rural areas. As such, Oxfam and other INGOs were redefining their main activities from providing humanitarian support to more long-term development interventions. Across the humanitarian sector, there was a shift in focus from providing what was seen as short-term poverty relief to attempts to tackle poverty's causes (Barnett, 2011).

The depoliticised narrative of economic development that we outlined was internalised by INGOs which presented themselves as neutral actors despite being embedded in a very specific framework of economic development advanced by the Global North. INGOs such as Oxfam positioned themselves as bypassing the pressures of the Cold War to focus their energies on the 'seemingly depoliticized task of development' (Hilton, 2018, p.500). Indeed, with the end of formal colonialism, there were new opportunities for aid interventions that went hand-in-hand with the 'technocratic impulse of the development planner' (ibid).

The rise of international campaigns and coalitions for aid combined with the optimism around science having all the answers to development. This accelerated a movement in the 1960s in which charities emerged as a 'viable solution to tackling global poverty' (ibid.). By the end of the 1960s Britain's then three largest charities had a combined income that is equivalent to over £100 million in 2018 levels, dwarfing the rest of the UK charitable humanitarian sector combined (ibid.). It was clear in the post-colonial period that INGOs were closely connected to the official aid and development machinery, even though they would later try to position themselves as an 'alternative' approach to development (Hilton, 2018).

A roadblock for the development project

The development project was also embedded in the national vision of social transformation held by Global South countries. This resulted in large-scale state investments to bring about structural transformation, technological progress and state-funded social security systems. The process of industrialisation and transformation took off for many economies, at least partially and for a period, but the transition to a homogenous industrialised modern economy that was expected by the developmentalist did not come to fruition for many Global South countries (Sen, 1999; Rodrik, 2016)³.

Setting Global South economies on this path of structural transformation often resulted in people being separated from their traditional livelihoods, such as small-scale agriculture, but they did not go on to find expected employment in the modern capitalist economy as formal wage workers. Many people had to derive livelihoods through self-employment in insecure informal activities, only now in an urban setting instead of the rural agricultural setting they had come from. The geographies had shifted but the fragmented economic structure denoting underdevelopment stayed intact. Even those who were absorbed in the industrial sector were often employed in informal jobs with precarious wage arrangements and on low incomes. The persistence of informality and poor working conditions across the Global South raised serious questions about the expectations of structural transformation that the developmentalists had envisioned (Breman, 2010; Rakowski, 1999); Sanyal, 2007).

3. Rodrik, D. (2016). Premature deindustrialization. *Journal of economic growth*, 21, 1-33.

In addition to this, the optimism of the developmentalist period started to fade in the 1970s when countries across the world were faced with a crisis of stagflation associated with increasing oil prices and the Volcker shock.⁴ Several countries in the Global South started to face unsustainable debt burdens which eventually led to the beginning of the 'Third World' debt crisis in the early 1980s. While the developmentalist approach had been vigorously critiqued by scholars in the Global South for some time by then – as we shall return to in the next section – it was a different kind of critique that would come to dominate mainstream development thinking.

A shift in direction: structural adjustment and good governance

To respond to the debt crises of the 1980s, the IMF stepped in and provided financial assistance but with strict conditionalities. By this time, the theoretical model in the economics discipline had shifted from debates about what leads to industrialisation and structural transformation to a focus on markets as efficient allocators of resources. This approach has come to be known as the Washington Consensus, which were a set of economic policy recommendations advanced by the IMF and the World Bank. The Washington Consensus focuses on promoting economic liberalisation, curtailing state expenditure and public spending and promoting reforms to privatise the economy to stimulate private investment and private enterprise.

This was facilitated through what were called structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), which provided conditional debt relief to various developing economies in return for them applying policies of the Washington Consensus. In this model, the state was viewed as a constraint that had been getting in the way of economic development and it was now time for the markets to facilitate economic development and stabilise the Global South. It is this view that took centre stage, and the institutional landscape was quickly reshaped to align with this new way of doing development. With the retreat of the state, INGOs came to play a new role. This led to an 'NGO-isation' of development, with donors increasingly by-passing what was considered to be an 'inefficient' state to reach people directly with poverty-alleviating interventions. To an increasing extent, aid was being directed through individual projects rather than sector or country-wide schemes (Krause, 2014).

This new development model attributed the lack of development to rent-seeking behaviours by the government and incomplete and missing markets (Akbulut et al., 2015). While development problems were considered distinct from problems of the Global North in the developmentalist era, this distinction fizzled out in what came to be known as the beginning of the neoliberal era, as economists increasingly recommended similar policy solutions across the globe.

4. The Volcker shock was a period of historically high interest rates precipitated by the US Federal Reserve chairperson Paul Volcker's decision to raise the key interest rate of the US Central Bank.

As such, the focus on transforming Global South economies through state investments was put on the back burner, and development problems were approached from a one-size-fits-all perspective.

The results of the SAPs were mostly disastrous across the Global South. Emerging industries collapsed, accompanied by a rise in poverty and the withdrawal of public spending from key social sectors. This led to another shift in the model, but this time a less drastic one. The diagnosis of the problem was not that the theoretical framework for SAPs was fundamentally flawed, but rather that it needed to be adapted to Global South contexts where markets may not always work as expected. The focus of development intervention should be, then, to establish regulatory frameworks to decrease corruption alongside mechanisms to smooth the flow of information and enable more complete markets to develop. This led to a focus on institutions and placed emphasis on the need to fix market imperfections (Stiglitz, 2002), such as information gaps and transaction costs, as well as a focus on good governance to combat corruption (Kruger, 1974). The key tenets of the Washington Consensus were kept intact, but with additional policies which were meant to address weak institutions and weak social safety nets (Ortiz et al., 2019). This paradigm, which emerged in the 1990s, is often known as the post-Washington Consensus. With the launch of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 1990, the focus on targeted poverty alleviation through INGOs was compounded.

A turn to micro-interventions and behaviouralism

The early 2000s with the rise of the very targeted approach of the MDGs paved the way for an individualised orientation towards narrow development interventions. The MDGs directed focus to poverty, but did not directly conflict with the already established market-oriented, macro-policy framework of the structural adjustment period (Saith, 2006). Instead, the MDGs provided a simplistic view of how development takes place, with a focus on a narrow set of human development indicators linked to issues such as nutrition, health and education, and a focus on service delivery associated with specific themes. But no attention was given to the structural constraints impeding development to begin with (Reddy and Heuty, 2008; Reddy and Kvangraven, 2015). Because of how the goals were formulated, implementation approaches tended to be conceptually narrow, vertically structured, and relied heavily on 'rolling out' technical solutions from above, resulting in the need for development and the strengthening of national institutions to be neglected (see Fukuda-Parr and Yamin, 2015).⁵

5. Although the MDGs are often championed by global development institutions as having led to increased donor funding and as contributing to halving poverty in the world, critical civil society and academic scholarship has poked serious holes in this understanding (Fukuda-Parr et al. 2014). The general increase in donor funding for the social sectors to meet basic needs was concentrated in health spending and on narrow health interventions, and by far the most significant increases in development funding have been to address post-conflict situations such as in Iraq and Afghanistan (Langford, 2012).

In light of this, micro-interventions were put in place to deal with a specific development issue, without considering the broad macroeconomics and structural aspects of development. Indeed, the issues of economic development were now not to be seen as something only plaguing Global South countries. Due to the withdrawal of social security nets in the Global North, markers of underdevelopment such as precarious and informal livelihoods and a lack of a living wage, had also started to emerge in these economies. Rather than understanding the underlying common structural features that were creating these markers of underdevelopment globally, albeit still with differences, the response was to treat development problems in every part of the world as stand-alone micro issues that needed localised interventions. In line with the decline in government spending and increased focus on specific interventions, at the beginning of the 2000s increased emphasis was placed on improving aid effectiveness (Savedoff et al., 2006; Mawdsley et al., 2014).

In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, with aid budgets under pressure, the focus on small, targeted interventions, where effects could more easily be measured, intensified (Donovan, 2018; Kvangraven, 2020). This is when randomised control trials (RCTs) were about to become dominant in economics, popularised by the Banerjee and Duflo (2011) bestseller *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*. RCTs are a method to measure the impact of an intervention by randomly allocating individuals to two groups – one that receives an intervention and the other that does not – and measuring the difference in outcomes between the two groups. This method gained traction across the world, but it has received widespread criticism for obscuring structural aspects or the issue or policy problem and for being considered a solution to all development problems.

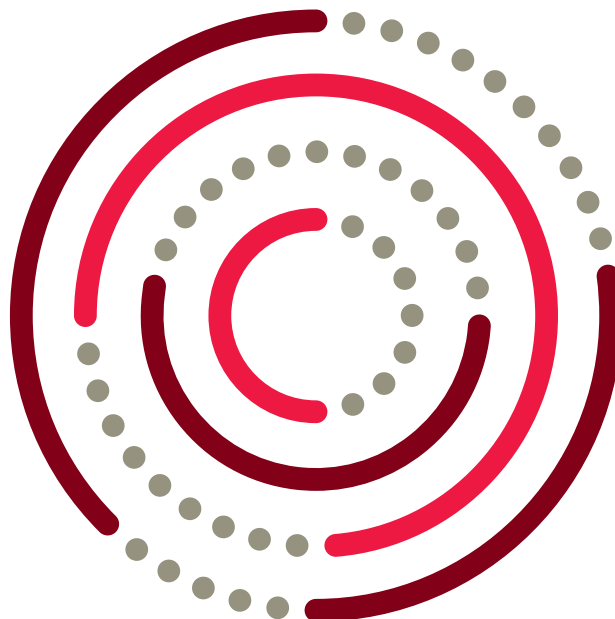
Economists Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer were awarded the Economics Nobel in 2019 for pioneering RCTs to find reliable answers about the best ways to fight global poverty. In the 2000s, the promoters of RCTs put forward an argument to the aid industry that ended up drastically increasing their influence. They argued that: 1) there is uncertainty around the effectiveness of aid, and 2) with better evidence (which they could provide), aid could become more effective (Donovan, 2018). Economists' strong links to institutions such as the Gates Foundation, the UK government's now-defunct Department for International Development and the World Bank helped to translate this shift in the discipline of economics to a shift in the aid industry as well. This led to a stronger focus on measurable, targeted interventions carried out in isolation from broader considerations of structural processes, power and inequality (Bédécarrats et al., 2017; Stein, 2008). Similar to the humanitarian approach of the developmentalist era, which considered itself removed from Cold War politics, the contemporary development paradigm also considers itself a-political as well as a-theoretical. As we shall see in the next section, this is far from the case.

A consequence of this shift in the development paradigm is a rise in micro-interventions by INGOs, cash transfer, micro-credit and skills-building for workers. Such interventions are often considered as a 'golden bullet' for resolving issues related to poverty, such as a lack of employment and education, climate breakdown and weak institutions. The rise of INGOs conforming to this paradigm demonstrates how the development landscape is strongly geared towards this approach.

Consider poverty, for example; instead of discussing mechanisms to structurally transform economies or to deal with the underlying causes of poverty and identifying the existence of large-scale dispossession and the inability of capitalist spheres of production to absorb workers or provide sufficient good jobs, the focus is put on providing workers with enough to get by, such as through cash transfers for survival or small, precarious livelihood options. For example, in India, one of the fastest growing economies of the world, a non-capitalist working population continues to exist. Even when transition to wage labour occurs, it is mainly in informal, precarious employment. Interventions have mainly focused on providing small loans, cash transfers to set up self-employment units and/or, at best, providing some form of precarious jobs (Centre for Sustainable Employment, 2018; Kesar et al., 2022). Consider another example: rather than challenging austerity-driven cuts to the education system, the focus of this development paradigm directs our attention to teacher absenteeism, textbooks, the effects of

school meals and the number of teachers in the classroom (Banerjee et al., 2008). As the promoters of this model position themselves as 'radical' (such as Banerjee and Duflo, 2011), their interventions and arguments serve to displace more radical voices in the development industry (Kvangraven, 2020). As the promoters of this model often argue that more evidence is needed, it also becomes difficult to challenge this approach because their use of ignorance is strategic. As McGoey (2009, p.155) puts it, 'uncertainty demands attention, debate, funding, and most crucially, experts to determine how the situation should be resolved'. By identifying uncertainty as central to this model, economists paved the way for their own methodological expertise to play a growing role.

This shift towards narrow interventions also fits with the general rise of evidence-based policy in policy-making and the What-Works movements that have gained ground in the US and the UK. This has been accentuated by the further cuts to UK aid in recent years as well as the continued insistence on austerity by international institutions, even after the Covid-19 pandemic receded (Razavi et al., 2021). This focus on narrow developmental interventions also go hand-in-hand with the general turn towards private sector development in the aid industry at large, both in the UK and beyond (Mawdsley, 2017). This is the paradigm in which we find ourselves today and in which some INGOs are reevaluating the role they are playing in promoting and/or resisting development. To provide a background for such an evaluation, we will now lay out a framework for decolonisation.



3. A framework for decolonising economic development

Before we develop a framework to engage with the idea of decolonising economic development, let's reflect on the deep-seated Eurocentrism in the dominant project of development outlined in the last section.

A Eurocentric view of economic development is one that assumes development in the Global North was based solely on improvements in scientific and technical progress, rationality and productivity. This sweeps under the carpet all forms of oppression that contributed to the development of capitalism, such as dispossession, exploitation, colonialism, the slave trade, patriarchal structures and other forms of structural oppression (Meek, 1976; Amin, 1988; Kvangraven and Kesar, 2023; Dutt et al., forthcoming). Such a Eurocentric view assumes that economic development was completely due to the 'innate' qualities of the Global North, meaning development is understood in isolation from global structures such as colonialism, imperialism and the slave trade.

As such, a Eurocentric view represents a partial and distorted understanding of capitalist development in the Global North, given the important role global forces played in contributing to the development of capitalism (Williams, 1944; Patnaik, 2018; Sen and Marcuzzo, 2017). This partial understanding of economic development is embedded within the project that President Truman initiated. This view also assumes other parts of the world would follow the same idealised path towards development that Europe was imagined to have followed, insisting on assessing all kinds of development across the globe in relation to this distorted Eurocentric idea of capitalist development. Such a stageist and partial view of development, where it is assumed that all countries can reach the same 'developed' stage, fails to acknowledge that development and underdevelopment are actually linked, and that unevenness could be baked into the capitalist system itself.

The first phase of the development project, including the theories of structural transformation by Lewis (1954), was structured precisely along these lines of this Eurocentric view: envisaging economic growth to transform Global South economies along the lines of the Global North. Amartya Sen (1999, p.748) captures this imagined development path quite starkly by arguing that 'the countries have been expected to perform like wind-up toys and "lumber through the various stages" of development single mindedly'.

Over time, as the specific economic structures of the Global South were forgotten, to be replaced by the one-size-fits-all policies of structural adjustment, and then by the behavioural turn of economic development driven by RCTs, these Eurocentric features of the development project were further cemented. Not only were structural aspects and differences

considered irrelevant, the fix to development was considered to be the same everywhere, albeit with local variations informed by 'field experiments'. This has made it harder to uncover the underlying common processes embedded in the system that was producing development in certain parts of the world, while marginalising others.

In contrast, a decolonised framework pushes us to move beyond the Eurocentric views that dominate the field of economic development. It identifies these common processes of development and underdevelopment embedded in capitalist development and recognises the power structures that facilitate such processes (Dutt et al., forthcoming; Kvangraven and Kesar, 2023). This framework is founded on work by anti-colonial and post-colonial scholarship that arose in the 1970s and 1980s which started to identify and challenge Eurocentrism in social science thinking and practice (e.g. Stavenhagen, 1971; Ake, 1979; Amin, 1988; Kay, 1989). It also has its roots in contemporary theory, analysis and practice put forward by scholars working with anti-colonial and anti-imperialist theories as well as scholarship on post-colonial capitalism (Dutt et al., 2024; Kvangraven and Kesar, 2023; Sanyal, 2007; Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela, 2004; Pierre, 2020; Patnaik, 2022; Bhattacharya et al., 2023). By putting forward such a framework, we do not mean to suggest that the process of decolonising economic development can ever be complete, rather we wish to suggest alternative critical frameworks and productive ways of thinking to evaluate contemporary economic development processes from a decolonised perspective.

A decolonised view based on rich and diverse traditions of non-Eurocentric and decolonised scholarship from the Global South displaces the notion of development and underdevelopment as two stages of a linear journey. It departs from the view that Global South economies simply lack the right institutions, technology, capacity and productivity (Pierre, 2020). Instead it adopts a historical and political economy approach to the issue. This approach considers underdevelopment, such as poverty, instability and inequality, as to be linked to elements of the contemporary development process itself, revealing how the distinct outcomes we see in the Global North and South are simultaneously produced by a common history (Frank, 1967). Such a decolonised view recognises the unevenness underpinning economic development and the exploitation associated with it.

The processes underlying this unevenness have been explored in various strands of non-Eurocentric scholarship. Some strands of this literature view the persistence of conditions of underdevelopment as a result of the imperial domination of the Global North over the Global South (Patnaik and Patnaik, 2016; Patnaik, 2009). For example,

interests of global capital, which align with the interests of the Global North, may only allow certain sectors - and in specific ways - in Global South countries to be transformed as these are the sectors that the Global North needs to support its economic growth. In many cases, the transformation may not always be towards modernisation, but also towards suppression of development as per the economic interests of the global North. Such economic interests include the provision of cheap inputs, labour and raw materials or other primary goods. This is evident in the recent surge in development projects on the green transition, which has continued to treat Global South countries mainly as providers of raw materials and critical minerals for green production and energy, only for the higher, value-added production to mainly be undertaken by Global North countries (Ajl, 2021; Perry and Sealey-Huggins, 2023). In other anti-colonial scholarship, unequal exchange between the North and South, transferring surplus from the latter to the former, is seen as relevant for understanding the distorted pattern of structural transformation in some Global South economies (Amin, 1976; Hickel et al., 2022).

While this scholarship hints towards the processes that simultaneously produce conditions of development and underdevelopment on a global scale, other non-Eurocentric scholarship has identified how this unevenness is embedded within the dynamics of capitalist expansion within Global South economies. Sanyal (2007) and Bhattacharya and Kesar (2022), for example, argue that the expansion of the capitalist sector of the economy continuously dispossesses people from their traditional livelihoods in order to access the resources needed for capital accumulation. However, the expanding capitalist sector fails to absorb people who are dispossessed. These people have to continuously recreate their livelihoods on the margins of the capitalist sector, usually in the informal economy - which is often considered a marker of underdevelopment in itself. From this perspective, underdevelopment can be considered as an outcome of capitalist expansion, rather than caused by a lack of it (as is often assumed in Eurocentric literature).

Radical scholarship from the Global South views the recent surge in micro-developmental intervention, such as cash transfers or micro-credit, as a way to provide political stability for an economic system in danger of being destabilised, given its failure to formally absorb most of the population on the peripheries (Sanyal, 2007; Chatterjee, 2004). In this way, development interventions have become a way of 'governing the poor' (Sanyal, 2007). Interventions from INGOs along these lines risk simply contributing to such governance, unless alternative understandings of economic development, which challenge the structure of development itself, are centred.

Once we adopt this non-Eurocentric view of economic development and recognise the contradictory nature of the contemporary development processes that produced both development and underdevelopment (Kesar and Bhattacharya, 2024), the undesirable outcomes that INGOs want to address,

such as poverty, are not simply imperfections of the system to be fixed. Rather these undesirable outcomes are an outcome of the way the current system and the development process is structured (Sanyal, 2007). Addressing poverty in a decolonised manner becomes about challenging these processes which are embedded in the system and the power structures that legitimise such processes.

We must not mistake a framework for decolonisation as one that prioritises macro issues over micro issues. On the contrary, micro issues such as poverty, hunger or land-use are incredibly important, but the crucial argument from non-Eurocentric scholarship is that the causes and analyses of micro issues, and the ways to address them, need to be located within structural, historical and global understandings of development (Stevano, 2020).

For example, a Eurocentric scholarship focuses on the individual behaviour and biases of farmers to understand why farmers do not use fertilizer (as in Duflo et al., 2008). But a framework for decolonisation would push us to consider the agroecological and political economy factors that shape this behaviour (Stevano, 2020; Dutt et al., 2024), such as how land quality is distributed in socially unequal ways, patriarchal structures that shape access to land and fertilizer, and how global power structures shape and constrain farming methods, techniques and technology in the Global South more generally. Understanding economic development through a framework of decolonisation is likely to improve the quality and rigor of the analysis, given that it provides a more structural understanding of the problem and addresses the major distortions and blind spots of Eurocentric theory (Kvangraven and Kesar, 2023).

The framework we put forward here departs from some other understandings of decolonisation. Our proposed framework focuses on both understanding the processes that are embedded within contemporary development, which contribute to conditions of underdevelopment, and uncovering the political and intellectual power structures that facilitate such processes. By doing so, this framework departs from views that see decolonisation as focusing on anything that comes from the Global South.⁶ Those views tend to focus on identity and geography, and risk leaving these underlying processes unquestioned and the power inequalities of the system intact. A lot of scholarship on Eurocentrism and anti-colonial theory comes from the Global South (but certainly not all of it). But this does not mean that theories and voices that come from the Global South are guaranteed to lend themselves to decolonisation.

Given the firmly cemented Eurocentric approach to economic development, Eurocentric ways of thinking have permeated all spaces in the world, including institutions of the Global South (Mkandawire, 2014; Carvalho and Flórez-

6. In Samir Amin's (1988) classic book *Eurocentrism* he called such views 'inverted Eurocentrism,' given that it is another form of nativism. More recently, there have been a number of critiques of such views of decolonisation (e.g. Larsen, 2022; Lewis and Lall, 2023).

Flórez, 2014). Decolonisation is not only about amplifying the voice of people with specific identities or from certain geographies, rather it is about uncovering and challenging the economic processes that make it difficult to picture alternative constructs of development in the Global South, and for all people who are exploited, marginalised and oppressed, wherever they may be. As such, an INGO can go through a process of localisation and incorporate actors and marginalised groups from the global South in their decision-making process, but its development interventions may still remain firmly rooted in a Eurocentric framework. This is important to keep in mind as we move on with our analysis.

We operationalise this framework for decolonisation in the tables below. The first table gives a general scale of Eurocentrism to assess how Eurocentric the INGOs are in their approach and operations. The second table gives specific examples of themes that INGO focus on.

Table 1: Framework of analysis: general scale of Eurocentrism

1	2	3	4	5
<p>Leaves existing power inequalities unaltered. Individual-centric approach focusing on how individuals can improve their own situation. Focus on inclusion in the market rather than challenging the systems and processes that produce underdevelopment. Aligns with the neoliberal turn of development.</p>	<p>Leaves existing power inequalities unaltered. Focus may be more on additional resources to manage poverty rather than equal access or power.</p>	<p>To some extent, challenging social and economic structures to allow for more power for structurally marginalised groups at various scales. However, focus may be more on improved access than fundamentally challenging processes and structures.</p>	<p>To a large extent, challenging social and economic structures to allow for more power for structurally marginalised groups at various scales. However, rather than challenging power structures in a holistic manner, the focus may be more on certain segments, while leaving other power structures and processes intact.</p>	<p>Fundamentally challenging social and economic structures to allow for more power for structurally marginalised groups at all relevant scales, and to challenge underpinning processes and economic structures that produce markers of underdevelopment.</p>

Table 2: A scale of Eurocentrism for various themes

1	2	3	4	5
EDUCATION				
Training individual teachers; interventions focusing on changing behaviours of the teacher without considering broader structural problems.	Providing incentives for parents to send students to school; technical assistance.	Providing increased access to schools, such as by better public transport to schools; improving school quality and infrastructure.	Advocacy for expanding fiscal spending on education; advocating for better employment contracts for teachers and increased public spending on the education system.	Equitable and critical public education; situating education work within global justice structures, such as calls for reparations and calls against austerity.
LIVELIHOOD				
Supporting entrepreneurship and skill development; other supply-type interventions.	Providing loans or access to productive resources for small business development or other entrepreneurial activities.	Advocating for public jobs or job security, such as employment guarantee programmes; advocacy for stronger public social safety nets for workers.	Promoting more power to labour, for example, through unionisation, strengthening unions and labour rights, or increasing (minimum) wages.	Advocacy for public ownership of capital; promoting equal distribution of productive resources; supporting movements for land and resource redistribution.
GENDER EQUALITY				
Supporting entrepreneurship and skill development for women; training to increase women's confidence without changing their material conditions.	Conditional cash transfers for women; providing some productive assets to women.	Providing legal support to women to defend their rights; promoting equal pay for women.	Advocacy for expanding fiscal spending on public services; government expansion of sectors where women are employed, such as education and health; supporting social movements fighting for the rights of women.	Creating alternative economic structures that challenge patriarchal relations; providing public support for social reproduction; supporting anti-capitalist feminist movements locally and globally.

Table 2: Contd.

1	2	3	4	5
INSTITUTIONS AND GOVERNANCE				
Providing training to groups and institutions with the aim of building capacity, improving governance and combating corruption.	Providing resources to strengthen local and national institutions with the aim of improving governance and capacity and combating corruption.	Supporting initiatives to improve governance procedures locally, nationally and globally; recognising inefficient and unjust governance structures in global institutions as well as those in the Global South.	Working to change power structures within institutions at various scales, for example, by promoting workers' rights in cooperatives or by promoting changes in voting rights and governance procedures in international institutions to give a larger voice to groups that have been marginalised.	Working to challenge the governance of the global economy itself, for example, by promoting democratic control over private and national resources, promoting reparations and redistribution of power, or supporting efforts to control big capital (i.e. tax, regulate, nationalise); facilitating free international movement of labour.
POVERTY				
Providing skills or training for people to engage in income-generating activities or entrepreneurship that can bring them out of poverty.	Providing transfers or resources for people living in poverty; providing incentives and support for people living in poverty to attend school and health clinics.	Advocating for public programmes to create jobs; advocacy for stronger public social safety nets.	Challenging structures that create poverty at various scales, for example, by challenging the distribution of power in international institutions, campaigning for better regulation of multinationals, or campaigning for a redistribution of power and wealth in relevant institutions or scales.	Fundamentally challenging structures that create poverty at various scales, for example, by campaigning for an end to involuntary dispossession of farmers from their livelihoods in absence of alternative secure means of livelihood, or campaigning for public ownership and governance of resources, or supporting movements towards equitable ownership and governance.

Table 2: Contd.

1	2	3	4	5
CLIMATE CHANGE AND SUSTAINABILITY				
Providing technical assistance or training for institutions or individuals so they are better able to adapt to climate change and/or pursue sustainable livelihoods.	Providing resources or cash transfers to institutions or groups so they can better adapt to climate change and/or pursue sustainable livelihoods.	Advocating for an increase in public resources to address climate change through initiatives such as preventing deforestation, promoting decarbonisation, green transition and green energy, and supporting adaptation and resilience for vulnerable communities.	Advocating for distribution of global resources to the communities most vulnerable to climate change; advocating for a transfer of resources from Global North to South for climate adaptation and mitigation; advocating for global climate initiatives; facilitating breaking carbon lock-ins to structurally alter the energy mix.	Advocating for a fundamental restructuring of global production systems in order to achieve a green economy, an end to fossil fuel production, and a just distribution of resources and technology to ensure green and sustainable production and consumption globally; embedding issues of livelihoods as a key part of green transition.

Please note: The transition from one point to another on the scale does not necessarily indicate a gradual or linear transition. In other words, in many cases, a transition from, for example, 3 to 4, would require a completely different / alternative approach to the issue rather than simply doing better within their current approach. The scale is only to get some general sense of how embedded the approach of INGOs is in Eurocentric project of economic development.

4. Analysis

4.1 Data and Methodology

To evaluate the extent to which the INGO sector aligns with a decolonisation agenda, we undertook three exercises. First, we analysed the websites of the different INGOs that are members of Bond, and assessed their approach towards development issues based on what is reported on their websites. We specifically took note of what it is that they aim to achieve and what it is that they achieve. We assessed the websites of 122 INGOs, with each arm of the INGO focussing on a different theme treated as a unique observation, giving us a total of 305 observations. It was important to separate the various arms of an INGO because the approach to development issues and decolonisation can vary markedly across the same organisation. Based on this self-reporting, we rate what each observation (i.e. every arm of an INGO) aims to achieve and what it has achieved on our scale of Eurocentrism (presented in Table 1) between one and five. We use this assigned value to get a general overview of where the different INGOs are placed on our scale and how this may vary based on the different sectors. While what INGOs say that they do, and what they say they have achieved on their websites, might not map perfectly onto work on-the-ground, we consider this to be an important first step to get a sense of how INGOs are presenting themselves, their aims and achievements to the rest of the world.

Second, we sent a survey to all INGO Bond members that work on economic development-related issues. The survey questions go into further detail on the INGO's specific approach to development, to decolonisation and their governance structure. A total of 38 INGOs responded to the survey, but only 19 completed the whole survey, which is likely to be a self-selected sample of INGOs particularly interested in decolonisation work.⁷

Finally, to gain further and deeper insights into why INGOs approached development in a particular way and how they understood various interventions to be connected, we organised interviews with representatives from six major INGOs. The interviews were geared towards unpacking some of the findings from the website analysis and the survey responses by having a more open-ended conversation. The interviews involved questions both on the INGO's overall approach to development, the specific approach based on the theme they work on, and how the INGO in general understood decolonisation in the context of economic development.⁸

Through each subsequent exercise, we attempted to unpack the findings from the prior one in order to get a holistic and deeper sense of the relationship between the INGO sector and the approach towards decolonising economic development. The analysis from these three exercises was then discussed with a focus group of INGO representatives

7. Survey questionnaire can be found here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/18F6Brhjo3NoD-oc9XRy5m_-dOJ04Zf4M/view?usp=sharing

8. See 8.1 in the appendix for the guiding questions that were asked to each INGO and 8.2 for an overview of the anonymised INGOs and their score on the website analysis.

(Bond members) who responded to the invitation. The focus group discussions provided further richness to our analysis.

In this section, we present all the relevant findings together, grouped under distinct themes. We start by analysing the INGOs' overall approach to economic development, including four specific examples (livelihood, gender, education, governance and institutions), before we analyse the INGOs' own understanding of and explicit approach to decolonisation.

4.2 Overall approach to economic development

When analysing the INGO sector's overall approach to economic development, there were two key aspects we wished to study. Firstly, we wished to uncover the INGOs' general approach to economic development. Secondly, we wished to explore to what extent this aligns with a framework for decolonisation. Notably, as we will show, we sometimes found that even when a seemingly decolonised approach was taken – for example, through a focus on empowerment or social movements – below the progressive language lay a Eurocentric framework for understanding economic development.

One of the survey questions asks INGOs to answer the question 'How would you describe your organisation's overall approach to economic development?' and provides the respondents with a set of options. INGOs could choose more than one option, and the distribution is quite telling for our general scale of Eurocentrism (Table 3). The two most frequent answers to this question were 'supporting education, skill development and technology transfer' and 'improving people's situation on the ground by supporting local entrepreneurship and creating income generating opportunities for them' (19/30 respondents chose these answers). This is a first sneak peek into how a substantial part of the INGO sample considers improving individual characteristics of people living in the Global South, such as skilling and entrepreneurship, as crucial points of intervention to promote economic development. As we discussed in Section 3, locating the problem with the individual or local institution in an isolated manner, without taking into account the processes and structures that shape and constrain conditions in the Global South, is a highly Eurocentric way of understanding problems of economic development.

Looking further into Table 3 and the answers that INGOs provided reveals that some INGOs chose options that focus on seemingly more structural factors of development, such as empowering communities that have been marginalised (15/30). However, what came across quite sharply in some interviews and discussions is how such seemingly radical statements often concealed a deeper Eurocentric approach to development. Indeed, when we probed INGOs in interviews on what 'empowering' really means, we discovered that for

many empowerment was simply reduced to skilling, training or providing finance and/or employment opportunities. Notably, the answer most aligned with a decolonisation agenda – ‘Efforts to redistribute power and resources at a global or local level’ – was among the least chosen answers, with 10/30 respondents selecting it.

Table 3. How would you describe your organisation’s overall approach to economic development? (Survey responses)

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Other	13.33%	4
Improving people’s situation on the ground by improving their employability;	43.33%	13
Improving people’s situation on the ground by advancing local entrepreneurship and creating income generating opportunities for them;	63.33%	19
Advancing trade and investment opportunities for low and middle-income countries so they are better integrated into global supply chains;	13.33%	4
Supporting education, skills development, technology transfer etc;	63.33%	19
Providing access to finance for individuals or organisations/ enterprises;	33.33%	10
Improving/ reforming/ transforming international structures / institutions;	43.33%	13
Improving local institutions, standards, policies, etc;	50.00%	15
Empowering marginalised communities to demand their rights;	50.00%	15
Efforts to redistribute power and resource at global or local level (for example, calls for reparation; participatory democracy)	33.33%	10
TOTAL RESPONDENTS: 30		

Figure 1. Which of the following describes best your tactical approach? (Survey responses - total respondents = 30)

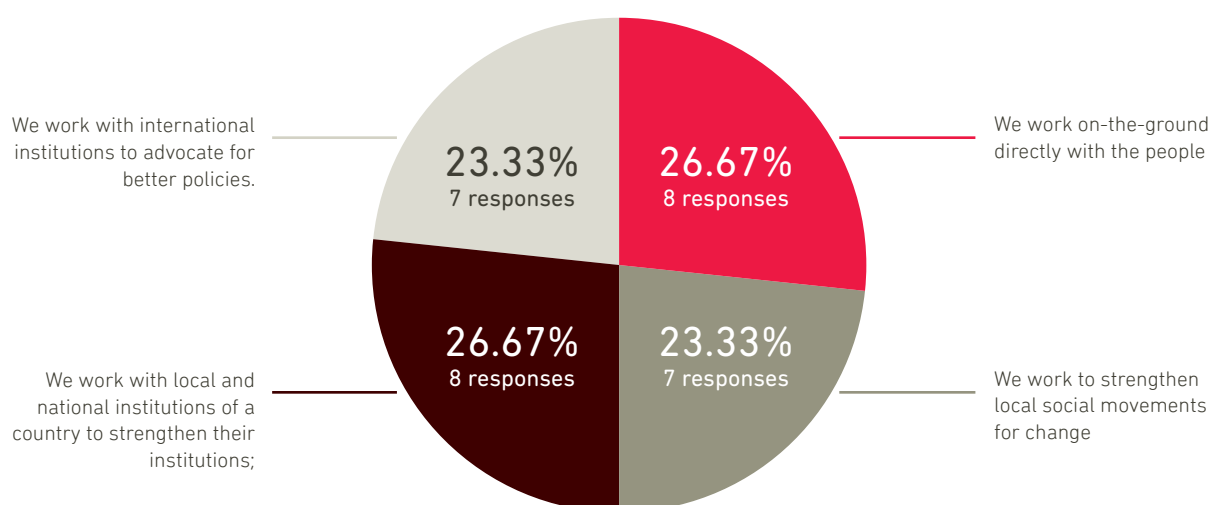
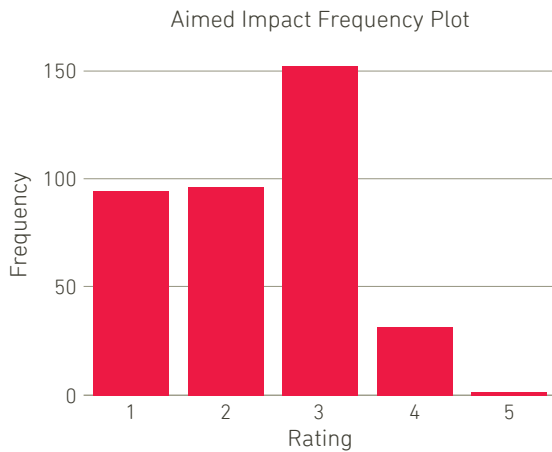
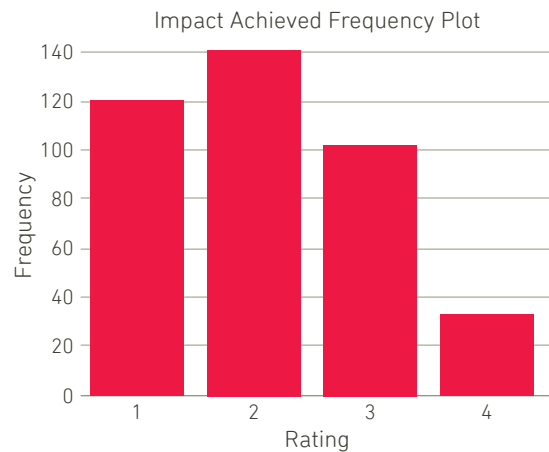


Figure 2. INGOs' aimed and achieved impact (Survey responses - total respondents = 30)

Panel A - Aimed Impact



Panel B - Achieved Impact



When asked about their tactical approach to economic development, INGOs' responses were fairly dispersed among a range of options, including working on the ground with people, working with social movements and working with national and international institutions. However, again, through the interviews we uncovered several different views of what working with people on the ground really meant as well as what it meant to work with a social movement. The question that is of particular interest to us is, regardless of who an INGO is working with, is towards what aims they are doing this work. We unpack this closely in the examples below.

Recall that we extracted the aims of INGOs from their websites and categorised them according to our constructed scale (Table 1 and 2). Our analysis suggests that an overwhelming majority of INGOs lie on a scale less than or equal to three in terms of what they aim to achieve (Figure 2, Panel A). This means they are operating with a relatively Eurocentric understanding of economic development. The situation is even worse for what these INGOs end up achieving (according to their own websites), whereby the distribution lies further to the left, indicating a much higher frequency of scores of one to two on the scale of Eurocentrism (Figure 2, Panel B).

A word cloud of the website analysis, which picks keywords from what the INGOs aim to achieve and have achieved, also speaks to this Eurocentric approach (Figure 3). The words 'training' and 'skills', which we deem as representing a Eurocentric approach to resolving the issue of (under) development, pop out as the most heavily used keywords on the websites. Other words, such as education, advocacy, loans, community and access, also stand out. However, as we shall see as we go through our four examples, most of the

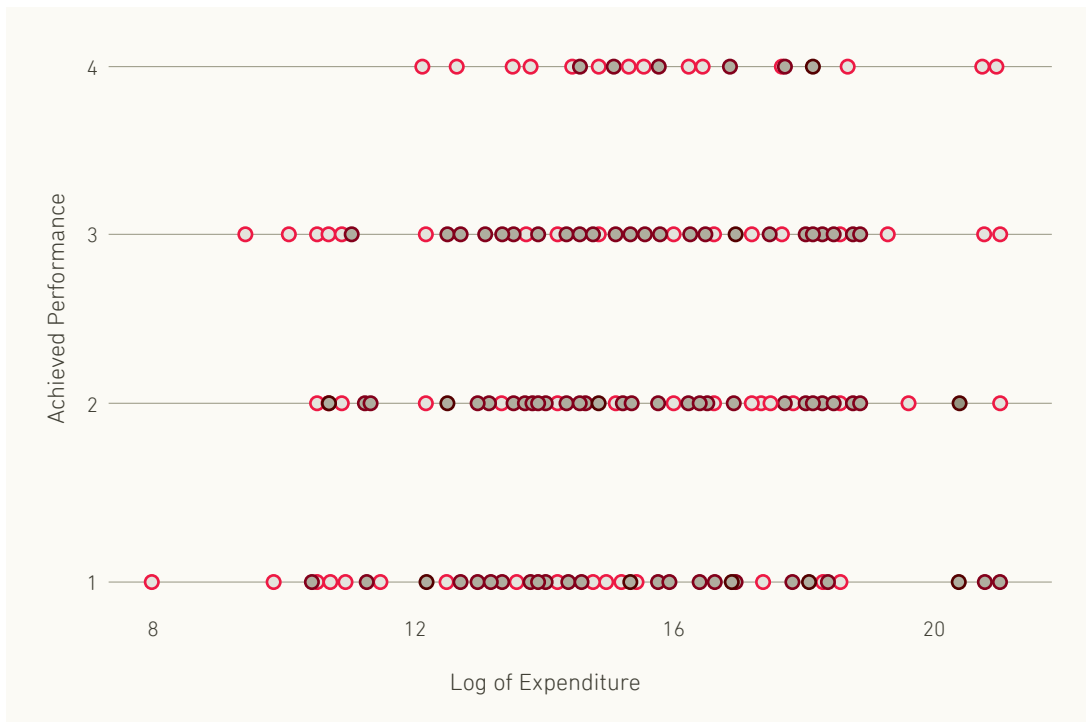
ways these issues are addressed align with a Eurocentric, rather than a decolonised, approach.

Figure 3. Word cloud on website analysis



Finally, we checked to what extent the size of an INGO's annual budget for expenditure was correlated with their score on the scale to investigate whether smaller or larger INGOs may be more or less radical. Interestingly, as shown in Figure 4 overleaf, there is no correlation with the size of an INGO's budget. There are plenty of INGOs of various sizes that scored from one to three, and fewer of all sizes that scored four (none scored five).

Figure 4. Does the size of INGO matter for achieved impact?



Example 1: Livelihoods

Providing sustainable and secure livelihoods for its populations has been a major concern for Global South economies. The problem is not limited to the Global South, as people in the Global North also experience low wages, poor quality jobs and lack the opportunities to secure a sustainable and secure livelihood, but the problem tends to be more intense in the Global South, given the structures of the global economy. As we discussed in Section 3, non-Eurocentric scholarship has long argued that the lack of livelihood options and persistent poverty in the Global South is embedded in how contemporary processes of economic development and the global economy are structured.

These theories, for example, highlight how the structuring of Global South economies in particular ways serve the economic needs of the global capitalist centre, or draw attention to the exclusionary nature of capitalist growth processes in the Global South (Nun, 2000; Sanyal, 2007; Bhaduri, 2018). However, despite this rich literature which is more in line with a framework for decolonisation, the results suggest that piecemeal, Eurocentric understandings of economic development dominate the INGO space.

As the word cloud for livelihoods suggests (Figure 5), the approach here focuses on training and skills. This suggests the focus remains methodologically centred on improving the individual in the Global South, suggesting that the lack of access to livelihoods can be resolved by addressing an

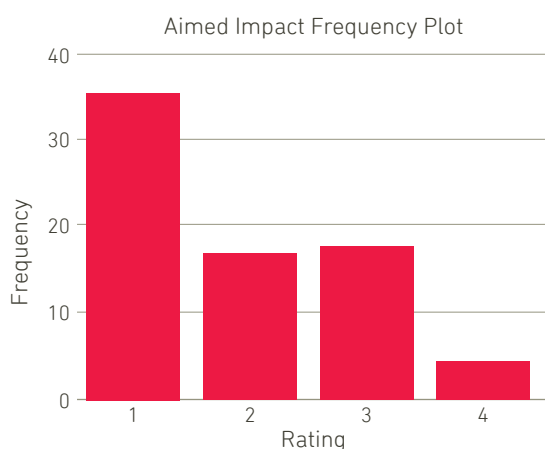
assumed 'lack' in Global South people themselves. This is a distorted understanding of what drives underdevelopment and the role of global structures in this regard, and it suggests that many INGOs align with a 'governing the poor' approach, rather than shifting the economic processes and power structures that limit the growth of good jobs and produce unstable labour relations to begin with.

Figure 5. Word cloud on livelihoods

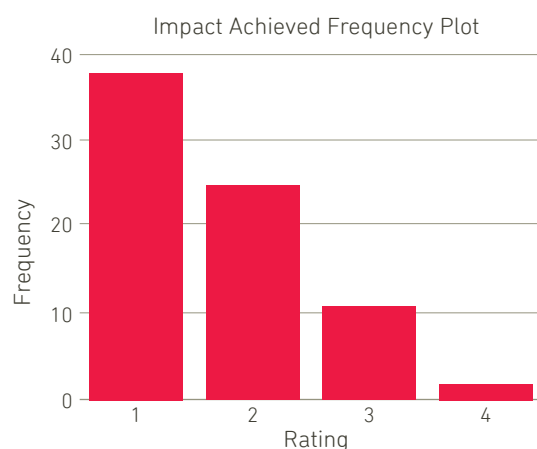


Figure 6. INGOs' aimed and achieved impact for livelihoods
(Survey responses - total respondents = 30)

Panel A - Aimed Impact



Panel B - Achieved Impact



For this theme, the analysis of where both the aimed and achieved impact lie is in line with the word cloud. Most of our observations are concentrated in the one to three range of the scale, suggesting the dominance of a Eurocentric approach to economic development in the INGO space, even according to how INGOs themselves describe their aims and impact (Figure 6). In fact, livelihoods is one of the fields with the highest concentration of INGOs rated as one on the scale. Generally, we can see that INGO work on livelihoods tends to be supply-side focused: the focus is on training or skilling the potential worker to enter the labour market or start their own business. Meanwhile, there is a lack of focus on the demand side – the lack of good, secure jobs, or the lack of any jobs at all – available in the economy. What's more, there is a remarkable lack of focus on the conditions that

create this situation to begin with, which would have required an analysis of how multinational corporations, production structures both at local and global level, ownership of resources and property rights, labour and innovation are structured along hierarchical lines.

This focus on skilling and training also bears out in the response to the survey questions, where the most common answer to the question of how livelihoods is approached was 'delivering skill-development programmes' (4/7) (Table 4). Fewer respondents indicated that they also deal with demand-side issues and/or institutional frameworks in which labour operates, such as lobbying corporations, supporting trade unions, engaging with public institutions or influencing international institutions.

Table 4. If one of your priority areas is livelihoods, please indicate how you approach this? (Survey responses - the number of respondents (7) is attributed to those who work on the theme of livelihoods)

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Providing training to/ working with employers to improve working conditions;	28.57%	2
Lobbying/ working with corporations/ businesses to improve work conditions for their workers or companies in their supply chains;	28.57%	2
Working to support trade unions' work and priorities domestically;	14.29%	1
Working to support trade unions' work and priorities globally;	0.00%	0
Engaging with public institutions in countries where the corporations' outsourcing work is based to institutionalize decent work agenda through standards, policies, regulation etc;	28.57%	2
Engaging with public institutions in countries where value chain work is in-sourced to institutionalize decent work agenda through standards, policies, regulation etc;	14.29%	1
Advocating for strengthening a public social security system;	0.00%	0
Advocating for job creation by the State;	0.00%	0
Advocating for stronger international labour laws;	14.29%	1
Influencing international or bilateral financial institutions on their decent work agenda;	28.57%	2
Delivering skill-development programmes, including internship, apprenticeship or graduate schemes;	57.14%	4
Delivering and disseminating research and policy work around decent work, job creation in partner countries; please specify what kind of research below.	14.29%	1
if other, please list below	0.00%	0
TOTAL RESPONDENTS: 7		

Even when engaging with issues of institutions, INGOs seem more likely to work with specific enterprises than with the state or movements to strengthen the institutions of labour security. (As is evident from no respondent choosing to advocate for job creation or strengthening public social security systems.) This fits with the role of INGOs as filling gaps left by the state, as discussed above, rather than attempting to strengthen public institutions.

These findings were further borne out in an interview with one of the largest INGOs of the sector (INGO5). The INGO dealt with the issue of livelihoods by focusing on youth employment and entrepreneurship. It focused on training young workers, but in more than half of the cases did not manage to find employment opportunities for these trainees (indicating the lack of focus on availability of jobs and other labour demand side factors). Even among the young people who did find employment, many got placed as apprentices who were then paid much less on average than wage workers (meaning these programmes were being used to exploit workers more). This INGO also focused on linking people with microfinance institutions so they could access funds to set up an enterprise, and thereby resolve their lack of work through self-employment. Not only does this remain individual-focused, it also stands in sharp contrast with critical scholarship which has found microfinance institutions to have negative effects on development outcomes (Ghosh, 2013), including the problem of a saturation of small entrepreneurs and the failure of a supply-side approach in dealing with low levels of demand (Bateman and Chang, 2012). Other scholars have identified the unsustainability of these small enterprises, given their inability to provide a stable source of income (Kesar, 2023).

However, the interviews also revealed alternative approaches among INGOs. While INGO5 focused on enabling young people to participate in the labour market, a representative from another INGO (INGO2) clearly identified the broader structures that constrain people's possibilities for securing livelihoods. For example, INGO2 was working to support Indigenous groups' efforts to pursue a legal battle against a corporation that was polluting water and destroying livelihoods in the region, thus pointing to and addressing the characteristic of dispossession that can be embedded in the development process. Even though both of these INGOs used empowerment to describe their approach, they diverged wildly in terms of how they aligned with a decolonisation framework, with the former scoring one in our website analysis and the latter scoring four for certain elements of its work.

Example 2: Gender

The issue of gender has been a critical focus of development interventions since the 1970s, including by the INGO sector. There are different ways to approach gender: from a thoroughly Eurocentric frame, where the problem identified is the skills and resources that women lack (see e.g. Carrasco-Miró, 2022) or a decolonised frame, where

the power structures that shape gendered outcomes come to the fore (Mies, 1986; Fraser, 2013; Bhattacharya, 2017; Ossome, 2023). In such a view, the issue of gender inequality is intertwined with that of the contemporary economic structure. Fraser (2021) argues that, despite providing an essential condition for the process of capitalist expansion, work in the household, which supports social reproduction and is usually undertaken by women, is undervalued and devalued and places extra burden on women. Withdrawing support for this kind of work, for example, by cutting down on publicly-funded childcare, risks creating instability in the system, given its reliance on this kind of work.

A decolonised framework also demands that we view this kind of work from a global perspective. For example, as women in the Global North participate in paid work, social reproductive work is often passed on to immigrant women at a lower wage, who, in turn, have to withdraw labour in their home countries, creating exploitative value chains of care (Fraser, 2021). Furthermore, women are often subjugated through various non-economic structures in order to have them available as cheap workers when required (Mies, 1986). In contrast, understanding gender inequality only as women's lack of access to jobs, opportunities, finance or skills becomes a partial understanding of gender and development.

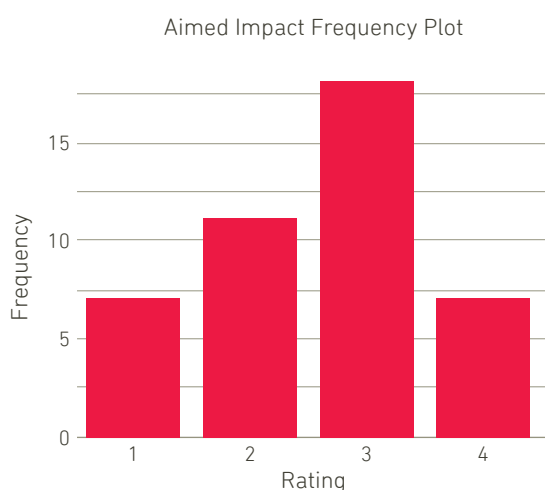
Our study reveals that the INGO sector is not governed by a deeper engagement with the relationship between patriarchy and the economy, and how this leads to adverse outcomes for women. Instead, as shown in the word cloud of keywords on the websites of INGOs working on gender (Figure 7), focus is directed towards changing individual women by training them to be more suited to enter the workforce.

Figure 7. Word cloud on gender

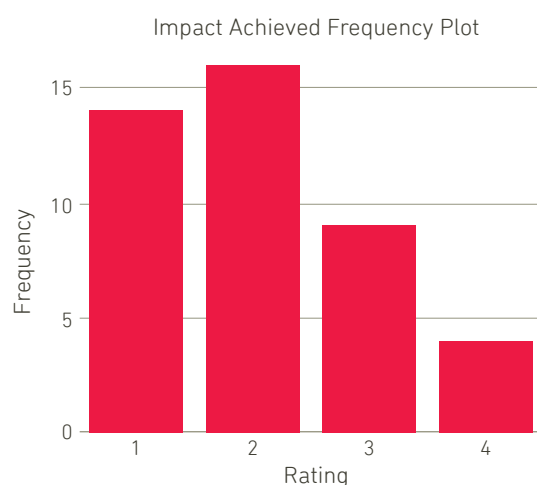


Figure 8. INGOs' aimed and achieved impact for gender

Panel A - Aimed Impact



Panel B - Achieved Impact



Exploring their aims and achieved impacts, we can see that INGOs working on gender score better than those working on livelihoods (meaning that gender work within the INGO sector takes a slightly less Eurocentric approach than livelihoods work, on average). But the rankings are still mostly concentrated in range one to three of the scale, with the scores for achieved impact being significantly worse than the aimed impact (Figure 8).

Once this issue is further explored through the survey (Table 5), we can see that the most frequent interventions focus on promoting financial inclusion (12/17) and assisting women to become entrepreneurs (11/17). Options that would be attributed a higher value on the scale, such as strengthening local social care institutions (3/17) and funding feminist movements (3/17), which align with an understanding of gender inequality from a more decolonised framework, do

Table 5. If one of your priority areas is gender, please indicate how you approach this? (Survey responses - number of respondents (17) is attributed to those who work on the theme of gender)

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Directly providing employment to women or supporting initiatives that increase women's employment opportunities;	52.94%	9
Promoting financial inclusion for women;	70.59%	12
Supporting initiative or advocating for advancing women's rights to property;	52.94%	9
Conducting research and data analysis on gender inequalities and disparities to inform policies and interventions	64.71%	11
Advocating for the inclusion of a gender lens in the work of international financial institutions	35.29%	6
Strengthening local social care institutions;	17.65%	3
Providing better education / nutrition to women;	52.94%	9
Assisting women to become entrepreneurs;	64.71%	11
Improving women's representation in political spaces;	47.06%	8
Supporting women to participate in social movements to demand their rights;	52.94%	9
Train other organisations on implementing gender-transformative practices;	47.06%	8
Facilitating the formation of global alliances;	23.53%	4
Organize women in Self-help groups;	41.18%	7
Providing support or unrestricted long-term funding for feminist movements/ initiatives globally;	17.65%	3
Organizing women to participate in NGOs;	23.53%	4
Other	11.76%	2
TOTAL RESPONDENTS: 17		

not have much take up in the sample. While there is a take-up of relatively more progressive policies, such as training employers to be more gender transformative (8/17) or advancing women's rights to properties (9/17), these kinds of approaches fall short of challenging the intertwined relation of patriarchy and the economic system.

This finding was further crystallised in the interviews, where one of the large development INGOs equated female empowerment with women's ability to earn more money (INGO5). While some INGOs signalled the need for the state to step in to provide care (INGO6), most initiatives that focused on empowering women were limited to training and developing entrepreneurial capabilities.

For some INGOs, involving women in designing the interventions was part of what was considered a decolonised approach (INGO6). Steps such as involving more women in designing interventions, deciding on the type of interventions required and providing women with skills so they can contribute is not necessarily undesirable as such, but these are temporary fixes in the absence of public social welfare. If making things more equal is the aim, INGOs would need to reorient their focus to the structures that produce unequal outcomes to begin with, such as creating alternative economic structures to challenge patriarchal relations, strengthening public services for social reproductive work and supporting feminist movements.

Example 3: Education

Since the structural adjustment period, education systems across the globe, including in the Global South, have been increasingly oriented towards private markets and actors, undermining the need for a strong public education system.⁹ It has been well documented that the privatisation agenda for schools is now firmly embedded within the global educational space. Indeed, the global discussion has become less about whether privatisation of education is good or not, and more about which forms of private education are desirable, with public-private partnerships becoming increasingly dominant (Rivzi, 2016; Languille, 2017). With such models, public spending on education may increase without state education systems being strengthened as public funds are channelled towards private corporations that are thought to deliver schooling more effectively than the state as they can bypass powerful teachers' unions (Patrinos et al., 2009; McGoey, 2014; Languille, 2017).¹⁰ For many Global South economies, this has led to a dwindling infrastructure for public schooling (Verger et al., 2016).

Critical literature has acknowledged that education has the potential to increase inequalities, given the wide variety of

opportunities available to those attending different types of schools (Eurodad, 2022). Under these circumstances, many progressive movements have called for the gap between private and state-funded schools to be narrowed by increasing public spending for schools. Even more radical demands have been made for a universal, equal and critical education system, which not only allows for equitable opportunities across class and identity groups but also pushes students to think critically about their own social position and the role of education and teaching within it (Freire, 2017/1970). These more radical demands are more in line with a framework for decolonisation.

The focus of the INGO sector, however, is far removed from these more radical demands. While the word cloud is filled with words that are hard to place on the scale of Eurocentrism as they do not say much about the approach to improving education (e.g. through access, support and learning; see Figure 9), the ranking of aims and achieved impact provides a few more clues (Figure 10 overleaf). The INGOs working on education were mainly concentrated on the one to three range of the scale for aimed impact. The high concentration around three on the scale suggests that INGO work on education is, on average, less Eurocentric than work on livelihoods and gender. However, in terms of what these INGOs achieved, the concentration on three is much lower, with a heavier concentration on one and two, indicating that their achievements are much more Eurocentric in nature.

This is further apparent in the survey results (Table 6), where we can see that the most common approach to improving educational outcomes is training teachers and/or providing them with resources (8/10 respondents). Much like the issue of livelihoods and gender, this indicates that the focus is on finding the gaps and 'lacks' in individual teachers, rather than acknowledging and addressing the undermining of the state

Figure 9. Word cloud on education

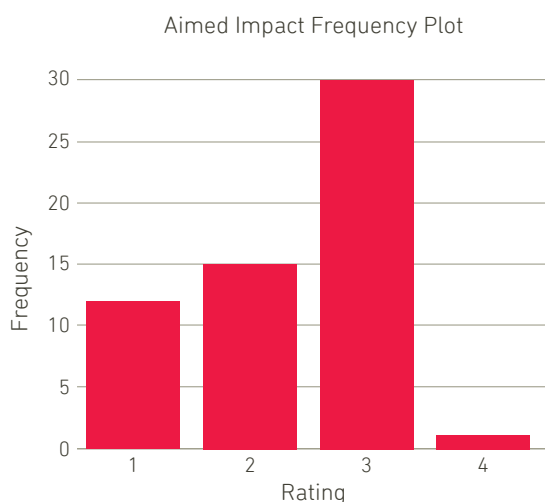


9. The effects of this are not well understood, given that the current production of knowledge about public-private partnerships is largely controlled by their main advocates. For a systematic review, see Languille (2017).

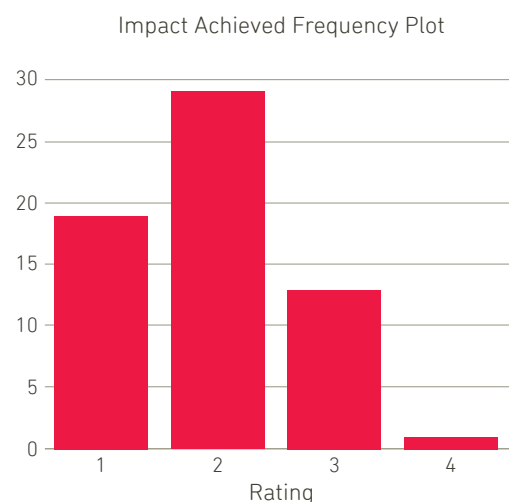
10. Whether private actors in education are actually less costly for the government is contested and evidence on the issue is mixed (Barrera-Osorio, 2012).

Figure 10. INGOs' aimed and achieved impact for education

Panel A - Aimed Impact



Panel B - Achieved Impact



which has caused poor education systems to begin with. Indeed, stepping in to train teachers rather than advocating for anti-austerity policies suggests that INGOs are willingly filling the gap, albeit quite unsatisfactorily, that structural adjustment has left in the education system, rather than tackling the problem at its roots. In many Global South countries, such as India, many school trials and experiments are run that involve volunteers assisting after-school teaching or running additional classes to improve exam outcomes, or increasing surveillance of teachers (Banerjee et al., 2008). However, such approaches avoid the broader structural problems, which includes teachers' long working hours (with many schools run by a single teacher), low

salaries and poor infrastructure, which make it extremely difficult to provide good quality education for all. Schooling itself needs to be placed within the broader development picture, given that post-school expectations are low for many pupils as demonstrated by the high levels of unemployment that persist across large parts of the Global South, especially for youth (see e.g. ILO 2024 for the case of India).

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that 4 out of 10 respondents reported that they advocate for national and international institutions to increase public spending on education, which means several INGOs also attempt to move beyond the role of filling the gap left by the withdrawal of the state.

Table 6. If one of your priority areas is education, please indicate how you approach this? (Survey responses - number of respondents (10) is attributed to those who work on the theme of education)

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Advocacy - lobbying for national and international institution to increase public spending on educational institutions	40.00%	4
Training teachers and/or providing teaching resources and tools	80.00%	8
Helping build school infrastructure (physical or digital)	20.00%	2
Covering operational costs of education facilities	50.00%	5
Running schools/ education facilities yourself	30.00%	3
Supporting private/ fee-based solutions	0.00%	0
TOTAL RESPONDENTS: 10		

The question remains, however, as to what kind of public education is being supported through such initiatives. As mentioned earlier, a decolonised approach to education is one that pushes for a universal, equal and critical education system which allows for equitable opportunities across class and identity groups, which pushes students to think critically, and which situates education work within global economic structures such as calls for reparations and anti-austerity.

Example 4: Governance and institutions

For any attempt towards decolonisation, the governance structures of the global economy and the institutional mechanisms in place are critical to consider and explore. Once again, this can be approached in a variety of ways. On the one hand, anti-colonial, post-colonial and structuralist scholars and activists have long pointed out that the global economy, including global governance structures and institutions, are heavily tilted in favour of Global North economies (Prebisch, 1950; Nkrumah, 1965; Patnaik and Patnaik, 2016; Muchala, 2021; Sylla, 2021).

This is true for the global trading system, which through global, regional and bilateral trading rules is structured to deny Global South countries the same development space for policymaking and the same institutional leeway that Global North countries had access to when they industrialised (Reinert, 2007; Chang, 2002). For example, Chang (2002) shows that when Global North economies were undergoing industrialisation and development, they protected their domestic economy and industries by following a closed trade regime. But they have since advocated for Global South countries to open up their economies for international trade as a path for facilitating economic development. This is what he has famously called 'kicking away the ladder'.

A similar structure can be identified in the global financial system. This is governed by a highly unequal power structure with, for example, the US having a veto in the IMF and the World Bank (Wade, 2011) and US dollars being the vehicle currency of the world in which about 88% of international transactions take place (Bertaut et al., 2021). The dominance of US dollars results in all economies of the world having to accumulate USD reserves to service their imports or debts, which for many economies have reached unsustainable levels. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, the loans advanced by the IMF to Global South countries are conditional on them adopting the Washington Consensus.

This has halted development in many economies and goes against the kinds of policies that Global North countries pursued when they were industrialising. While debt justice activists across the globe have long called for the cancellation of unsustainable and odious debt burdens, groups of creditors in the Global North resist any radical restructuring of the global credit system. Others have pointed out the need to provide more space to enable Global South economies to undertake public investment in order

to facilitate economic development and expand the social provision of basic services (UNCTAD, 2020). Scholarship on these governance issues that is in line with a decolonisation agenda takes into account the vast power imbalances that these systems are built on and how they reproduce economic and political inequalities.

In contrast, the way governance and institutions is approached within the dominant development paradigm, which has a strong influence on INGOs, has been to depoliticise the question and reduce the problem to either fixing imperfections in Global South institutions (e.g. through anti-corruption efforts) or to capacity building. As such, the focus has moved from addressing underlying power inequalities in the world to the 'lack' in institutions and people in the Global South (Pierre, 2020). The focus within this model moves to finding ways to achieve 'good governance' at the local or national level, away from global forces of power. This is a classic example of a Eurocentric approach to institutions and governance.

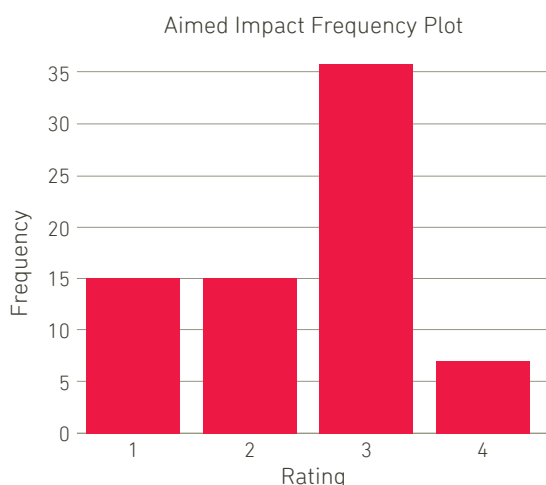
Figure 11. Word cloud on governance and institutions



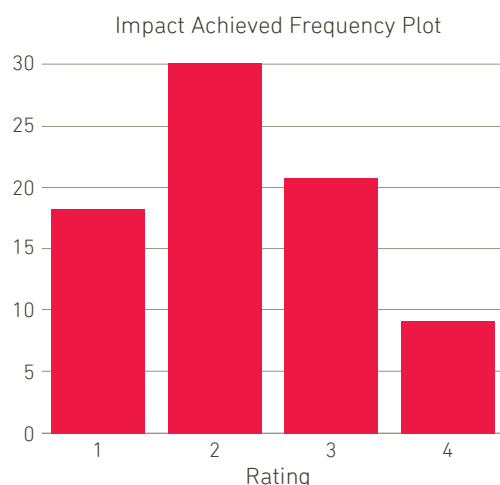
When we look at the results from the website analysis, it is quite striking that words associated with capacity building and improving people and institutions in the Global South are in focus, with the verbs 'building' and 'training' being the most commonly used words (Figure 11). Other notable terms are 'skills', 'learning', 'design' and 'local', which suggest a generally Eurocentric approach to governance and institutions. There is not a single word that suggests a structural approach to governance and institutions that would be considered less Eurocentric. But, as we shall see in a moment, some INGOs do pursue a more ambitious attempt at reforming institutions and governance.

Figure 12. INGOs' aimed and achieved impact for governance and institutions

Panel A - Aimed Impact



Panel B - Achieved Impact



As you can see from Figure 12, the aimed impact frequency plot shows proportions similar to the overall picture, but the achieved impact has a higher proportion of threes and a lower proportion of ones. The majority of INGO observations are concentrated on level two and three of the scale, rather than on one and two, which was the case for other themes. Indeed, this may suggest that while continuing to work within an Eurocentric framework, INGO interventions on institutions and governance consider structures and power dynamics more seriously than interventions under other themes, such as education and livelihoods. Nonetheless, the observations at the right tail of the scale are still sparse, with no INGO at five and only a few at four.

Some of the INGOs surveyed answered that global governance was one of their priority areas (8/38), and their answers give some indication of what kinds of issues they focus on under this theme (Table 7). While the answers do not always indicate whether the kinds of policies being pushed for are anti-colonial (e.g. one could be advocating for various kinds of policies within the IMF and World Bank), they do suggest that a large part of the work that INGOs are doing on global governance is linked to advocating for reforms at the global level and supporting civil society groups that are doing the same in the Global North and South (with a focus on supporting civil society groups in the South). This was also reflected in interviews with INGOs that focus on global

Table 7. If one of your priority areas is global governance, please indicate how you approach this? (Survey responses - number of respondents (8) is attributed to those who work on the theme of governance)

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Advocating for specific policies, initiatives within multi-lateral policy space (increasing voice of LMICs in various institutions, advocating for UN Tax convention, new international debt mechanism etc)	75.00%	6
Advocating for reforms of global financial architecture (WB, IMF etc)	75.00%	6
Supporting and/or funding civil society groups in the global North that lobby their governments or international institutions;	25.00%	2
Supporting civil society in partner countries of the global South to advocate for systemic changes on an international level;	62.50%	5
Working on anti-corruption initiatives at national or local level	25.00%	2
Other	0.00%	0
TOTAL RESPONDENTS: 8		

governance (e.g. INGO1, INGO2). Nonetheless, a smaller, but still substantial, number of INGOs also said their global governance work involved anti-corruption initiatives (one fourth of respondents), which suggests a more Eurocentric approach to global governance where the concern is on making the state in Global South countries function more efficiently.

Of course, global governance is a cross-cutting area that may also be taken into account by INGOs working on entirely different themes, such as trade, labour and climate change. As we saw in the discussion on livelihoods, a small number of INGOs included work on advocating for stronger international labour laws, influencing institutional bodies or creating space for the state to undertake investment and create jobs and social safety nets, but more INGOs focused solely on supply-side micro-intervention issues (Table 5).

Similarly, we see a mix of approaches in how INGOs approach climate change (Table 8). A significant number of INGO respondents (about half) are engaged in environmental and climate sustainability which involved both advocating for global environmental justice and lobbying international institutions and/or Global North governments to take specific actions or provide needed support for a green transition. Given the global scale and unequal distribution of responsibilities and impacts related to climate change, it is perhaps expected – and certainly important – that there is a stronger focus on the global picture among INGOs working on this issue. However, from these responses it is not clear

whether advocacy for a green transition assumes that the Global South will continue to provide low value-added primary products and critical minerals for such a transition, or whether INGOs link climate change work to broader problems of structural inequalities between North and South.

Some INGOs we interviewed pointed to problems within the global economic structure and governance. For example, some INGOs intervene directly to lobby the World Bank or work with Global South partners to support their lobbying work against international institutions (INGO2). However, even those that were very active in their lobbying of UK trade treaties to create more policy space for Global South countries (e.g. INGO1), indicating a more radical approach, ended up reducing their on-the-ground work to better connecting farmers to the private sector or fair trade initiatives. Again, here the focus is on supply-side initiatives and is closer to the bottom end of the scale, indicating a more Eurocentric approach. This suggests a discrepancy in terms of what kind of work is more or less in line with a decolonisation agenda, even within the same INGO. It also indicates a disconnect between ‘global’ work and on-the-ground work, suggesting that work in these different spaces is often carried out in isolation from each other, and there is a lack of understanding about how the two are connected. This poses a challenge to decolonisation as it suggests that when INGOs work on the ground, even if they are otherwise progressive in their global work, they tend to take broader power structures as a given.

Table 8. If one of your priority areas is environmental and climate sustainability, please indicate how do you approach this? (Survey responses - the number of respondents (13) is attributed to those who work on the theme of environmental and climate sustainability)

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Advocating for public funding or State policies at national or local level to support mitigation and/or adaptation to climate change	53.85%	7
Strengthening and supporting local movements for ecological conservation	61.54%	8
Directly funding households' efforts to improve their resilience to climate shocks	30.77%	4
funding and/or facilitating private sector efforts to support environmental and climate sustainability	7.69%	1
Lobbying international institutions and/or governments in the global North to take specific actions or provide needed support for a green transition	61.54%	8
Advocate for global environmental justice, e.g., through environmental reparations	53.85%	7
Provide loans or income transfers to households for investment in environmental and climate-friendly technologies, such as clean energy	0.00%	0
Create awareness among communities for environmentally sustainable practices	53.86%	7
If other, please list	7.69%	1
TOTAL RESPONDENTS: 13		

4.3 How do INGOs approach decolonisation?

Different INGOs' understanding and practice of decolonisation differ quite drastically and point to some important tensions that are necessary to clarify. This diversity is probably not surprising, given how quickly the metaphor of decolonisation has permeated different academic and institutional spaces without a systematic consideration of its theoretical and political underpinning. Through the survey and interviews, we were able to gain insights into some of the ways that UK INGOs approach decolonisation both in terms of their framework for development and how they are attempting to change their own internal structures and workings.

How do INGOs understand decolonisation?

The INGOs in our sample differed greatly in their understanding of decolonisation. Some understood decolonisation as localisation or shifting power to country offices, while others saw it as improving diversity or increasing the influence of Indigenous knowledge. A handful of INGOs saw decolonisation as linked to changing the global economic system and power structures, which is in line with the decolonisation framework put forward in this report. Here are some snippets from the answers to the survey question 'How does your organisation understand decolonisation?'

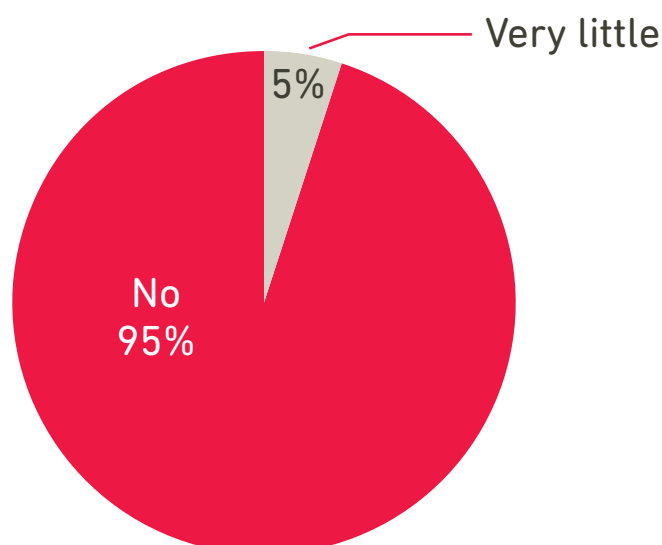
- "Rebalancing the global balance of power in favour of developing countries and away from northern multilateral corporations."

- "As a large organisation, the picture here is mixed. There are pockets of work going on within the organisations to shift power internally within the organisation. However, our governance structures are still dominated by power holders based in the Global North (typically fundraising countries)."
- "Locally-led, locally-defined (by the communities, not necessarily national governments)."
- "It's complicated."
- "Yes, however our various projects and programmes are designed and executed based on local context, its needs and what our partners deem most appropriate."
- "While our policies are determined by our members, we are nevertheless a Western-based NGO that emerged from another Western-based NGO."

We saw similar responses from the interviewees, for example:

- "Decolonisation is about bringing Indigenous knowledge into decision-making." (INGO 3)
- "[It's] about challenging power structures – resources and local leadership. We need to hold ourselves more to account, to not just talk about aid but rather focus on structural issues." (INGO 2)
- "[Decolonisation means] changing our ideas of what expertise is and where it lies, and celebrating Indigenous knowledge." (INGO 2)
- "[It's about] disrupting power structures, and locally-led development." (INGO 4)
- "Decolonisation is about partnership and funding for rights." (INGO 6)

Figure 13. Is your organisation doing any work internally around decolonisation? (Survey respondents - answered 15, skipped 19)



How do INGOs approach decolonisation?

Despite no consensus among INGOs on what decolonisation means, there is a strong interest in the concept among the INGOs that responded to the survey (Figure 13 - previous page). This is interesting, given the strong Eurocentrism we uncovered in these organisations' approach to issues of economic development.

When asked 'How does your organisation's practice align with a decolonisation agenda?' the answers were equally diverse. Some of the answers to the survey include:

- *"Not sure about the specifics of the decolonisation agenda but we have a conscious, constructive and deliberate movement towards members in the Global South being locally governed. Leadership is locally led, all in-country staff are local, and decision-making, policies [are locally-led]."*
- *"Partners have commended their input into design, leadership and support, given where required. [There is also] mutual respect; they had not observed a power imbalance between the organisations. We continue to dig deeper, assess and reflect. We have a good reputation amongst partners for their accessing a high proportion of grants."*
- *"African women are delivering our mission."*
- *"It's complicated."*
- *"We are increasingly employing local staff and changing the balance to be locally led. Our support mechanism for IPLCs [Indigenous people and local communities] is about providing decision-making locally, instead of by us."*

A few striking reflections emerge from these responses. First, it is notable how what the INGOs understand by decolonisation departs from how they undertake decolonisation in practice. For example, radical understandings of decolonisation, such as challenging global power structures and disrupting power structures, make up some of the responses of how INGO representatives understand decolonisation. However, in their own organisational attempts towards decolonising, the approach remains limited to actions such as including local INGO partners, increasing diversity or increasing local staff, which doesn't go very far in achieving the former. The disconnect between the understanding of decolonisation and how to go about it suggests there is a risk that decolonisation may become a mere metaphor and may be co-opted towards non-radical means.

Second, what emerges from these answers is a strong tendency towards equating decolonisation with things that do not necessarily have to do with a decolonisation framework, as outlined by the anti- and post-colonial scholars discussed earlier. This is probably not surprising, given how embedded INGOs have been in the Eurocentric development project and their role in an approach that aligns with 'governance

of the poor' (Sanyal, 2007). Instead, INGOs often equate decolonisation with other justice-oriented goals,¹¹ such as shifting decision-making power from offices in the Global North to partners in the Global South, increasing diversity, involving local actors in their work and drawing on Indigenous knowledge. While these efforts may be important in their own right, it is worth noting that they are not the same as a decolonisation agenda as outlined in this report, and at times they may even be in conflict with it. Take localisation, for example; if power is shifted from a London headquarters to a local office but that local office promotes highly Eurocentric development policies, this would run counter to a decolonisation agenda. Some INGOs recognise this contradiction and call out the localisation trend as a problematic one from a decolonisation perspective (INGO3).

According to the survey results, INGOs differed greatly in their understanding of what the problem in the INGO landscape is. For example, some saw the INGO sphere as London-centric, with a lot of posturing about decolonisation (INGO2). Nonetheless, there was general agreement that there had been a shift in recent years, although different INGOs understood the nature of the shift in different ways. For example, some saw positive improvements in recent years spurred on by the Black Lives Matter movement (INGO3), and others noticed that there has been a shift from colonial images and practices to more focus on power and voice (INGO1). But overall it was striking to find that, in terms of the efforts undertaken or considered by the INGOs, there was often a (false) parallel drawn between decolonisation and the localisation / diversity agenda without a critical examination of what the framework and scholarship on decolonisation entails. For example, in one interview an INGO representative focused on diversity of voices as decolonisation and considered decolonisation as something that depended on individuals (INGO3).

But this was not always the case. In the interviews, some INGOs recognised the power imbalance between the Global North and South, and how the aims that international institutions work to achieve may not allow for a rebalancing (e.g. INGO6). Others highlighted the need to admit complicity in creating global inequalities and extractive processes (e.g. INGO2).

Even when not necessarily aligning their understanding with the decolonisation framework put forward here, other INGOs described some constraints to including local partners, which provide important insights for understanding the roadblocks that stand in the way of decolonisation. For example, some INGOs emphasised the role of donors' priorities, which often compress timelines in ways that make it impossible to make demand-side efforts, let alone take a structural approach that may better align with a decolonisation agenda (INGO5). There was also a recognition that shifting power and money directly to partner countries risks making Global North headquarters redundant (INGO5).

11. This is often done in academia as well, as has been famously criticised by Tuck and Yang (2012).

Some recognised the fact that the sector’s structure is set up in such a way that it actually makes decolonisation counter to strong interests within some INGOs, given that there are some that will lose out in the decolonisation process due to the power struggle it entails. This is important to recognise, as it reminds us that decolonisation is an inherently political struggle which involves challenging rigid power structures. Indeed, some INGOs were quite explicit about the fact that the decolonisation process was severely constrained by the fact that some UK INGOs’ income generally comes from the public, and therefore public perception and interest needs to shift before there can be progress towards decolonisation (INGO1). As one INGO representative put it, “after all, we are in [the] Global North with Global North funders. We need funders to shift the way they work.” A representative from INGO5 put it even more bluntly: “If power shifts to local partners, it would make headquarters quite redundant.”

Decolonisation and internal governance

In the survey and interviews, we asked INGOs questions about who in the organisation makes decisions on the approach to economic development, how research is carried out, who informs research and programmatic work and what the role of social movements are. The findings here can be grouped into three themes: priority-setting, how the overall framework for development is set, and how research is organised:

1. **Priority-setting:** The majority of INGOs say head office and country offices are the most important in determining priorities. The government of the country where the head office is based seems less important. Southern-based activists and civil society groups play a varied role, as do donors (Table 9).

Table 9. (Survey results): To what extent (from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is fully) are the following actors involved in defining your organisation’s priorities and designing actions to promote economic development?

	1	2	3	4	5	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
The Head office	5.00% 1	5.00% 1	20.00% 4	10.00% 2	60.00% 12	20	4.15
Country offices	25.00% 5	5.00% 1	5.00% 1	25.00% 5	40.00% 8	20	3.50
Local non-governmental partners	10.00% 2	20.00% 4	20.00% 4	35.00% 7	15.00% 3	20	3.25
Local public-sector partners	25.00% 5	30.00% 6	20.00% 4	20.00% 4	5.00% 1	20	2.50
Local communities	15.00% 3	30.00% 6	10.00% 2	25.00% 5	20.00% 4	20	3.05
Local private sector	35.00% 7	25.00% 5	35.00% 7	0.00% 0	5.00% 1	20	2.15
Indigenous and marginalized communities	20.00% 4	20.00% 4	20.00% 4	20.00% 4	20.00% 4	20	3.00
Government of the HQ country	40.00% 8	25.00% 5	20.00% 4	10.00% 2	5.00% 1	20	2.15
Southern-based activists and civil society groups	20.00% 4	10.00% 2	20.00% 4	35.00% 7	15.00% 3	20	3.15
your donors	5.00% 1	45.00% 9	30.00% 6	20.00% 4	0.00% 0	20	2.65

Table 10. (Survey results): How are your country-level interventions structured?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
They are designed entirely based on local context	30.00%	6
There is a general framework and set of goals and the local contexts can influence it	60.00%	12
There is a particular set of goals and practices that are universally applied	10.00%	2
TOTAL RESPONDENTS: 20		

- 2. **Framework:** The majority of INGOs we surveyed and interviewed have a general framework for interventions but allow local context to influence it. The majority of INGOs said they either implicitly or explicitly work with social movements. Few INGOs apply a universal framework regardless of local context (Table 10). Interestingly, the majority of INGOs surveyed said their organisation is led by Western values and interests to a greater extent than local context (Figure 14).
- 3. **Research:** We found there is a strong bias in INGOs towards drawing on research from international institutions as well as internal research by the organisations themselves (Table 11). There is some reliance on academic research, consultancies by academics and research by local organisations, but fewer drew on independent consultants from the Global North or South. INGOs tend to have a few consultants that they work with, often based in the Global North. Generally, anti-colonial scholars are not often involved in such consultancies.

The majority of INGOs we surveyed said their headquarter priorities determine their research, while somewhat fewer said their research is determined by input from Southern partners, social movements in the Global South or donor projects (Table 12). This indicates that a structure has been established to produce a certain kind of research to inform INGO approaches to economic development which, as we have established, is often Eurocentric. Breaking out of this structure is not simply about sourcing more consultants from the Global South, but carefully interrogating the frameworks used by the researcher and the kinds of assumptions about economic development that are being made in INGO-funded research.

Overall, the INGO sector appears to be shifting to incorporating some local actors and interests, but it does not necessarily seem influenced by the decolonisation agenda we discussed. This is not to say that the shift towards local actors having a say is not important. In fact, it is striking that this is not already the case; not only are a significant number of INGOs still Eurocentric in their approach to economic development (which we identify as the most crucial concern), actors and funders in the Global North also seem to carry significant power in calling the shots on how things are run in Global South economies. However, our concern with decolonising the agenda of economic development is even graver. It requires a shift in how development itself is envisaged and what could potentially be established as alternative paths towards and aims for development, as outlined by non-Eurocentric scholarship.

Figure 14. Do you think your organisation is led by Western values and interests to a greater extent than by the local context?

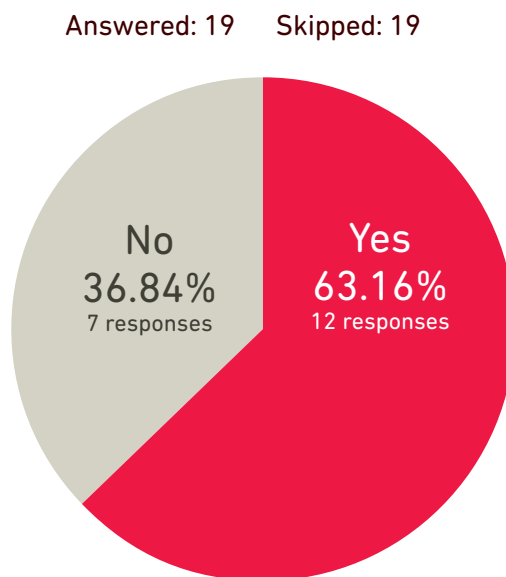


Table 11. Please indicate how frequently (from 1 to 5, where 1 is never and 5 is constantly) you draw upon the following for research, knowledge and information?

	1	2	3	4	5	TOTAL
Research that comes out of international institutions	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	5.26% 1	47.37% 9	47.37% 9	19
Academic research or researched sourced from academic consultants	5.26% 1	5.26% 1	21.05% 4	42.11% 8	26.32% 5	19
Research sourced from independent consultants based in the global South	10.53% 2	10.53% 2	31.58% 6	31.58% 6	15.79% 3	19
Research sourced from independent consultants based in the Global North	5.26% 1	10.53% 2	36.84% 7	31.58% 6	15.79% 3	19
Local research by organisations on the ground	10.53% 2	10.53% 2	36.84% 7	15.79% 3	26.32% 5	19
Internal research in your organisation	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	36.84% 6	31.58% 4	47.37% 9	19

Table 12. To what extent do the following factors determine your research (where 1 is not at all and 5 is significantly)? (Survey responses)

	1	2	3	4	5	TOTAL
Results from donor projects	10.53% 2	26.32% 5	21.05% 4	21.05% 4	21.05% 4	19
Your organization's priorities determined in your headquarters	5.26% 1	10.53% 2	10.53% 2	36.84% 7	36.84% 7	19
Pressure from civil society or other actors in the country where you are headquartered	26.32% 5	36.84% 7	15.79% 3	15.79% 3	5.26% 1	19
Pressure from the government of the country in which you are headquartered	57.89% 11	10.53% 2	21.05% 4	10.53% 2	0.00% 0	19
Pressure from the government of the country in which you operate	47.37% 9	15.79% 3	26.32% 5	10.53% 2	0.00% 0	19
One-off or time-limited consultations with Southern partners, such as local NGOs	15.79% 3	15.79% 3	36.84% 7	26.32% 5	5.26% 1	19
Long term relationships with Southern partners, such as local NGOs	0.00% 0	5.26% 1	26.32% 5	52.63% 10	15.79% 3	19
Input from social movements in the global South	15.79% 3	15.79% 3	31.58% 6	21.05% 4	15.79% 3	19

5. Conclusions

Whether INGOs can decolonise their approach to economic development is a question that cannot be removed from the INGO sector's history and the contemporary political trajectory.

Not only can we trace the institutional history and role of INGOs all the way back to colonial imperatives, the way INGOs are currently structured also remains firmly cemented in a Eurocentric approach to development. In the developmentalist post-World War II period, the role of the INGOs evolved in firm alignment with the dominant development project of the time. From filling in the gaps of social provision while Global South governments and their partners directed their efforts towards transformation and modernisation, to playing the role of a stop-gap band aid for social provision when both the old and new development projects failed to deliver promises of development, the role of the INGO sector has been critical. However, as this report's findings suggest, the sector's value has been more in the service of the dominant Eurocentric development model than towards advancing an alternative understanding of development or strengthening existing efforts to push for decolonisation.

It could be argued that the INGO sector should not be expected to push for decolonisation, and that this might be a tall ask, given INGOs' tendency to work within the system to plug gaps in existing provisioning and to advance social support. The task of more radical interventions, in contrast, is necessarily one of social movements and groups able to mount resistance to the dominant system. Nonetheless, a few critical issues are worth noting. Even though the views of the leaders of some INGOs appear to align with a decolonised framework, the INGO sector as a whole has been working both in service of, and to strengthen, the Eurocentric development model. Given that INGOs are usually funded by governments in the Global North or philanthropy associated with big capital (both in the Global North and South), this alignment is not surprising.

Furthermore, often INGOs' interventions are in sharp contrast with the aims of social movements that are actually geared towards decolonisation. In those instances, involvement of INGOs with these radical movements could even estrange the latter from its political nature and risk its co-option (Lerche, 2008). Often, movements may be asked to develop a strategy that aligns with INGOs and international institutions in order to gather support and resources for the cause, effectively depoliticising movements or distancing them from radical aims.

Even when INGOs include local actors or focus on making their processes more diverse and inclusive, they are likely to play their defined role in the development project (even if unconsciously and unwillingly): to provide political stability to an inequitable and exclusionary economic system.

This is not to suggest a completely pessimistic view of the

role that INGOs can play in a decolonisation process. Rather it is to identify INGOs' limits and to prevent the radical parts of the decolonisation agenda from being co-opted. These limits were also pointed out by INGO representatives in the interviews. There are, of course, roles that INGOs can play that can contribute towards providing space for initiatives to decolonise economic development, such as strengthening labour laws which opens possibilities of increasing workers' bargaining power, advocating for policy space for the Global South which expands its ability to increase social spending, and providing support to local organisations and movements to bargain against big capital.

However, in each of these instances, the aim should not merely be to provide band-aids and fixes whose effectiveness can be immediately measured, rather the aim should be to contribute towards supporting those who can undertake the project of decolonisation. In such instances, the role of INGOs is to support certain groups that can be actors of radical change, rather than simply including them in their project or having them align their strategies with the strategies of INGOs. The feasibility of this happening, however, is open for debate, given the political and historical role of INGOs to date and who funds and governs INGOs.

6. Recommendations

Given the nature of decolonisation as a deeply political and structural process, it is not possible – nor desirable – to come up with a simple check-list for decolonisation.

We can certainly pinpoint aspects that would lead to higher scores on the scale we constructed, but even this may be inadequate if the INGO sector as a whole falls short of radically transforming. As such, we caution against INGOs co-opting the language of decolonisation without thinking carefully about the kinds of interests they represent, and how and where they are located in the dominant framework of development.

A decolonisation framework

The ways for INGOs to move away from Eurocentric interventions and closer to a decolonisation process would require the way development itself is conceived to be fundamentally altered. For example, the structural aspects of development would need to be recognised by identifying the processes that create conditions of underdevelopment within the dominant view of economic development, such as dispossession, ownership of productive resources by a few and deepening labour exploitation. Supporting political mobilisation that is calling for processes aligned with decolonisation is necessary to attempt to shift the balance of power away from global capital and other actors who benefit from a Eurocentric development project. This is not achievable through charity and philanthropy; it is achieved by creating possibilities and fissures for such political mobilisation and social movements to gain strength.

More concretely, at the macroeconomic level, this could involve INGOs bargaining and lobbying for more policy space and fiscal capacity to allow actors in the Global South to function under fewer constraints (such as debt cancellation and reorientation of trade, financial and labour governance). At the microeconomic level, it is crucial that INGOs should not become a replacement for the state, and thereby legitimise its withdrawal, but rather work to strengthen the actors that can negotiate and collectively bargain with the state and international institutions. Rather than attempting to impose an agenda, the work would need to be informed by radical social movements on the ground that are challenging the violence of development. At the same time, this means structuring how INGOs function to meet the demands of the social movements, rather than INGOs intervening on their own terms defined by Eurocentric frameworks.

Understanding development in line with a decolonisation agenda would mean placing all kinds of localised problems within a global, decolonised understanding of economic development, rather than trying to ‘fix’ people or institutions in an isolated, local setting. For example, rather than nudging farmers to opt for more rational savings or fertilizer behaviour, an INGO should ask itself what local and global farmers’ movements are demanding, how they are linked to

more structural problems such as being dispossessed due to competition from agri-corporations, and how they can support such demands.

A wider problem

Non-Eurocentric radical approaches to economic development have been pursued by scholars and activists across the globe, but they have often been marginalised both in academic spaces and in spaces that may inform an INGO agenda. As such, the project of decolonisation is much broader than simply the INGO sector itself. Rather, the INGO sector may be a reflection of a deep-seated Eurocentrism in mainstream economic development scholarship and practice.

With this in mind, we wish to put a few questions to those working within and with INGOs, which can help to stimulate critical thinking and reflection on the role of INGOs in the development process:

- How does the approach towards economic development adopted by your INGO fit within the Eurocentric framework that we outline?
- To what extent is the working of your INGO structured to provide support to actors involved in social movements aligning towards a decolonised (not localised) approach to economic development or to dismantling the Eurocentric approach to economic development?
- How do you deal with the risk of co-option in such an involvement?
- Does your INGO challenge underlying structural processes that create uneven development, poverty, dispossession and other problems related to the unequal global economic system? Or does it contribute to stabilising the current system through the ‘governance of the poor’ framework that we have outlined?

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8. Appendix

8.1 Interview guide

The interview with the selected INGOs revolved around the following key questions:

Overall interview guide:

- 1. Approach to economic development:** What is your main aim, how does it relate to the idea of economic development, and how do you work to achieve it?
 - a) What role does challenging power structures play in your approach?
 - b) What role does local context play? How does the local context feature?
- 2. Priorities/Governance:** Can you explain how your organisation sets its priorities? Who are the actors involved?
 - a) How do you engage with Southern partners on this?
- 3. Decolonisation:** Do you think that your INGO or the INGO space, in general, has a Global North centric bias, by that we mean that it takes ideas dominant in the Global North institutions as the basis for understanding what is development / how to bring about development in the Global South and/or does not challenge the North-South hierarchies?
- 4. Decolonisation:** What does an attempt towards decolonisation mean to your organisation and has your organisation made attempts towards it? If so, what? If not, why not?
- 5. Decolonisation:** What are the main challenges you face / are likely to face in terms of pursuing a decolonised approach to economic development?

8.2 Interviews with INGOs: Overview

INGO - anonymised	Score for achieved impact on the scale of Eurocentrism according to web analysis
INGO1	2-3 depending on the arm/theme
INGO2	2-4 depending on the arm/theme
INGO3	n/a
INGO4	1-2 depending on the arm/theme
INGO5	1
INGO6	1-2 depending on the arm/theme

