

Imagine alternative future(s) of the Belgian development cooperation

Final report

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PSR - Tracks for the decolonization of the Belgian development cooperation

Imagine alternative future(s) of the Belgian development cooperation

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Contributions

The opinions expressed in this report are not necessarily those of the VLIR-UOS, DGD. Responsibility for the views expressed remains solely with the authors.

Pictures

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACODEV	Fédération francophone et germanophone des associations de coopération au développement
ARES	Académie De Recherche Et D'enseignement Supérieur
DGD	Directorate-general Development Cooperation & Humanitarian Aid
DRC	The Democratic Republic of the Congo
D4D	Digital for Development
ETD	Entités Territoriales Décentralisées
HR	Human Resources
IFSI-ISVI	Internationale Syndicale Samenwerking
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
ITM	Institute of Tropical Medicine
LOCI	Localities, Ontologies, Commons, Integrated research group
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NGAs	Non-governmental Actors
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PaCt	Putting At the CenTre
PSR	Policy Supporting Research
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UCB	Universidad Catolica Boliviana
ULB	Universite Libre de Bruxelles
UMSS	Universidad Mayor de San Simon
VLIR-UOS	Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad
VUB	Vrije Universiteit Brussel

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development aid discourse is portrayed as the will to do good to help populations left behind in humanity's inevitable march towards modernity [1] and economic growth. However, its usefulness and the multiple violences (e.g., racism, colonialism, patriarchy, neoliberalism, capitalism, extractivism, etc.) derived from modernity and growth are increasingly being questioned [2]. Academia, social movements, and development aid agencies have argued that development aid has little impact on poverty reduction in the partner countries [3]. Thus, there is a request for a power shift from all parts, especially elucidated from the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016 and social movements such as “Black Life Matters”, “Charity so White”, and the 60th anniversary of DRC's independence demonstrations. These movements call for an urgent need to break with the modernity/coloniality violences [4]–[6] and decolonize international relations and development aid practices.

Through the 2021 policy-supporting research (PSR) call - Tracks for the decolonization of the Belgian development cooperation, the Directorate-general Development Cooperation & Humanitarian Aid (DGD), as a donor and responsible for Belgian development cooperation policy and practice, is engaged in understanding the degree of institutional colonialism in its structures. DGD is looking for alternative pathways for a decolonized Belgian development cooperation future. The PSR study seeks to support these efforts, exploring possible alternative pathways to guide the Belgian government and development actors in their ambitions to decolonize Belgian development cooperation. For this, the research will explore the perceptions and visions of the future of the different actors involved in the Belgian Development Cooperation. However, it is essential to note that we will not be systematically appraising primary studies on ‘colonialism’ and ‘power relations’, as this is beyond the project's scope. Interested readers can refer to the cited bibliography.

This research was carried out by an international, transdisciplinary and multicultural consortium of researchers and practitioners from Belgium, Bolivia, Cuba, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, led by the Localities, Ontologies, Commons, Integrated (LOCI) research group at VUB. The research team proposed a participatory methodological approach to (i) examine the complexities, tensions, and paradoxes emerging from the Belgian development aid industry and (ii) explore new imaginaries with the different development actors that potentially lead to decolonial forms of collaboration. To this aim, the team implemented participatory workshops and interviews, inviting a large number of actors directly involved in Belgian development cooperation projects to share their experiences and visions of alternative futures for development cooperation.

According to participatory research principles [7], the research process sought to establish a dialogue between the different knowledge systems focusing on the perspectives and experiences of persons working on diverse topics, sectors, and positions in the Belgian and participating partner countries involved in the development cooperation industry. The report builds upon their experiential knowledge and, from these experiences, delves into the problems that affect the development aid sector. Participants also explored alternative ways to deal with the identified challenges through a self and collective reflexivity process during participatory workshops. The research team facilitated the process and consolidated the participants' ideas, stressing the divergencies, commonalities, tensions, paradoxes and propositions. It is also essential to highlight that despite the diversity of the actors that participated in this research, more than 200 from different origins, many of them work for non-governmental organizations. They were interested in decolonization or had already initiated reflections on the subject.

Although the issues in this research correspond to old structural problems of our societies, it reveals the participants' perceptions and feelings. Participants consider that these problems have not yet been resolved and are still in force in the cooperation development practices. Consequently, most participants expressed the need for a fundamental change in dealing with these problems that seem to be anchored in the

development cooperation sector. Therefore, this research confirmed what several authors have already alerted us about the difficulties of breaking the coloniality logic and the modernity rhetoric [4]–[6], [8]–[10] and the power imbalances in development cooperation [11], [12]. Likewise, it verified the repetition of colonial patterns embedded in the development model and implemented through international cooperation programs [3].

Despite the difficulties and the challenges it represents of leaving the colonial matrix, the participants dared to dream and imagine other futures for Belgian development cooperation. These imaginaries are so diverse and plural that they show the need to accept policy heterodoxy [11] and dare to explore non-traditional pathways. We must also highlight that the participants called for a collaboration based on values such as respect, trust, empathy, transparency, solidarity and sovereignty. Likewise, they made a unanimous call to open spaces for dialogue among multiple actors, including donors, so that a collective construction of those desired futures can begin.

This report seeks to serve as a compass to guide these dialogues by proposing a social cartography [13] as a pedagogical tool. This methodology offers the possibility of mapping the various understandings and interpretations of numerous socially constructed associations or cultural clusters' mini-narratives, particularly in cases where diversity of values and cultural differences predominate [13]. The cartography mapped the participants' experiences, desires, and dreams, complemented by a literature review. The tool differentiates between discourses that promote alternatives for softening power imbalances as strategies for decolonizing development aid, those that call for a power shift or others that consider it necessary to build new vocabularies and ways of weaving relationships between the planet's inhabitants. In other words, this report calls readers to recognize that decolonization has become a comfortable buzzword for the aid sector [14]. So, there is a risk of being co-opted and diluted into mainstream narratives by development policy and programs, such as has happened with participation [15], gender equality [16]–[18], and sustainability [19]. These practices have depoliticized communities' struggles to support development as usual and preserve the status quo [15]. Thus this research is an invitation to be profoundly vigilant about our complicities [18] and not turn decolonization into a metaphor [20]; instead, dare to dream of alternative futures.

1.1. Methodology

The research adopted a participatory approach as a platform for listening to diverse voices and experiences of people involved in the development aid sector. With the help of DGD, we first mapped the Belgian Cooperation actors to be involved in our study (See Annex-1 for the details). We then ran ten (10) face-to-face workshops and 49 interviews with diverse groups from different countries and backgrounds (see Section 1.2). Then we analyzed the transcripts of the material and recordings generated in each workshop/interview. We did this first by country and later all countries together, applying an inductive thematic analysis methodology [21] to identify patterns within the data.

The different workshops followed a methodology inspired by the Three Horizons approach developed by Bill Sharpe and colleagues [22] but modified to suit our needs and interests. The Three Horizons framework is a tool for complex and intractable problems and uncertain futures. It uses systemic thinking focusing on pathways that bring about transformational change by reflecting on three moments: future, present and past, to identify current issues and their underlying causes. In the first moment, participants were invited to share their experiences in development cooperation and identify colonial aspects of development cooperation practices in their organizations. In the second moment, they were invited to share their visions for the future they wanted. Afterwards, participants reflected on current concerns to identify problems and their underlying causes. Finally, participants focused on practices for transformational change. The process is schematized in figure 1.1.

To train the research team on the Three Horizons (3H) approach and gain sufficient knowledge to apply it in their own context, we organized four online workshops, between three and four hours each. The workshops were designed and guided by the Xpaths research group, led by Dr Ana Paula Aguiar, a researcher at the Stockholm Resilience Center. The workshops introduced the methodology, proposed practical exercises, and refined the understanding through Q&A moments.

After the training, the research team evaluated the process and adapted the methodology according to the context. We decided to organize face-to-face workshops despite the COVID-19 pandemic because of the difficulties we experienced implementing such methodology during the online training workshops.

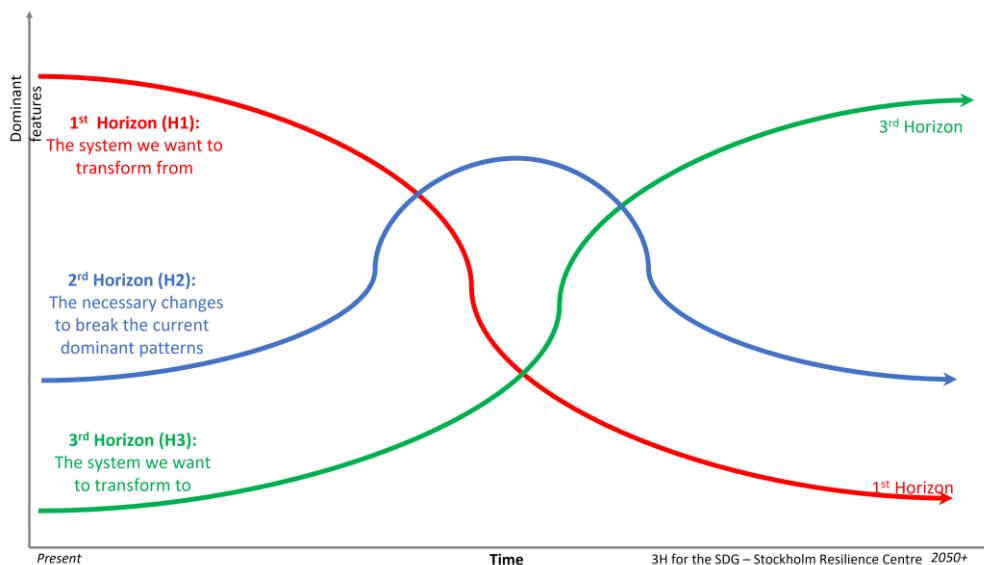


Figure 1-1 Three Horizons framework

The first adaptation of the methodology concerned the reduction in time. Ideally, the process will require a minimum of three sessions of half a day each. However, at the request of the DGD and due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the process was reduced to a five-hour session and then a three-hour joint workshop for final validation. The significant time reduction limited us to delving equally into each phase of the three horizons approach and applying other methodologies, such as Forum Theatre, included in the proposal. These activities require face-to-face interactions and an investment of a significant amount of time from the participants. The second adaptation was that at the beginning, we intended to organize two workshops for all the participants instead of one to achieve feedback and cross-pollination between the Belgian participants and participants from partner countries. We planned to discuss the views about the decolonization of the Belgian participants with participants from partner countries and vice versa to compare views and enhance discussion on how decolonization as a concept should be turned into practice. Unfortunately, these plans had to be cancelled due to the delays caused by COVID-19 and the lack of flexibility in the project timeframe.

The workshops were held with participants from different nationalities (Bangladesh, Belgium, Bolivia, Canada, Cuba, France, Italy, The Democratic Republic of Congo – DRC and Uganda) grouped by language (French, Dutch, English, Spanish) and settings (Belgium, Bolivia, DRC, Uganda, online). The objective was to develop with participants, in an inclusive way, their desired visions of the future, building on current experiences and targeting root causes for identified problems. The workshops followed a four-step process (Rivers of Life, Desired Future, Identified Concerns and Proposed Actions for Solutions), combining individual and collective exercises with separate groups and plenary discussions. At least one organizing team member facilitated the workshops, and in the largest workshops, three members were present.

The participants used poster-size sheets to capture the proposals and reflections generated during the different exercises. The researchers collected the materials produced at the end of the workshop to transcribe later all the information generated verbatim in their original language. Likewise, the two plenary sessions at the end of the Identified Concerns exercise and the Proposed Actions for Solutions were recorded and transcribed. Before starting the workshop, the participants were asked for their authorization to record the plenaries and collect the materials produced. All participants agreed and signed a consent form (see Annex-1). The report uses participant quotes and drawings to illustrate specific perspectives raised during the workshops and interviews. Some quotes were translated and edited for clarity and length purposes.

As an ice-breaking exercise and a first self-reflexivity moment, participants were asked to draw their “rivers of life” [23]. The activity sought that participants look back in time and identify colonial aspects in the development cooperation practices of the organization that have affected or impacted their lives. Participants were invited to reflect on their own experience in the development sector as a river and do so through the lens of decolonization, highlighting critical moments in which the course might change, water flow might increase, etc. Later, participants were invited to discuss their river of life with one of their peers or in a group, depending on the workshop and the number of attendants (collective reflexivity moment). The posters were then hung on the walls to be viewed and discussed during breaks. By triggering metaphorical thinking, participants were encouraged to share their experiences in their own terms and communicate with others that might have experienced similar situations/feelings when engaging in different projects.

As this step was planned as an ice-breaking exercise, we did not record the exchange between the participants. Although it was a wise decision because it helped engage participants in a more open dialogue, we could not collect valuable information about their lived experiences.

It is noteworthy that there was a big difference between Belgian participants' experiences and those from the partner countries. The Belgium actors focused on portraying multiple working experiences, many of them in different countries. In contrast, actors from the Global South used the rivers of life to bring out colonial experiences they had encountered working in development cooperation. However, in both cases, the exercise helped us identify that we had diverse actors that attended the workshops. Participants ranged from stagiaires, persons with few months of experience, emeritus professors and directors of NGOs or academics working for more than 30 years in development aid and from different sectors and disciplines.

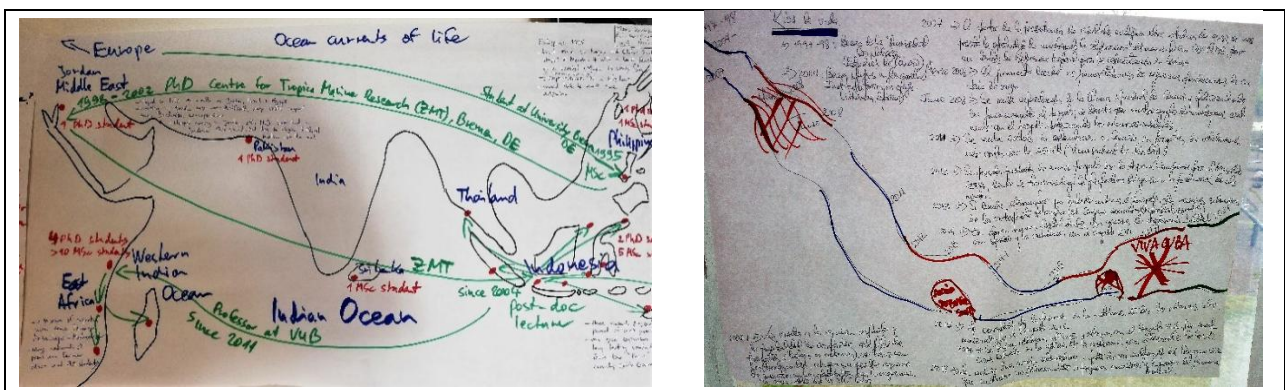


Figure 1-2 Example of Rivers of life

The second step (Desired Futures) was followed with another individual exercise, in which participants could write or draw their desired future for development cooperation. Participants were free to express their future views as they preferred (including drawings or in a written form) and discuss them in groups. There was no plenary session for this activity as in the previous exercise. The exchanges between the participants were not recorded due to the limited time and human resources. One of the most significant difficulties when analyzing the data was finding single words or drawings challenging to interpret. This situation arose mainly

in the workshop with Belgian NGOs, which also had extensive participation of actors, making it more difficult to monitor each participant's input. To fill these information gaps, we used the validation workshop. However, the limited time and the online setting, with more than 80 participants, were not ideal for completing this task. Many of the participants, mainly from Belgium, expressed the need to carry out another workshop dedicated exclusively to conceptualizing some terms and thus be able to create a common language. Unfortunately, we did not have time to carry out a new workshop (due to the delays caused by COVID-19 and the lack of flexibility in the project timeframe). We opted to ask the participants to send us their feedback by email.

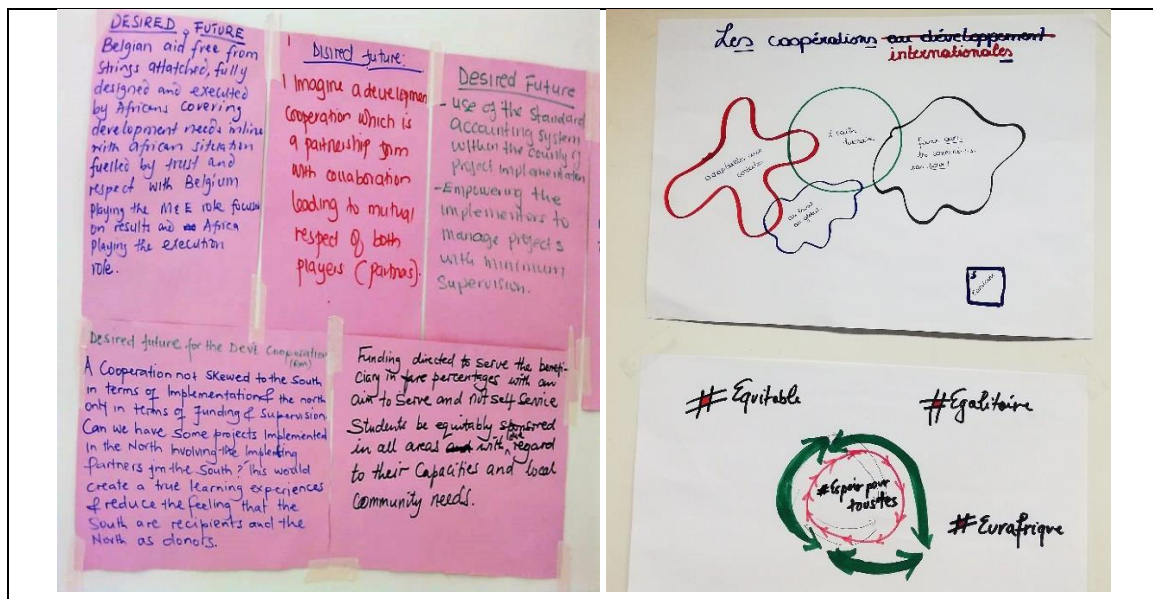


Figure 1-3 Examples of Desired futures

The third step (Identified Concerns) consisted of a group exercise. Participants were asked to identify several causal layers of problems, classifying them into epiphenomenal (mind-body) problems and direct or root causes for the obstacles. They identified the path from the present towards the desired future. At the end of the group exercise, participants shared their concerns in a plenary session. For analysis, the plenary was recorded and transcribed verbatim (converting the recorded audio files to English/French/Flemish/Spanish text).

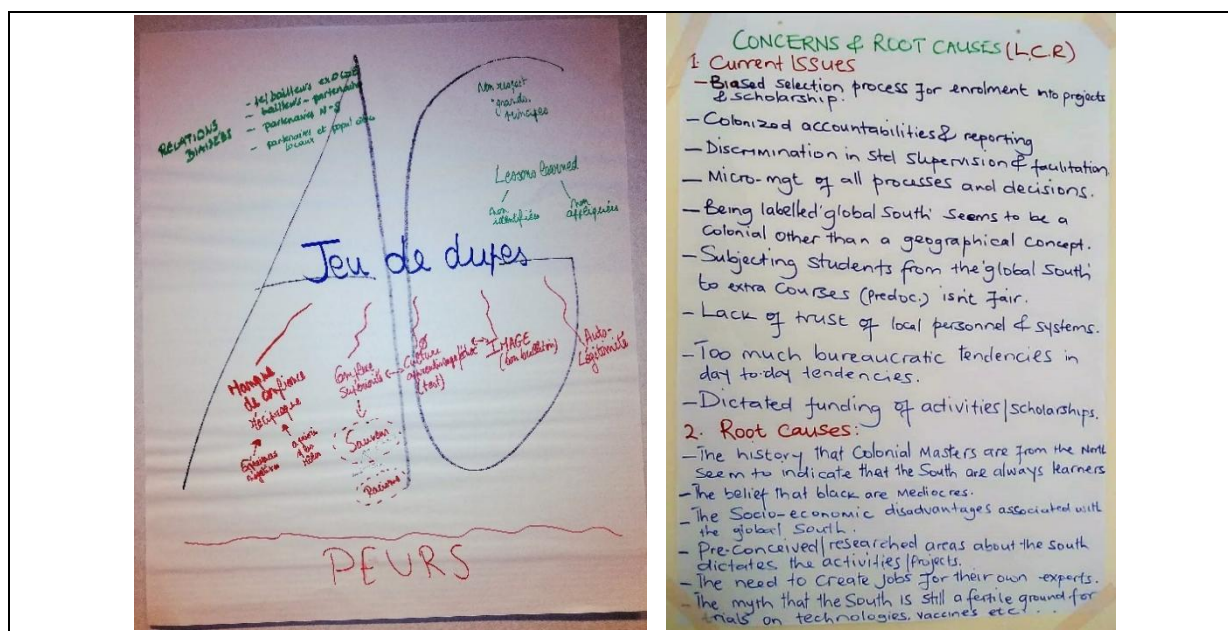


Figure 1-4 Example of identified concerns

The fourth and final step consisted in finding seeds in the present or possible leverage points to overcome the problems identified during the previous step and move towards the desired future. This was a group exercise followed by a plenary group presentation which was recorded and transcribed for analysis. In most cases, the different groups had extensive discussions and profound reflections on the problems identified. These exchanges between groups were not recorded to allow open dialogue between participants. However, they were asked to report all the outcomes in the sheets and during the plenaries. Unfortunately, at the time of the analysis, we realized that many elements were left without going into depth at the time of the plenaries.

It is essential to highlight that interviews were carried out in Bolivia instead of workshops due to the participants' time constraints. In Uganda, interviews were also conducted with some people who could not participate in the workshops. Finally, we had an online workshop instead of a face-to-face event with the INGO group. Still, the interview guide and the online workshop followed the structure of the face-to-face workshops with some adaptations according to the setting. For example, we used a digital notice board (Padlet) for the online workshop to collect participants' inputs.

As mentioned above, participants shared their concerns at the end of the group exercises in a plenary session. The plenary was recorded and transcribed verbatim in their original language (converting the recorded audio files to English/French/Flemish/Spanish text) for analysis. After the workshops and interviews, each researcher and team member analyzed the data. The analysis was sent to the leading team, who consolidated the analyses and created a single database. Using the NVIVO software, we first coded thought-provoking features of the data. This coding exercise was shared with participants by email and validated in a global online workshop (8 February 2022, which replaced the planned second workshop) to consolidate our analysis. Due to the limited time during the online workshop, it was impossible to review all the codes. So, we asked the participants to email us further or pending comments. With participants' feedback, the lead team redefined the codes and searched for potential themes that the researchers of each country later validated. Finally, we defined and named the themes/patterns and established connexions or linkages between them. This process allowed us to implement investigator triangulation and iterative analysis to reduce bias.

The patterns identified during the thematic analysis were grouped into ten subthemes that later were consolidated into two main themes: structural and procedural. The results presented in this report are

grouped within these two themes according to the barriers identified and then to the proposed changes to overcome those barriers. Subsequently, the tacit assumptions, tensions and paradoxes identified during the analysis are presented. Finally, we propose a social cartography pedagogical tool that outlines three possible scenarios to initiate a multi-actor dialogue about the challenges and pitfalls countries might encounter in the decolonization processes. The proposed tool also reminds us that decolonizing development cooperation requires more than a willingness to 'correct' procedures. It requires structural changes in the system, which requires political will and a genuine desire for change.

1.2. Participants

One of the first activities of the project was to do a mapping exercise of the organizations and actors linked to the Belgian development cooperation aid system. The research team elaborated a comprehensive list from DGD and VLIR-UOS websites and local actors from the partner countries (DRC, Bolivia, Cuba, Uganda and International NGOs). We held a workshop with DGD colleagues, who gave feedback on the mapping actor exercise by country. After completing the list of possible participants and defining the workshops' dates, invitations were sent to the listed organizations and actors in the participating countries. At the same time, DGD, VLIR-UOS, ARES, and umbrella organizations such as CDCN.11.11.11 and 11.11.11 helped spread the invitation within their networks. Table 1-1 summarises actors and organizations invited vs attendants. For further information about the invited organizations by country, readers can refer to Annex-1.

Country	# Contacted Organizations	# Participant Organizations	# Participant People
Belgium	110	43	78
Bolivia	59	32	36
Cuba	21	8	15
DRC	83	30	44
Uganda	18	10	33
TOTAL	291	123	206

Table 1-1 Number of contacted organizations v.s. participant organizations

The workshop's attendees varied depending on the target groups and are summarized per country in the following sections. Of 291 contacted organizations, 123 responded favourably (see Table 1.1), which resulted in 206 people from diverse locations participating in this research. Although it is a significant number of participants, especially for a pilot project, we are aware that this is not a comprehensive representation of the sector as a whole. However, we attempted to diversify the perspectives by being as inclusive as possible regarding gender, years of working experience, sector/discipline and local/Belgian NGOs. Thus the value of this research lies in de-centring the conversation about decolonizing Belgian development cooperation and bringing the usually excluded voices from the partner countries.

1.2.1. Belgium

We organized five workshops, 2 with DGD (one in French and the other in Dutch), 2 with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (one in French and the other in Dutch) and one with academics (universities in English). The 78 participants (51 women and 27 men), as indicated in figure 2.4, had diverse experiences in development aid programmes. The participating organizations are listed in the following tables.

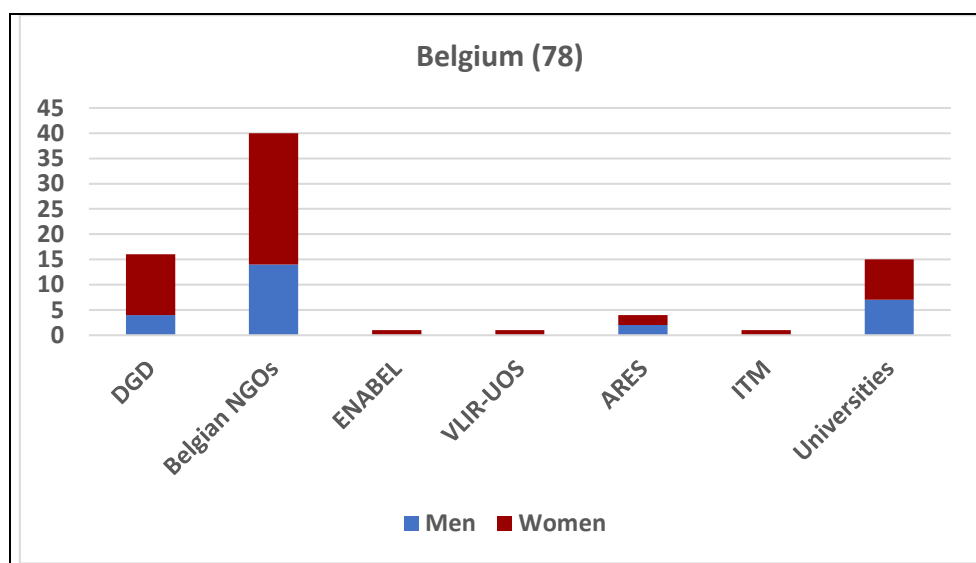


Figure 1-5 Belgium - Gender statistics per type of organization

Organization Type	Women	Men
Universities	8	7
Belgian NGOs	26	14
ENABEL	1	0
VLIR-UOS	1	0
ITM	1	0
ARES	2	2
DGD	12	4
TOTAL	51	27

Table 1-2 Belgium – Total Participants

Belgian NGOs	Universities	Donors
ACODEV Autre Terre Africalia Broederlijk Delen Caritas International Belgique Chaîne de l'espoir Belgique 11.11.11.- Koepel van de Vlaamse Noord-Zuidbeweging CNCD 11.11.11 Defi Belgique Afrique Djapo Echos communication Entraide et Fraternité Fairtrade Belgium FOS Hand in Hand Against Racism	UGent ULB Vlaamse Hogescholenraad VUB	DGD VLIR-UOS ARES ENABEL ITM

IFSI-ISVI ITECO Justice & Paix KIYO Louvain cooperation Médecins Sans Vacances Memisa NGO Federatie SCI projets Internationaux SOS Villages d'enfants Belgique Oxfam Oxfam Magasins du monde Plan International Belgique Quinoa ULB Coopération UNICEF Belgique Via Don Bosco We Social Movements (WSM)		
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Table 1-3 Belgium - Participating Organizations

The following figure illustrates some moments during the workshops carried out in Belgium.

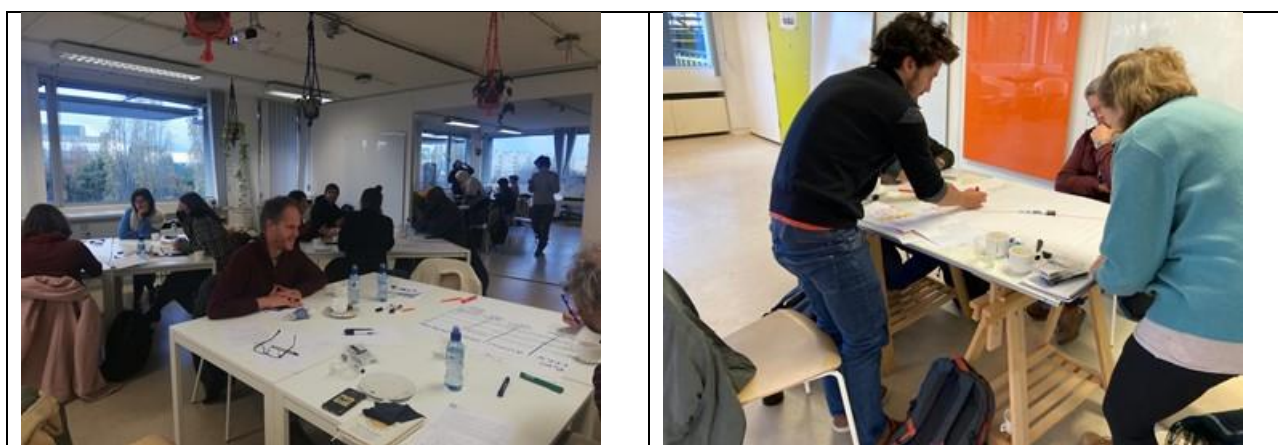


Figure 1-6 Workshops in Brussels

1.2.2. Plurinational State of Bolivia

In Bolivia, we organized interviews with Local and Belgian NGOs based in Bolivia and academics (universities). They are listed in Table 1-4. 36 participants (27 men and nine women) were interviewed, as indicated in Figure 1-7. They had worked in development cooperation programmes with Belgian institutions and other countries for several years.

LOCAL NGOs	Belgian NGOs	Universities	Others
AGRECOL ANDES INCCA PROGRAMA NINA	SOS FAIM SOLIDAGRO Broederlijk Delen	UCB UMSS UCLouvain	PRORURAL Ex CTB COSUDE

ANAPA CENDA CIPCA Coordillera APROSAR FUNDACIÓN TIERRA CIPCA Santa Cruz PB contra el CC FUNDACIÓN JUBILEO PBCC SOLIDAGRO Bolivia CEDIB	Plan Internacional Louvain Coopération ECLOSIO FOS Miel Maya Honing 11.11.11		ARES
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Table 1-4 Bolivia - Participating Organizations

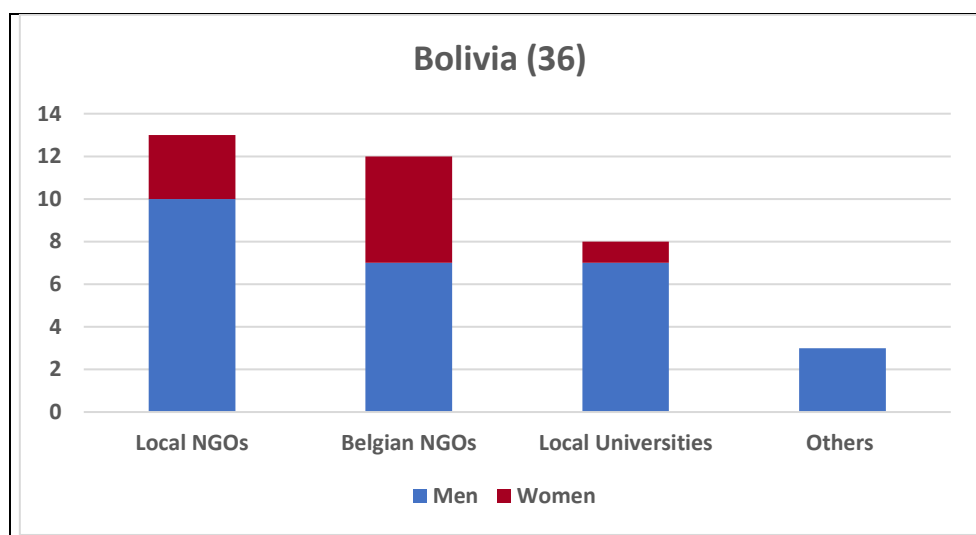


Figure 1-7 Bolivia - Gender statistics per type of organization

1.2.3. Cuba

Figure 1-8 represents the number of participants in the workshop with a Cuban University carried out in Belgium and attended by six female and three male Cuban scholars on an official trip to Belgium. All the participants had extensive experience in development cooperation programmes.

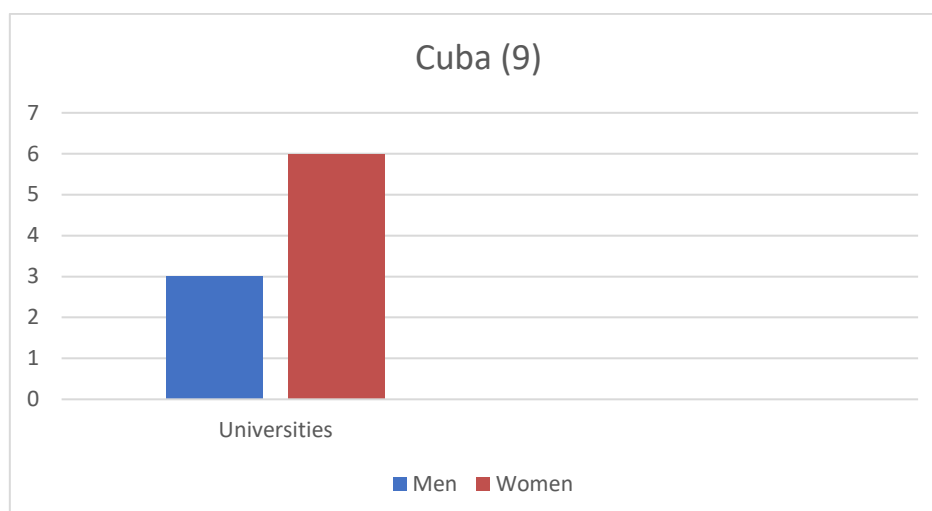


Figure 1-8 Cuba - Gender statistics

1.2.4. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

We organized two workshops in DRC, one in Kinshasa and one in Bukavu; most participants had extensive experience in development aid programmes or projects. The details of the different participating organizations are summarized in the following table.

Organization Type	Women	Men
Kinshasa		
Universities : ULC, UCLouvain, ISTM	1	6
Gouvernement (Ministries of Finances & Agriculture)	0	3
Bureau Central de Coordination	0	1
Barreau de Matete	0	1
NGOs: FPM, Louvain coopération, MSV	1	2
Jesuit priest (Belgian)	0	1
Bukavu		
Universities : UEA, UCB, UOB, CREGED, ISDR, ISTM, ISC	3	14
Gouvernement (Division Genre, Famille et Enfant/Commission genre, Commune d'Ibanda, Division du plan)	1	2
ONGs (AETA, Caritas development, Héritiers de la justice)	0	3
Barreau du Sud-Kivu	0	1
Media (RTNC)	1	0
Ordre des infirmiers	1	0
IITA	0	1
ENABEL	0	1
Total	8	36

Table 1-5 DRC - Participating Organizations

1.2.5. International NGOs (INGOs)

The group of “INGOs” consisted of humanitarian and development professionals at different career stages, from young volunteers to senior managers. Most of the participants had worked with DGD funds throughout their careers. Four of the six people who joined the online workshop identified themselves as women. The participants' origins, cultures, and nationalities were diverse (Bangladesh, Canada, France, and Italy). The age range was between 25 and 42 years old.

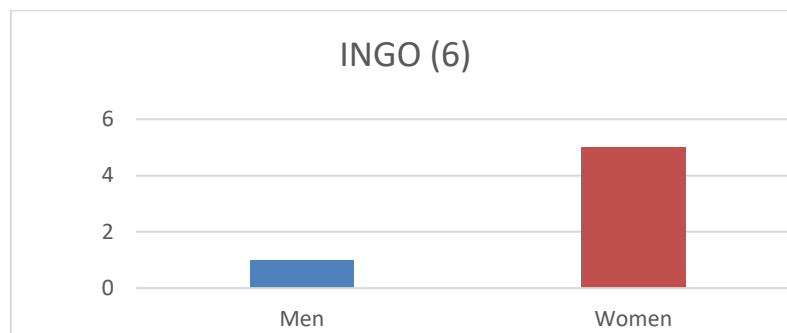


Figure 1-9 INGOs - Gender statistics



Figure 1-10 INGOs - Online workshop screenshot (Padlet)

1.2.6. Uganda

In Uganda, we organized interviews and workshops in Kampala and Fort Portal. All participants had worked for several years in development cooperation programs. A summary of the participant organizations and the gender division is listed in the following table.

Organization Type	Women	Men
University: MMU	3	6
University Beneficiaries from VLIR-UOS/ENABEL: MMU	6	4
Belgian Embassy	1	1
Local NGOs: NRD, Join for Water, JESE, Caritas	2	5
Belgian NGOs: Iles de Paix		2
ENABEL		3
TOTAL	12	21

Table 1-6 Uganda - Participating Organizations

1.3. Report Outline

The report has the following structure. The second chapter presents the complexities of the Belgian development aid, mapping structural and procedural barriers to decolonizing the aid system pointed out by the participants. In contrast, the third chapter focuses on possible alternative pathways identified by the participants to overcome these barriers. The fourth chapter discusses the underlying assumptions, tensions, and paradoxes from analyzing the complexities and the alternative pathways proposed by the participants. After identifying the critical and relevant themes, the research team consolidated the results and, together with the literature review, elaborated a social cartography. The goal was to map the interpretations of the decolonization pathways for the development cooperation sector in three possible scenarios. Thus, chapter fifth provides the mapping exercise framed in a social cartography of responses to the modernity-coloniality matrix in the context of Belgian development aid. Chapter six presents some conclusions and recommendations for the Belgian development aid sector.

2. MAPPING COMPLEXITIES

This section summarizes the main challenges and difficulties identified by the participants during the workshops and interviews. They are divided into structural and procedural barriers (See Section 1.1. for the details on the thematic analysis methodology) that prevent or limit the possibilities of decolonizing development aid.

2.1. Structural barriers

The complex Belgian political structure

The Belgian participants agree that in addition to the difficulties imposed by the global geopolitical system, the complicated political structure of the country also adds a layer of difficulties in launching decolonizing processes. This complexity translates into the inefficient management of resources and difficulties in promoting collaboration between organizations. As a result of these problems, participants consider that they end up wasting scarce resources and increasing competition between organizations. Talking about these challenges, participants from the Belgian NGO sector argued that:

“There is a very competitive and economic dimension to funding. So, we are supposed to collaborate, but at the same time, we are still in competition, which also creates a lack of sharing and collaboration. And then opportunistic project definitions. There is also a disconnection from real needs.”

While Belgian academics stated that:

“We also often see that repetition of the projects. We see the same project in different universities, which causes a lack of impact because we repeat ourselves.”

Academics also pointed out the deep contradictions in the system. On the one hand, it expresses its commitment to eradicating poverty and, on the other, strengthens the business sector, which is mainly interested in profit generation rather than redistribution of benefits. In addition to contradicting the principles of development aid, focusing on businesses typically increases the risk and pressure on land and territories that are the basis of well-being for most communities in “partner countries”². As highlighted by a Belgian academic:

“Development cooperation goes one way and then everything that is trade. So, the private sector goes in the totally opposite way (...) if you look at (...) the millions that are spent, for example, helping communities in the Amazon region. At the same time, millions are also spent on corporations destroying the forest.”

Other participants from the partner countries argued that the main issue is that the development aid interventions do not address the structural roots of poverty, unsustainability, and multi-dimensional violence. On the contrary, the emphasis continues to be placed on economic growth and technological development based on the extraction of natural resources and patterns of accumulation. This situation is particularly evident in issues such as energy production and its effects on climate variations, as a participant explained in an interview:

“A very functional cooperation on government policy issues, very accommodating. When we proposed the hydrocarbons agenda, the issue of royalties, the economy's problem, and the public budget, we talked about structural issues; they didn't even understand it. I feel that they have a very local, regional, specific, sectoral approach, and, therefore, there is no comprehensive vision.”

² “Partner country” according to Belgian Law designates the country considered a country in development by the OECD [44]. This report will use the term used in the Law. However, it is essential to highlight that many participants do not believe there is a “real” partnership.

Lack of transparency and greediness

Respondents from partner countries argued that the development aid industry seemed to have a hidden agenda. They mentioned that in some cases, what they perceive as donors' political agenda is disguised as a partnership. Thus insinuating that there is masquerading and not a genuine partnership, as illustrated in this quote:

"...they try to show that they have done some landscaping, they understand the direction of the country, the country strategies and their development aid is embedded in the recipients' development strategy, but when you scratch the surface, you realize that they are trying to serve mainly the developed countries."

The same feeling is reflected by the drawing made by participants during the DRC workshop, where participants illustrate the lack of transparency in funding. The drawing shows a handsome, elegant, good-looking man exchanging 1 dollar bill with another short, skinny and not well-dressed man who, in return, has the dwarf man and small hands over a package worth 54 US dollars. The handsome man is tall and robust and personifies Belgium, while the dwarf represents the DRC.

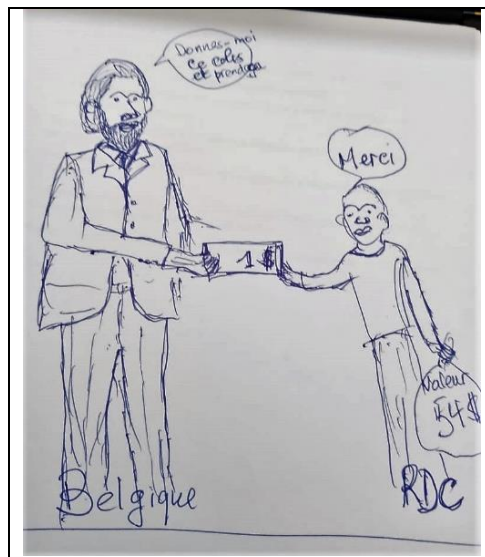


Figure 2-1 Lack of transparency illustration

Another aspect of this lack of transparency is what several participants call a faulty development approach and dependency syndrome. Participants consider that the strategies and actions defined by donors have a low impact on the ground, wasting development cooperation resources and increasing dependency instead of contributing to problem resolution.

Participants from partner countries also noted this lack of transparency and greediness in their own governments that continue to wait for external aid instead of developing independent sources of financing internally.

"We remain in the policy of the outstretched hand that continually seeks outside help."

Several participants consider this problem strongly connected with corruption in their countries and misuse of funds allocated to cooperation projects fueled by Belgian cooperation.

"The politicians use the money from the cooperation to finance actions for electoral purposes and thus achieve their political aspirations."

The comfort of the status quo

Another barrier most participants recognize, mainly from the NGO sector, is that they are part of and help maintain the system with all its flaws. Financial dependency prevents organizations from criticizing the system for fear of losing financial support, reinforcing and justifying the status quo. As stated by some Non-governmental Actors (NGAs):

"We also have a self-interest in maintaining the sector because it's our job. But it also has to do with the financial influx of our organizations. (...) There is also simply a political unwillingness to give up power because, remember, the partnership also means that you have to give up power, but there is unwillingness. People don't want to do that."

The participants used the workshops to reflect on and share experiences, frustrations, and fears. They highlighted that most of the staff involved in the aid sector were afraid that change would require a loss of benefits, including job loss but also privileges:

"I'm an ex-pat, and (...) I became part of the system (...) You become part of a system because it also gives you advantages that you didn't have before".

Or, as questioned by a participant in a partner country:

"How honest can you be in reflecting a reality to transform it if that reality offers you privileges?"

The 'whiteness' and hierarchical structures based on class and gender bias of the aid industry are other elements that participants raise as prevalent and, at the same time, difficult to change.

"One of the biggest pains for our sector is that it is very white, and we are very much in search of the role of the diaspora and that this role is currently being kept very small so that we cannot really be considered inclusive."

Paternalism and the white saviour complex

Most participants from the partner countries agreed that paternalism and the white saviour complex are still prevalent in the Belgian development aid. For example, some participants in DRC explain how Belgium continues to interfere in countries' political, social, and cultural life.

"Cooperation with Belgium in the context of development aid is paternalistic. The father is supposed to know his son's needs to consider the solutions and the means of application to achieve the result (...). Belgium does not consider the fundamental problems of the population. Public policies are not always followed because there are strategies at all levels, but their operationality poses problems. For example, there is a development dynamic at the ETD (Entités Territoriales Décentralisées) level. Each plan outlines the real needs of the population. Unfortunately, the population has expressed its priorities is not listened to because the interventions do not consider their aspirations."

According to most participants from the partner countries, Belgium imposes its development model as part of this paternalistic attitude. Also, some Belgian NGAs stated:

"We impose our vision of development from the North, based on our capitalist, globalist world vision. This situation has consequences, particularly paternalism, a top-down approach, a unidirectionality, therefore a lack of consultation with the beneficiaries."

The participants consider that the definition of programs and strategies is linked to the problem of imposing a development model. Consequently, these responses to the interests of the donors end up disconnected from the real needs of the beneficiaries, as stated by some Belgian participants:

“We often adopt a top-down approach. So not considering the needs on the ground first, but the political agenda and what we want to do rather than doing something helpful.”

Belgian NGAs also acknowledge that the Belgian development aid is contaminated with the white saviour complex:

“We also have the complex of the white saviour or those who know will save those who do not know. Why this centrality, this domination of Western culture and worldview? Because of history. In world history, there is a history of domination of some peoples over others.”

Persistence of racism, discrimination and white gaze

Racism and other forms of discrimination still prevail among isolated individuals representing development cooperation. This situation looks individualized, but the point at which it becomes a challenge for development cooperation is when the misconduct goes unnoticed and is not followed up appropriately to guarantee its non-repetition. The respondent indicated that this behavior is extreme and structural. The vices and cases go silent when it comes to racism, discrimination and exhibition of western supremacy over the citizens of the partner countries, as one respondent explained:

“Sometimes people come, and they have their stereotypes, but sometimes it goes beyond like one Belgian came and said, I cannot mix with those “blacks”, get for me a cubicle here (showing a place away from local workers). You are driving with someone and say, please, when you talk to me, don’t look at me but look the other side, but how not to look if he is asking you a question.”

Participants also noted extreme racist and discrimination statements reminiscent of a colonial past when talking about the money that is expended on the projects in the partner countries:

“This is our taxpayer’s money. This is my grandmother who pays this; this is my money.”

Reckless statements like the one above reflect that racism is very present in our daily lives, including in the development aid sector. Situations like those presented above, combined with the non-existent evaluation of donors and their development agencies, hamper any possibility of criticism of the actions carried out in the partner countries.

Unfortunately, this situation reminds us that racism is not a problem of the past. Racial power is part of the dominant relationships in development aid that can manifest in racist behaviors, as in the examples above. But we can also observe them in more subtle and normalized forms of discrimination, such as organizational hierarchies, wage differences, and hiring procedures, as noted by some participants.

“Do racialized people from other social strata also have access to jobs? This is a question that I allow myself to ask. Are we in the NGOs sensitive to that? Because there are many people of other races here in Belgium, who have two masters, three masters, or four masters but are unemployed, while others do not have the same job opportunities. Could NGOs have a career policy and the same with the DGD?”

This situation is also evident in the education sector. We could observe it among academics convinced that there is only one way to do science. Some believe they need to “educate” scholars from partner countries, transferring knowledge, technologies and methodologies. Scholars from partner countries mentioned that it

is prevalent that foreign academics impose their ideas while ignoring and belittling local knowledge, capacities and needs, building low self-esteem and a lack of assertiveness in recipients.

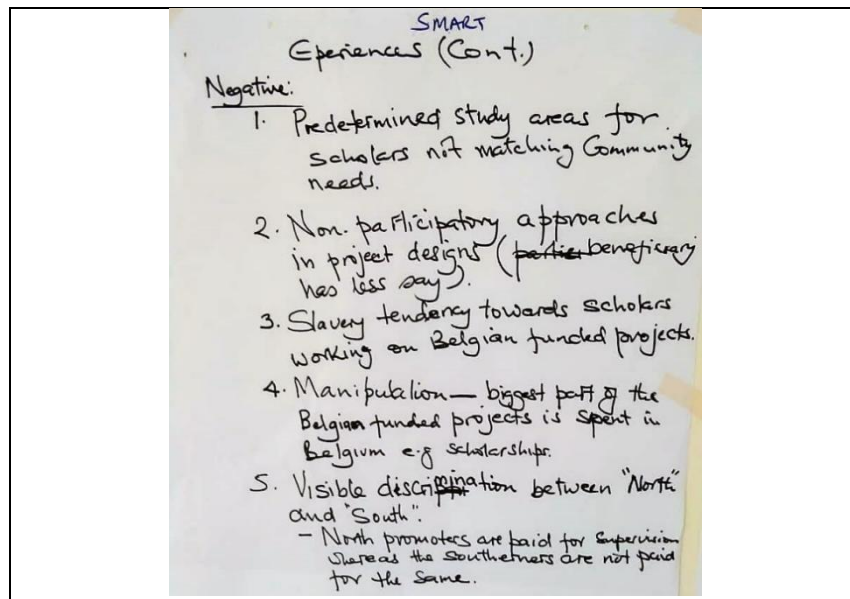


Figure 2-2 Discrimination in the education sector

Another problem is related to the definition of the research topics. Some Belgian academics are interested in developing research that can be published in high-impact scientific journals. But they are not necessarily interested in solving local problems that are the consideration of academics in partner countries, as mentioned by one of the interviewees:

"In the universities there (Belgium), they have publishing standards, and those are linked to the latest technology. For example, we were going to study the genetics of (...). For me, the interest is to have a technology that can be used here (...), that it be easy and economical and that we can carry it out here and not depend on equipment or send them to do it there (Belgium). So, they said that the research I wanted to do was not publishable and that those were old technologies, and we would not have a good publication. And I told him the truth, that it doesn't interest me and that I'm not thinking much about the publication. I'm thinking about solving my problem."

2.2. Procedural barriers

Although the procedural barriers mentioned by the participants are many and diverse, we attempted to classify them into five thematic groups. The first group relates to project management and its regulatory character; the second relates to knowing the context. The third is associated with monitoring and evaluation. The fourth and fifth themes highlight interpersonal relationship issues, such as differential treatment and communication issues.

The regulatory character of development programmes and power relations

Previous studies have shown that bureaucratic procedures are part of the regulatory character of the development apparatus that local and external administrations use to ensure their own survival [18]. In our research, all participants agreed that development programmes are subject to numerous bureaucratic procedures such as technical requirements, budgetary time frames and funding priorities that have little relation to on-the-ground needs; as a participant remarks:

“Most of the time, planning is done at the colonial master’s table, so they will come and say we have this money for this kind of project, so either you take it or leave it. If they wanted to do it differently, they could have started where they want to implement (the project) and then address the real problems, so they don’t come saying that the problem is food security when the problem is water.”

DGD staff also declared that bureaucratization is one of the biggest problems they have, as stated by some participants:

“Another problem that we have identified is that of bureaucratization. Indeed, bureaucratization, mainly the control, is ultimately exercised by the donors.”

Likewise, the NGAs also have the same perception, as noted by some Belgian participants:

“The most obvious is administrative. Obviously, it is provided with our standards, tools, and administrative norms. That is, of course, translated by our chronological, the docs, highly intellectual conceptual frameworks and Western criteria. This makes us say that the intentionality of including local actors is very cosmetic.”

In general, the participants agreed that stakeholders from partner countries have limited opportunities to take part in the decision processes:

“We have extremely unbalanced partnerships (...). You talked about it earlier, but compared to our programs written here in the North and often very little with the partner of the South or with methods imposed on the partners.”

According to the participants, this regulatory character of cooperation is connected with power relations and, more specifically, the unwillingness to give up power.

“There is also simply a political unwillingness to give up power because, remember, the partnership also means that you have to give up power, but there is unwillingness. People don’t want to do that.”

Lack of comprehensive knowledge of the local context

Participants from the partner countries consider that the Belgian development aid system has a limited and superficial knowledge of the local political, socio-economic, environmental and local context. Although a reasonably accurate diagnosis identifies the main problems, the analysis of the causes that generate them is not deepened or neglected. This translates into actions aimed at alleviating the symptoms and not the causes affecting the structural persistence of poverty, marginality, social conflicts, human rights violations, and environmental deterioration, as explained by one of the participants.

“We perceive a certain dislocation concerning the national reality on the part of the Belgian actors, a very candid reading of the processes. That, in our opinion, sometimes makes them have to make the wrong decisions. They would have to develop the ability to analyze reality, allowing them to have the vision to say: around here, yes; around here, no.”

Another consequence of this lack of comprehensive knowledge of the local context is the fragmentation and misrepresentation of the realities later reflected in sectorial interventions. Therefore, a sectoral strategy is adopted with little emphasis on the interrelationships between the issues, leaving aside from the very design of the strategy a more comprehensive and holistic vision.

While concerning the transversal criteria (gender, climate change, D4D), participants mentioned that they have to follow the donors' conditions to access the funding, even if they do not know about the subject or how to include gender or climate change issues in their research.

“Cooperation defines its strategic lines. For example, when we competed in the ARES programme, there were already defined elements that we had to comply with in terms of gender and generation, governance, climate change, etc. They may indeed be fashionable, but we do not necessarily understand that all projects must meet many criteria. And it is often difficult for us to put this in a project because it is an equation of many variables and, well, we finally have to adapt. We need to talk about gender, generational, governance, even without really knowing what we are referring to.”

Belgian NGAs also mentioned a similar issue:

“Donors sometimes impose their conditions for funding without taking into account the priorities of the countries, but there are also many conditional program requirements: that the link with the environment, that link with digitalization, that link with ..., even if you are working on a specific theme, we would have to look for consistency with many other themes, which could divert you from your main mission.”

Evaluation as a control mechanism and not as a tool to improve

Most participants agreed that project management is bureaucratic, unidirectional, focused on evaluating the fulfilment of activities and is limited mainly to measuring the efficiency of projects. In other words, the evaluation focuses on controlling the use of resources (money). However, there is no genuine interest in the utility or the positive or negative effects of the actions carried out, and it is not understood as a learning exercise or a tool for improvement.

Participants from INGOs consider that the evaluation does not seek mutual learning and feedback because there are no bi-directional mechanisms for Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL). Consequently, the evaluation becomes a selection criterion to grant aid to the beneficiaries, but it is not related to their needs.

Similarly, Belgian NGAs acknowledged that they must use their reporting to convince donors of the success of their interventions but not for learning, as stated by some participants:

“A risk on that very strong reporting-focused system that if those results are so essential for financial support that can drive people to embellish results, make them up because so much depends on it, and so there's really no room for error. Organisations do not have the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. Everything must always be perfect.”

On the other hand, the DGD staff confirmed that their workload does not give them time to take advantage of the information provided in the reports. Somehow all the experience is lost because they are busier controlling than learning, as explained by one of the groups:

“(…) In theory, the DGD still has a strategic and line-defining role, and sometimes control tasks take more time from us than the others. In any case, control takes a lot of time. Is it up to us to control? How far should we control?”

Most participants noted that the administrative process had become more bureaucratic. Their time on reporting takes away valuable time that they feel could be spent on other, more relevant activities. In addition, participants declared that the heavy control over resources produces a feeling of abuse of power and lack of respect that affects relationships and decreases trust. Participants from the partner countries deplore that donors ask them to report difficulties and changes in the context. Still, they are not taken into account for future interventions, as noted by some academics:

“These VLIR projects ask to explain the context and variation of the problem each year. Why they ask for it is not understood because the same indicators are there when the new model arrives. So there is no sense in it. The objective is to obtain information, but this new information does not allow you to evaluate and modify your projection based on that context.”

Differential treatment

Participants from the partner countries consider that the salary treatment of local partners is not proportional to the work they do to implement the planned activities and achieve the objectives of the projects. They believe that also is not proportional to the salary the Belgian partners who live in the same conditions receive. Participants consider that both local and foreign experts need to be paid at the same rate for purposes of equity:

“There are imbalances in terms of facilitation between north and south experts. South experts have similar skills and similar challenges in life, so facilitation should be the same or even more. South experts support families and deserve more.”

Participants from the partner countries consider that this differential treatment is also observed in other spheres, such as the lack of empathy towards local actors when unforeseen situations arise that delay the execution of projects. However, participants consider that they are more flexible with Belgian colleagues. Participants also believe that such imbalances reflect some colonial tendency where local people are seen as not having the same stand or say in their being or work.

Communication barriers

Some participants consider that communication problems are related to relationships of domination and the difficulty of listening and accepting the diversity of visions and ways of understanding the world. Therefore, it is difficult to establish an open dialogue between the different actors and the rules end up being imposed from above, as explained by one of the Belgian participants.

“It becomes difficult to have real communication. We ask ourselves how far we can really go in the dialogue, whether with donors, our partners or even sometimes within a team.”

Language is another factor that hinders interpersonal relationships, as noted mainly by Latin American participants. Although Belgian partners in the field speak Spanish, the same does not happen with the headquarters' staff in Belgium. The latter prefer the exchange in English, which prevents a direct relationship in evaluation visits, cooperation workshops, correspondence and reporting.

Besides the challenges mentioned above, the academic sector privileges English in communication and knowledge production, thus producing hierarchies, as stated by participants. They also consider that academics impose priorities, thematic, and methodologies using peer-reviewed English journals as an argument. Several participants considered that Belgian researchers are at the top of the pyramid, processing the information and preparing scientific publications. In contrast, local researchers are used to collecting the data.

“Here (...), we had done a lot of research, and he had been publishing the results of our research. They didn't even consult, and when I found out they were publishing, I asked them why they were publishing. And he felt he had the right to define whether he was going to publish it or not. He had given a little money, and I told him, no, you can't do that because we have done the work here. You can't even if you've got some money, and you can't say these results now I'm going to publish it. Because finally, what you have given does not cover even 10% of our work. And there was a big discussion, and I felt that colonial attitude there. I even almost told him, you want to exchange mirrors for gold.”

3. IMAGINING ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

After elucidating the different concerns, the participants were invited to imagine alternative pathways to deal with the identified issues. Below we summarize the structural and procedural changes proposed by the participants (See Section 1.1. for the details on the thematic analysis methodology).

3.1. Proposed structural changes

No development cooperation

Some participants consider that the only possible solution is to stop development cooperation. They observed that the system could not be changed and needed to disappear. Some of the expressions participants used were: *“Development cooperation is the arm and the navel of the perpetuation of colonization”*; *“eliminate the ‘show up’ of cooperation projects.”* Or by saying *“No development cooperation,”* as illustrated in the picture below:

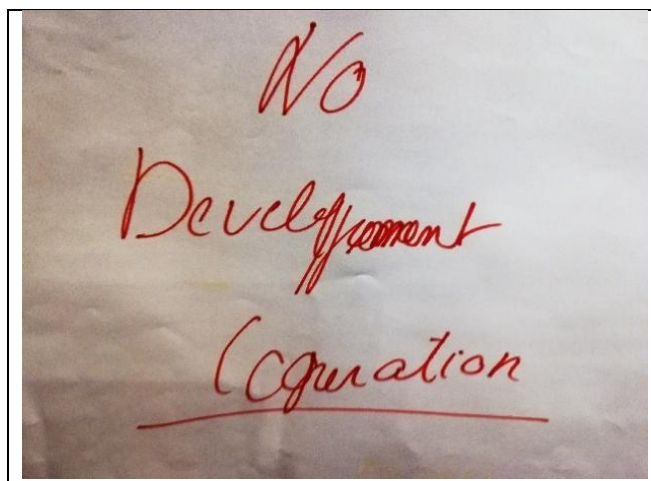


Figure 3-1 No development cooperation in the future

Imaging other possible ways: Reparations, debt cancellation and equal partnerships

Participants wanted to share other possible ways that could help partner countries in their fight against poverty. Some participants suggest reparations and debt cancellation could be better than development cooperation programmes:

“Reparations are necessary, and recognizing wrongdoings is necessary to decolonize minds and systems.”

Maybe not exactly in the same direction, but searching for different pathways, other participants propose to promote non-financial partnerships. However, they stated they did not know how it could be implemented.

“Promote non-financial partnerships because if we say that the financial aspect is one of the sinews of war in these colonization issues, could we try in our governmental cooperation, but also with our partners, non-financial partnerships.”

Participants also used a very extensive vocabulary about changing the current relationships in a way that is characterized by (more) *equality*, *“solidarity”*, *“liberty”*, *“sovereignty”*, and *“diversity”* were some of the used words. They conceive of international relationships in terms of working together on commonly defined challenges and towards *“a spiral of universal progress.”* In general, an *“equal”* and *“real partnership”* was the idea that most resonated among participants, whether from Belgium or partner countries.

Daring a change from within

Some Belgian participants agreed that all development aid actors should change their organizational structures to advance toward equal partnerships. Policies must lead to actions that ensure organizations move from rhetoric to action and dismantle hierarchies. Also, to raise awareness of the unearned benefits and privileges through racial hierarchies and at local communities' expense.

Participants consider it necessary to build new decision-making tools where all voices have the same decision-making power. This requires that those with power use it to benefit those who need it most. In other words, changing the system's DNA is necessary, which implies being accountable to the local communities' needs and not donor rules. As illustrated in the picture below, the participants consider that the change is needed; otherwise, development cooperation will disappear.

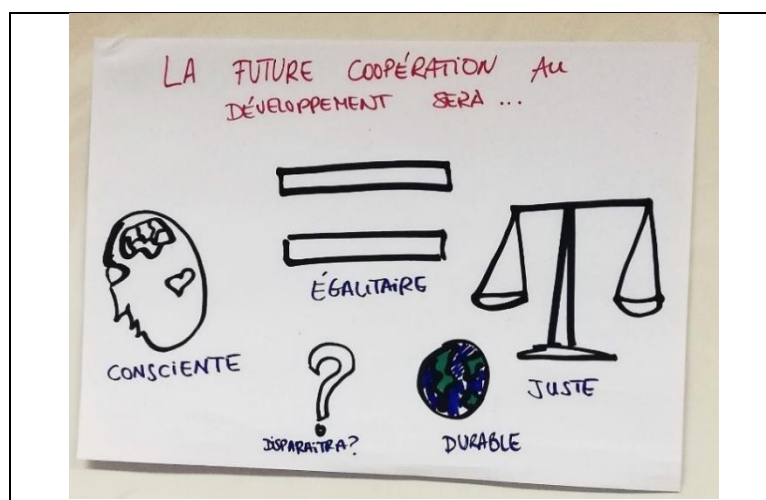


Figure 3-2 Need to change

Some participants consider that more policy coherence is needed somehow; Belgian NGAs feel that policy goes in a different direction:

“We need a policy that does not hinder but supports what we are trying to do.”

NGAs emphasized the need for a change in the system and called for a more inclusive Human Resources (HR) policy in their organizations and mainly integrating the diaspora:

“We should not let ourselves be distracted. Look at your HR policy or your governing bodies. Who is in there? Where is the partner in all that story? Where is the diaspora? Where is the diversity of society in our white institutions?”

Acknowledging and raising awareness among development aid actors of their (neo)colonial practices

Several Belgian participants consider that the first step to decolonize Belgian development aid is “the recognition of the colonial roots (history) and (neo)colonial approach (now)”. Other Belgian NGAs consider it crucial that rich countries recognize they are rich thanks to decades of colonization to establish an unequal financial, ecological, commercial and political system. Participants also ponder the need to go beyond relations of domination and begin by recognizing them, as indicated in the illustration below.

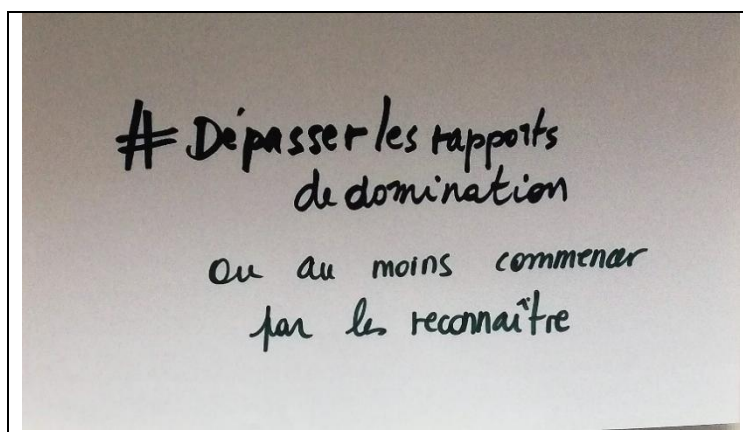


Figure 3-3 Going beyond domination relationships

Several participants from the INGOs referred to education as one of the most concrete actions to be taken at various levels: internally within the aid sector, including a change in recruitment parameters, and externally, with taxpayers and governments in the Global North, with Governments, project participants and partners in the Global South:

"So I think a better education could be one of the (concrete actions), because if we have a better understanding, and a space to communicate like this one (the workshop), which is a very good time for me to learn many things from you. I think it can be useful. We can be part of the system in a better way".

Participants mentioned that university courses, as well as the introduction training of INGOs and UN, also need to be changed:

"Education and changing the narrative in the academia, development studies should also be focused on the mission".

Participants from the partner countries consider that development aid must fight against racism and all forms of discrimination. They propose raising awareness within the development aid staff and applying the existing moral codes to reach this goal.

On the other hand, some participants from the partner countries consider that the global crisis and the colonial past mean that *"cooperation is not an optional issue but rather an obligation of the colonizing countries"*. They consider it crucial *"reflect on the colonial nature of cooperation; it must be done in a transversal and permanent way within the partners."*

A power shift towards civil society

There has been a unanimous call to co-create the development aid programme together with donors, policymakers, partner countries and civil society—a programme based on local priorities and needs, implemented by local communities to strengthen ownership and mutual accountability. Mechanisms must be created that allow civil society organizations to be involved in decision-making on all actions directly or indirectly related to their territories. Civil society should be able to decide on the programmes, strategies, budget, and even the beneficiaries of the interventions.

Participants consider that changing the system also implies decentralizing knowledge, structures and decision power, giving voice to local communities. According to the participants, this change implies building different forms of relating. They mention, among others, reciprocity, respect and empathy as bases for an equitable partnership. They also noted the importance of being accountable for present and future generations.

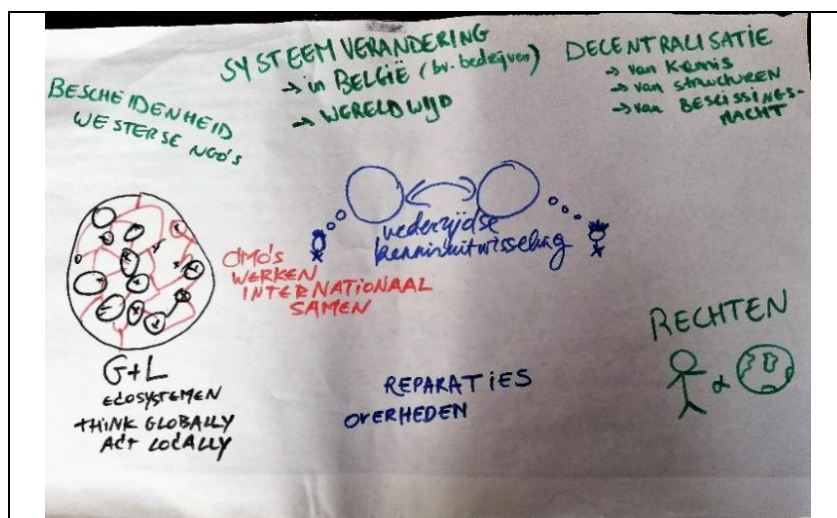


Figure 3-4 Changing the system

Participants ponder the necessity to recognize the capacities and expertise of local communities. At the same time, a willingness to learn from local experience and value other knowledge systems as equally valid to scientific knowledge is required. A participant's dream expresses this change as follows:

"I dream that (...) we stop talking about capacity building and go towards capacity sharing."

Working together on a shared locally-led future

Most participants agree that a shared future needs equal partnership, fostering collaboration at all levels, including South-South collaboration and building transparent and horizontal relationships among partners. The joint construction of a common strategic framework is necessary, integrating values such as reciprocity, solidarity, and respect. Although some organizations already implement these practices, expanding and strengthening them is suggested.

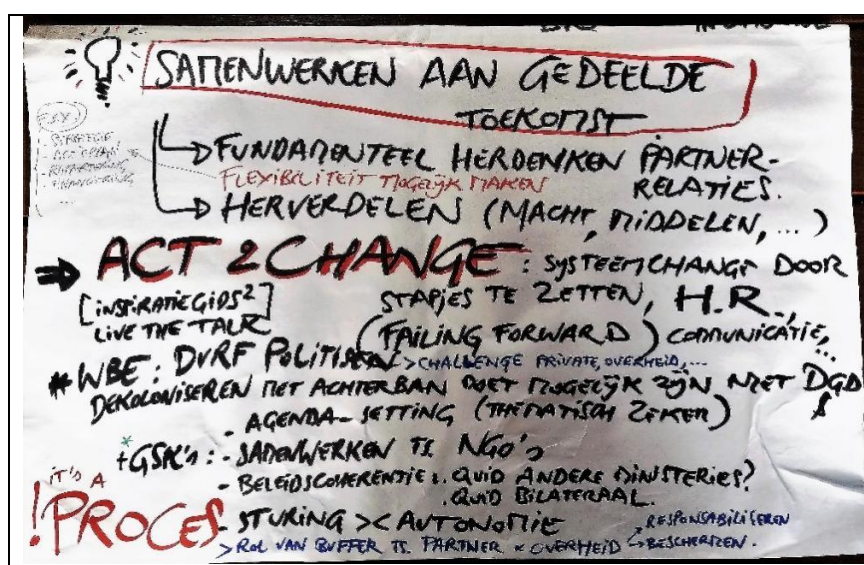


Figure 3-5 Working together on a shared future

Changing the DNA of the development aid will require a change in decision-making processes. It requires breaking hierarchical relations and building synergies, collaborative work, mutual learning and a co-management that considers local culture. Participants demand a future built with and led by civil society and their needs.

Collaboration based on partner needs

The participants from the partner countries make a unanimous call for collaboration based on the countries' real needs. They consider that development aid should strengthen country sovereignty:

"Development cooperation will change when the beneficiary States have acquired the right to refuse or accept proposed interventions."

Other participants ponder that civil society should have the last word in defining the programs and projects intended to be implemented in their territories. In addition, these interventions must respect the local culture, value the knowledge and skills in the territories, and not be conditional aid.

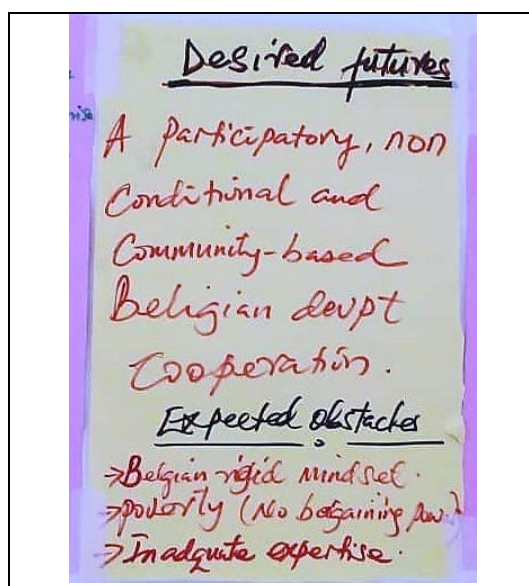


Figure 3-6 Community-based collaboration

3.2. Proposed procedural changes

Develop a bidirectional MEAL system

NGAs participants consider it necessary to embrace a culture of mutual learning through bi-directional mechanisms for Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) that must be flexible to changes in the context. These practices can help strengthen relationships, co-management, and local ownership and increase beneficiaries' self-esteem. According to the participants, the ultimate goal must be a shared decision-making process and improving interventions, learning from mistakes and adopting an evaluation to learn, not control. Thus, adopting a learning culture where partners dare try something new and different without fear of failure is essential.

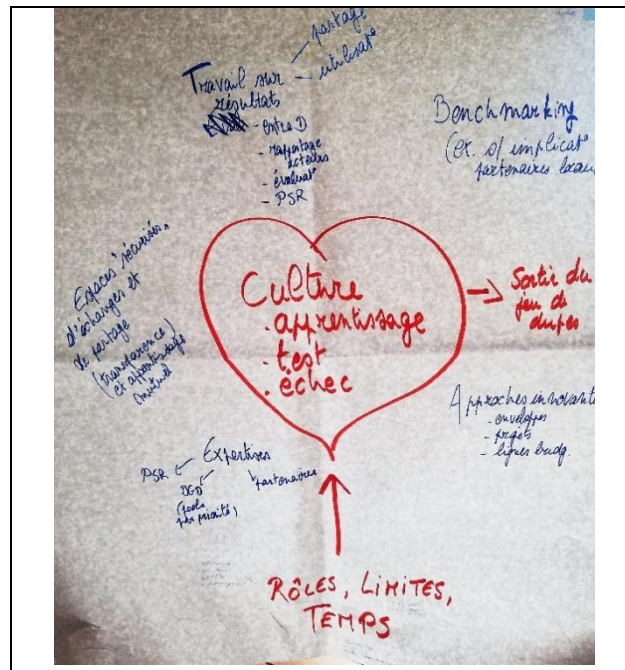


Figure 3-7 Learning culture

Simplify administrative procedures

According to the participants, mainly from the NGO sector, a critical change implies simplifying the administrative procedures for handling and managing programs and projects. The objective is to move away from technocratic managerial values that offer “best practices” developed by experts from the Global North. Because these practices do not correspond to the partner countries' needs, contexts, values, and realities, limiting the search for local solutions. Then, it is necessary to harmonize the procedures and tools with those already in operation in the partner countries and go from technocratic best practices to local best-fit solutions.

For their part, DGD participants suggest that much time is spent on administrative and control procedures that leave no time for essential things. Therefore, they consider administrative simplification necessary and the easiest to start with, as some participants noted:

“We thought the easiest to reach and relatively easier to implement is simplifying many control and administrative procedures.”

Streamline remuneration processes and national experts instead of foreigners

Participants from the partner countries argue there are enough national experts with better capacities and knowledge of the local context to engage in development aid actions. At the same time, they highlight that development aid staff need to be remunerated in the same way, irrespective of their origins. Measures of this type would not only help to eliminate privileges but would also reduce hierarchical and power relations.

Improving communication

Some NGAs argue that building equal partnerships is necessary to foster collaborative dialogue beyond their organizations and mainly with beneficiaries. Simultaneously, be aware of how language and communication could reinforce the dominant relationships. Academics from both sides highlighted the importance of listening, sharing and working together in a participatory manner to reduce power asymmetries.

Participants from NGOs also noted the importance of changing communication in fundraising and marketing campaigns that still use stereotypes reinforcing colonial imaginaries. INGO participants mentioned that top-down and paternalistic donor communication should be internally challenged. At the same time, communication should help to change the view of the work that cooperation is doing.

On the other hand, participants from the partner countries consider that improving communication and reducing power relations between partners is necessary to increase the official use of the local languages. They argue that language is power, and imposing a foreign language (often the language of the former colonizers) creates limits, hierarchies and barriers at all levels.

4. IDENTIFIED TACIT ASSUMPTIONS, TENSIONS AND PARADOXES

The result of the participatory process showed that starting a dialogue on the need to decolonize development cooperation is essential. Although some development actors are aware of the legacy of the colonial history of Belgium and its organizations, some participants (including local actors) still do not realize that their own colonial practices could also be affecting the interventions and the intended beneficiaries; this situation was particularly alarming in the academic sector. Therefore, this chapter seeks to summarise some of the tensions, paradoxes, and underlying assumptions that emerged from the analysis. We also acknowledge our limitations as researchers trained under the Western paradigm and part of one of the most colonial institutions of modern society, the university. Then, this chapter is an invitation to remember *“that there is always an oppressor within each of us”* [7], even if we are part of the marginalized people.

A change in semantics alone will not address the deep-rooted systemic racism in development.

Through time, the aid sector has been changing the way of naming the loans and grants disbursed by the governments of the Global North to promote "development" in the countries of the Global South. Some of the names that have been used are "foreign", "international", or "development" aid, Official Development Assistance (ODA), development cooperation and, more recently, a partnership of equals. Aid recipients have moved from poor, marginalized or disadvantaged groups to beneficiaries, target groups or partners. Likewise, aid is no longer used as a tool to "develop" but to "empower" or "Leave No One Behind".

There have been calls to reconsider the term "development aid" in our workshops. Participants proposed to use the concept of solidarity and equal partnership instead of development aid. But naming aid as solidarity or equal partnership does not necessarily change the dependence relationship hidden behind the act of "giving" and "receiving" if the one who gives does so by imposing their conditions and continues to control the socio, political and economic system [24]. In the same way, if the aid recipients are called partners instead of beneficiaries, it will not have any effect unless we do not address the existing structural racism embedded and manifested in development discourse, policy, practice, attitudes and values. Additionally, this change will not be possible if the partner cannot decide on its own development and if the donors' standards measure countries' political, social, economic, and cultural processes [25]. A semantics change without deep-rooted systemic change will take us into the partnership paradox [24] and continue in business as usual.

The challenge of going from rhetoric to action

Participants acknowledged that ownership, diversity, inclusion, and equal partnership are daily buzzwords in the development lexicon. Participants consider that these concepts are not reflected in programme implementation. Instead, they remain only rhetorical devices. Some participants believe that Belgian cooperation has regressed in ownership, emphasizing the imperative to move towards a future based on local ownership. In other words, they ponder that actions must respond to local needs, and civil society should have the power to decide on development policies and the actions implemented in their territories.

This understanding of local ownership implies a power shift beyond existing practices in which donor agencies and national governments must share control over the decision-making processes in the political and economic agendas. But are those in power interested in sharing control? Most participants believe that this is a utopia. Additionally, there is the problem around the lack of legitimacy of local governments and the internal colonialism exercised by the ruling elites in the partner countries, as also participants from the partner countries noted. Then, under these circumstances, how Belgian donors and agencies could build local ownership without interfering with the national sovereignty of the partner countries?

Concerning inclusion, most participants focused on Human Resources (HR) policies and how to make their organizations more diverse and inclusive. Some participants believe that inclusion is a guarantee for decolonizing the development aid system.

“if personnel policy is more inclusive, that will ensure that decolonization will gradually trickle down.”

Although inclusion is crucial for diversifying development aid understandings and practices, it will not safeguard a decolonization process. Moreover, the difficulty will be ensuring that an HR policy does not become a tokenistic diversity or utilitarian act to meet non-white inclusion quotas [25]. There is also a further pitfall that females, transgender and non-white staff remain underrepresented in top positions and on organization boards, not to mention the absence of local communities in decision-making spaces. Also, we must remember that *“inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone”* [26].

There is also a tendency to believe that dialogue and participation guarantee inclusion forgetting the asymmetrical conditions of power in which dialogue and participation occur [15]. Instead of shared and genuine decision-making power and dialogue without listening, tokenism participation increases inequalities and perpetuates domination [27].

Local NGOs between precariousness and dependency

Entering the aid industry makes civil society organizations lose their autonomy and the possibility of criticizing the system [1]. But it also becomes the only alternative to having a job, as mentioned by some participants. So local NGAs are trapped between precariousness and dependency with the aggravating circumstance that they could end up reproducing exclusionary schemes in their communities, sometimes without noticing.

The most challenging problem is that it is almost impossible to get out of it when entering the system. As noted in the rivers of life, many participants have been working in the sector for more than 20 years. So, the system uses mechanisms to make people feel good and believe that they are "making a difference" when, in reality, they are being used to reproduce an economic, social and political model. This situation can be seen in arguments such as the following:

“... I was also looking at staff stability. I know other development organizations do it. They put gratuity in development cooperation. So people are attracted to stay longer because the longer you stay, the more your thing grows. I have seen in some organizations that someone stays in an organization for 15 years, 20 years because they know, ok, the longer you stay, the more I will grow my thing.”

A system trapped between the discourse of poverty, the white saviour complex and privileges

Although some voices are trying to interrogate the system, scholars argue that the aid industry is caught up in the discourse of poverty, the white savior complex [25] and privileges. Development aid is based on the discourse of the limitations of some and the goodwill of others. The latter convinces the former via a technical and politically neutral language to help them address their diagnosed lack of technology, skills, education, and democratic institutions [28]. These two narratives degenerate into paternalistic practices that, combined with the lack of genuine participation in decision-making bodies, end up imposing actions disconnected from reality and the needs of the partner countries, as remarked by almost all participants.

To break with these paternalistic practices, organizations need to recognize their colonial history and how it has perpetuated dependency, reinforcing hegemonic practices based on western values and culture, as noted by some participants. NGAs also need to recognize how these practices facilitated or overlooked different forms of discrimination against some people while engendering privileges in others [25].

Although some development actors are aware of their privileges, they are not ready to give them up, as observed by some participants. They also prefer to start with soft reforms that do not jeopardise their jobs and affect their privileges. The issue is that *“until white development workers and scholars confront how they*

benefit from the racial hierarchies that underpin this field, and actively work to upend their unearned privilege, development will always suffer from a 'white gaze' problem" [25, p. 14].

One unique way of doing science

Higher education and knowledge production are sectors in which modernity and (neo)colonial violences (e.g. patriarchal, anthropocentric, racialized) have historically been reproduced vigorously [29]. A few years ago, debates began within European universities about the need to decolonize the academy. These initiatives question the whiteness of curricula and the need to incorporate thinkers from other latitudes [30]. Likewise, emphasis is placed on breaking with the white-male supremacist culture that dominates the sector [31]. However, questioning science as the only reliable truth remains marginal. This trend could be observed in the workshops with the Belgian academics, some of whom expressed their conviction that there is only one way to produce knowledge: through western science and its scientific method. This position disqualifies other ways of knowing and understanding the world. From this perspective, science is something to "export" to the partner countries, believing that in this way, academics from wealthy countries contribute to the partners' "development". Yet participants from the South argued that this contributes to increasing dependency and making other knowledge systems invisible and worthless, confirmed by research on neocolonial processes. Therefore, there is no collaboration or mutual learning but an imposition of a way of thinking and doing, as most academics from partner countries observed.

Another problem related to the development cooperation programmes is that territories and populations from the partner countries become research laboratories for many scholars (mainly male and white) from the donor countries that reproduce the western paradigm in partner countries. Unfortunately, very few participants questioned the coloniality of these practices. They limited themselves to questioning the few funds available and asking who benefits from the research:

"The key problem we found with our group is: not having enough questioning, for whom the research is done? And we think this affects development cooperation because without questioning that, we don't come to understand how this research would benefit the intended kind of beneficiaries in the research."

When will funding be enough?

Another element that most participants agreed on is the lack of sufficient funds. Still, data shows that the humanitarian industry is growing. Since 1989, it has grown from \$0.5bn to \$22bn in 2018 [32]. According to the OECD Development cooperation peer-reviews of Belgium (2020) in 2017-18, the top five sectors for Belgian bilateral cooperation were: humanitarian aid (USD 175 million); education (USD 85 million); health (USD 85 million) and share of funding to NGAs amounted to USD 288 million, i.e. 21% of bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA). However, the education and the NGO sector claim they do not have enough funds. Is the problem insufficient funds? There are not enough funds for what or for whom?

Some Belgian academics report strong competitiveness related to funds allocation that leads to high professionalization in the sector, as noted by one of a Belgian academics when discussing funding:

"(...) due to the fierce competition in Flanders and the lack of money. Actually, it turns out that it's rather the North partner having his research idea writing the project because he knows how to write it to get it funded here and is just looking for someone in the South who can then be the partner (...) So again, I think this can only be solved if more money is put into the system."

Although the discussion here focuses on the lack of funds, we believe the case is illustrative of situations in which well-written projects are favoured instead of those relevant to the context. In these cases, there is no collaboration or mutual learning; instead, it marginalises and diminishes the knowledge and capacities of the "partners". Then, maybe we need to ask what percentage of this money reaches the intended beneficiaries.

Or supported attempts at self-reliance and autonomy? And how much of that money has contributed to reducing poverty?

Racism and multiple forms of discrimination reduced to socio-economic inequalities

We have seen how structural racism persists in our societies, becoming evident again through the "Black Lives Matter" and "charity so white" movements. As mentioned above, racism and other forms of discrimination are also present in Belgian development cooperation, as revealed by some participants. However, very few participants proposed actions against racism or any other discrimination. The few actions were mainly related to inclusive HR policies, reducing the problem of socio-economic inequalities and funding. But reducing racism and other discriminatory forms to an economic issue will perpetuate power, privileges [25] and poverty.

Beyond socio-economic development

The research showed tensions in how different participants perceive Belgian development aid. First, some participants deny there is a problem. Although they admit procedural flaws, they are convinced of the system's benevolence. They believe that colonial legacies are a matter of the past, and it is necessary to turn the page:

"We take too much account of the historical context and remain stuck in predefined roles of 'dominant' and 'submissive', of 'colonist' and 'colonized', the one who gives and the one who receives. Rather, making a clean sweep and starting from scratch will be necessary to define a partnership of equals."

In contrast, other participants insisted on an urgent need to change (neo)colonial practices and the whole development aid narrative to shape partner countries' social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental structures. They noted that it is necessary first to acknowledge the legacy of colonization present in different forms of oppression, such as racism, patriarchy, or extractivism, to change the development aid narrative. However, they also highlighted the difficulty of overcoming structural and procedural barriers since development aid results from a geopolitical strategy built on the unconditional virtue of capitalism, productivity, and economic efficiency. Participants noted that commitment is required from all parties to break the colonial legacies inherent in the development and aid dyad replicated throughout the entire system. This obligation includes dominant nations and wealthy and corrupt ruling elites in the partners' countries.

Although participants agree that it is time to break with the reminiscences of a colonial past and the current (neo)colonial practices, their focus is still mainly on socio-economic development. Few participants acknowledge the importance of unsettling the narrow anthropocentric idea of 'development as progress' based on economic growth and knowledge transfer. One participant suggested the need to deconstruct the development concept to open new possibilities that nurture and respect life on Earth and go beyond equal partnership between donors and partner countries:

"What will be the use of a balanced and fulfilling future of our relations (between human beings of Belgium and human beings of the countries of the South) if, in the meantime, the fauna and flora continue to suffer dramatically from human activities and the climate goes completely out of whack?"

Contradictions and tensions

There are remarkable contradictions, mainly among the Belgian participants, between the desired futures and the proposed actions. Firstly, the actions that are being proposed are often quite limited compared to the desired futures that are discursively expressed, especially among institutional development actors but also on the level of NGOs (Belgian and local). The proposed actions are described within the existing

institutional framework and within the existing relationships. Secondly, the proposed actions are often situated at a local level. In contrast, the framework for decolonized development cooperation is usually situated at a global level. Remarkable is that the different actors predominantly describe the required actions to decolonize in relation to an overarching authority. NGOs often describe actions in relation to the government and the umbrella organizations, DGD in relation to the EU or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and university staff refers to VLIR-UOS. Thirdly, decolonization is understood in the same terms as development. Decolonization is conceived as a gift from those in power to those lacking it, but it remains a gift that can be asked back at any time. There is no true open-endedness.

Underlying these contradictions is a long list of challenges to decolonizing development. At the level of development organizations, these challenges are both situated internally and externally. Internally, there are different views on how radical decolonization should be. Some are more convinced of the use of the concept or its radicality than others. Those who take a more radical stance often struggle to convey the message to other team members, focusing on arguments such as realism, pragmatism, and prudence.

Moreover, for some individuals, decolonization comes with personal risks, as it impairs job security and long-term career plans. This can lead to internal conflicts, demotivation, or cynicism amongst proponents of a more radical view. In other words, discussions on decolonization have an impact on group dynamics and interpersonal relationships at the group level.

Externally, the development sector is heterogeneous and competitive, and each organization's efforts to decolonize also come with possible risks. For example, decisions to decolonize the imagery and the visual language mean that development organizations refrain from using stereotypical images, portraying beneficiaries as passive or helpless victims that reproduce colonial representations. Yet, suppose other organizations keep using these images and collecting more funding. In that case, this weakens the organisation's position that applies a more ethical approach. This results in different development actors looking and pointing at each other when acting and feeling hesitant to undertake efforts themselves.

5. MAPPING INTERPRETATIONS OF DECOLONIZATION FOR CO-CREATING PLURIVERSE FUTURES

Although development aid is intended to support partner countries to ensure the well-being of their citizens, unfortunately, this aid becomes a lubricant for (neo)colonial systems of policy co-optation [3]. Several authors argue that the aid industry inscribed in an international network of institutions from the United Nations, donors and NGOs are used as a technical means to (re)produce and sustain dominant (neo)colonial schemes and modernity violence [1], [3]–[5], [12]. One of the strategies used by the system is the representation of partners as “poor” and “underdeveloped”, which helps to justify and reproduce power and, at the same time, depoliticize poverty issues [18]. Another strategy that the aid industry uses is the NGOization of social movements in partner countries, turning them into weak private organizations that, in the process, lose their political and intellectual autonomy [1]. By becoming subcontractors of international agencies, local NGOs turn into one more link in the development aid apparatus chain and inadvertently end up replicating the perverse effects of the system. These schemes are based on asymmetrical power relations manifested in the overlapping military, economic and knowledge spheres [11]. Although all these dimensions overlap, knowledge may be the most potent form of domination [11]. Historically, knowledge has been used to impose religious and racial doctrines used to justify everything from conquest and slavery to economic and market models [4], [11], [33].

The actions of the aid industry are then embodied in global “common agreements” such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that operate under the political-economy paradigms based on economic growth logic [1] at the expense of irreparable ecological destruction [34]. At the same time, global joint agreements typically deny other ways of seeing and understanding the world by imposing a prefabricated vision of development. This vision defines the objectives the partner countries should achieve and the strategies and instruments they must use. Moreover, these actions have not been reducing inequalities worldwide until now, as confirmed by the World Inequality Report 2022. The report noted that global wealth inequalities did not decrease since the early 20th century instead have increased everywhere since the 1980s [35].

Our analysis shows the limits of some currently proposed solutions, such as semantic changes, inclusion and participation as decolonization strategies. We also sought to map the system's complexities, tensions, and paradoxes to suggest possible ways to proceed in the decolonizing process DGD intends to initiate. Since decolonization comes with internal challenges and possibly also with personal losses and threats to the organization, the competition between different NGOs in development cooperation efforts to decolonize has some characteristics of a collective action problem. This means that, although there is general agreement within the development sector about the importance of decolonizing development, they largely fail to do so because of conflicting interests between individuals and organizations that discourage joint action. Therefore, efforts to decolonize will not be successful unless institutionally supported and umbrella organizations take a leading role in its implementation; otherwise, they might be a source of mutual distrust.

Moreover, the more than 200 participants of this research disclosed the difficulties of imaging futures outside the western notion of “development.” Participants argued that co-creating alternative pathways to decolonize Belgian development aid would require significant efforts from governments, donors, policymakers, United Nations organizations, NGAs, academics and civil society to go beyond development and recognize diversity as an over-arching characteristic of the global community [11]. The research also revealed a truth that has been shouted for a long time about how unequal power dynamics rooted in structural racism and multiple forms of discrimination affect international relations, mainly the relationships with intended beneficiaries. Many of the current practices in the aid system reinforce (neo)colonial dynamics such as paternalism, white gaze, white savior and unearned privileges visible in the regulatory character of the development programmes and the absence of beneficiaries in decision-making spaces. As a result of this absence, development aid programmes and research design are deep-rooted in western canons belittling local knowledge and capacities. In turn, the little recognition of the capacities of the beneficiaries is later reflected in low self-esteem and greater dependence, turning development aid into a paradox. Our findings are consistent with a recent global consultation on power dynamics and imbalances in the international aid

system. In November 2020, this global consultation confirmed the difficulties in addressing the aid system's colonial legacy and ongoing racism [36]. It was also a call of over a hundred national and subnational organizations worldwide demanding international NGOs that pay lip service to the "Shifting Power". They challenged them to use their resources to support grassroots organizations instead of keeping them in a master/servant relationship [37].

Under this scenario and to be consistent with the participants' call of the need to build the processes from below, instead of a list of possible solutions to deal with the development aid sector complexities, this report offers a social cartography [13] of responses to the colonial legacies in the Belgian development aid context. Social cartography is a visual synthesis of reality representing multiple understandings and tensions from different positions, often invisible in conversations [30].

The social cartography, illustrated in Figure 6.1, is derived from the participant's responses and inspired by the current literature on decolonization. Although our research and literature found radical positions that call to end the development aid sector, our mapping exercise does not include this scenario because we are conscious that many people derive their livelihood from the aid industry. However, we agree that it is necessary to create alternatives to development [38] and that development cooperation should not be used to impose policy conditionalities or macroeconomic policy frameworks [11]. Thus, our cartography represents a vision of three possible decolonization approaches in the context of development aid, all with different aims, commitments, and orientations. It attempts to be a pedagogical tool to guide reflexive and transformative dialogues among diverse actors to generate new vocabularies that could lead to new imaginaries [14].

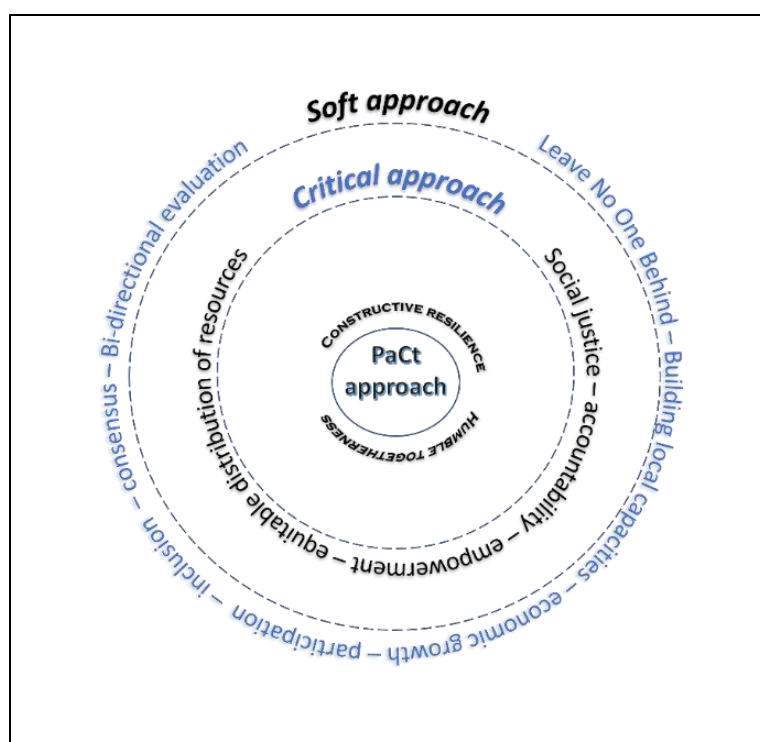


Figure 5-1 Mapping interpretations of decolonization in development aid

We identified three main discourses or approaches that are represented in three circles. The first one is the **soft approach**. Located in the outer circle, this approach is grounded in a strong belief in modernity, economic growth and progress-making that can be achieved with industrialization, science and technology. Thus, the "least developed" and "developing" countries can reach "development" through building capacities, goodwill, democratic processes, inclusion, and participation without making significant system changes. The soft approach is represented in the cartography's outer circle that is further away from the structural issues,

characterized by no questioning structural power relations and focuses mainly on procedural changes. The partners from the Global South have no voice. Instead, changes and proposals are defined by the donors or organizations from the Global North unilaterally and imposed on the local organizations deciding what is good for the beneficiaries and how these should be done. Thus, this approach is usually rhetorical, top-down, one-sided and western-centric [14]. It uses decolonization as a brand to integrate it into a mainstream narrative [39] for the perpetual expansion of existing institutions working toward a single story of human development [38].

In the middle, the **critical approach** pursues social justice, equity and autonomy, empowering civil society to fight against exploitation and a fairer distribution of resources and softening power imbalances. Unlike the *soft approach*, this space questions and seeks to fix the power relations and violences generated by the modernity-coloniality dyad (e.g. capitalism, racism, patriarchy, cis-heteronormativity). However, it uses the system's formal channels, such as empowerment, participation and dialogue based on consensus. Although it could use alternative channels such as contests, struggles, and protests to disrupt power, the system can consider them violent and uncivilized [30]. Therefore, there is a risk that organizations and donors co-opt the decolonization discourse and put it into a tick-box framework, as happened with participation, gender equality and sustainability [15], [17], [19].

The critical approach could help start shifting power. However, there is a danger that actions could deepen coloniality rather than unravel it [40]. If there is no genuine participation of the partner countries in the decision-making process and all the actors are not highly vigilant of their complicities in maintaining the status quo, their efforts will be in vain. Additionally, if the actions are limited to fixing what does not work in the system without disrupting the modernity-coloniality violences, the structural barriers will continue shaping the development aid industry.

The third approach pursues **Putting At the CenTre (PaCt)** relationality, harmony, humility and life. It seeks to take the dynamics of exclusion and discrimination within hegemonic power structures by disrupting the colonial legacies, power relations, and privileges [14] through humble togetherness and constructive resilience [21]. This approach searches for structural changes supported by traditional values such as reciprocity and interdependence, reconnecting with each other and nature by displacing ourselves from the centre of the world [30]. This change requires openness, relatedness and collective responsibility [41]. To initiate this dialogue, actors also need to understand that poverty, power, politics and privileges are the product of pettiness and the insatiable desire for accumulation, structured in hierarchies of race and place[25]. It also requires an understanding of development aid as a system.

The **PaCt** approach is an invitation to recognize the diversity of perspectives, visions and understandings of 'development'. Our research clarified that there is no one-size-fits-all pathway to change the development aid industry. Therefore, the change needs to be done at all levels and include all different actors, donors, governments, (international) NGOs, grassroots organizations, and beneficiaries. The latter must have the most significant decision-making power over the actions implemented in their territories and be the greatest beneficiaries of these actions. The change should start from the bottom, respecting the sovereignty of the communities in their territories. Actors must invest in creating alternatives to development. **PaCt's** approach should centre on the questions of land, natural 'resources', environment, and exploitation while valorizing subaltern knowledge and histories. In other words, actors must invest their efforts in not turning decolonizing into a metaphor [20]. Instead, they should dare to learn through messy collective experimentation, improvisation and reflexivity while nurturing ethical and equitable relations based on respect, reciprocity and solidarity [38].

The social cartography presented above is a tool to engage donors, policymakers, United Nations organizations, NGOs, academics, activists and civil society from donors and partner countries in transformative dialogues. Although it will be complex conversations, their objective is to raise awareness, unlearn the colonial-modernity matrix habits, and co-create alternative narratives that can lead to structural

and procedural changes in the Belgian development cooperation system. In this process, hyper-reflexivity [6] and collective reflexivity [22] are required to go from monologues to dialogues based on listening and mutual learning [11]. But also opening spaces for dissent, to imagine and co-create pluriverse futures as opposed to colonial ways of thinking and acting [42]. In practice, this means walking uncharted paths without fear of failure or getting lost but with a deep desire to learn from them.

Based on the above, we recommend using the proposed cartography to move beyond aid and development cooperation towards a PaCt of “humble togetherness” where partners are eager to dig deeper, learn to unlearn, imagine, and build alternative pathways. Building this PaCt implies:

- a) Taking the time, pace and space to start complex conversations with partner countries to imagine and co-create alternative futures to go beyond development, economic growth, patriarchy, individualism, separation, polarization, greediness and arrogance by nurturing values such as reciprocity, empathy, respect and caretaking, not only people but also Mother Earth
 - b) Understanding, healing the unconscious and addressing colonial-modernity violences (capitalism, racism, patriarchy, cis-heteronormativity, extractivism) and all forms of oppression and discrimination, learning to unlearn the internalized and cultural habits of domination and designing a world without socio-economic inequalities
 - c) Foster transformative dialogues to co-create new vocabularies, meanings and images of a world in which many worlds can be embraced [43]
 - d) Replace traditional donor-recipient relationships by cultivating relational accountability, reciprocity and complementarity
 - e) Transcend neoliberal order by creating radical strategies for alternative solidarity, harmony, and interdependence
 - f) Enable grassroots collaborative thinking by building local identities based on local knowledge and improving access to safe spaces for mutual learning and associated collaborative actions.
 - g) Stop competition, separation and fragmentation by sharing experiences, good practices, failures, data and resources necessary for mutual inspiration and cross-pollination
 - h) Dare to invest time and efforts to explore the complexities, tensions and paradoxes that a decolonizing process will entail
 - i) Maintain and not give up efforts even though we realize how difficult it is to abandon our privileges and the high cost involved
 - j) Recognition of diversity among nations and of the right of each nation to plan its own course of development, therefore acceptance of policy heterodoxy [11]
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6. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this study, the participants expressed the importance of the need to make a profound change in the Belgian development aid system. The participants consider that despite the intentions to establish equal partnerships with the partner countries, these have not been put fully into practice. On the contrary, the participants deplore the persistence of the effects of the colonial legacy, from structural racism to different forms of discrimination and segregation, while ignoring historical power imbalances [12]. Participants also emphasize how programmes, projects, research designs, implementation, and evaluation are rooted in western values and knowledge that devalue local knowledge systems. This issue is also linked to the limited participation of partner countries and the absence of local communities in decision-making spaces.

This study demonstrates that truly decolonizing the aid industry requires going beyond procedural changes and fighting against structural racism and all forms of discrimination. Although participants consider this change is needed. The research also shows that development aid actors are not fully aware of or have difficulty acknowledging how colonial legacies are deep-rooted in the system, our societies and ourselves. Certain practices, such as the white savior complex, white gaze and paternalism, reinforce (neo)colonial dynamics and systems of domination. Thus, without realizing it, they end up reproducing modernity-coloniality violences.

Decolonizing Belgian development cooperation/aid will entail accepting decolonization as a contradictory, complex and unpredictable process. Therefore, it needs to start an open and honest dialogue between all actors. We need, first, to continue raising awareness of the colonial legacies of the system, second to question everyday thinking and acting, and third to imagine and experiment with alternative pathways to development aid. To this aim, this report offers a social cartography that can be used as a pedagogical tool to jump into these uncharted waters.

The pedagogical tool invites participants to move toward a PaCt of “humble togetherness” and constructive resilience. Participants should dare to reimagine our societies collectively and envision a future in which many worlds can fit —knowing that it will not be easy. It will require building new ways of relating to others and nature to address global challenges collaboratively. We hope that DGD, ARES, and VLIR-UOS continue the conversations that have already started with Belgian NGOs. But we encourage them to expand and deepen the work with the various actors from the partner countries, allowing them to take the driving seat of their futures.

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