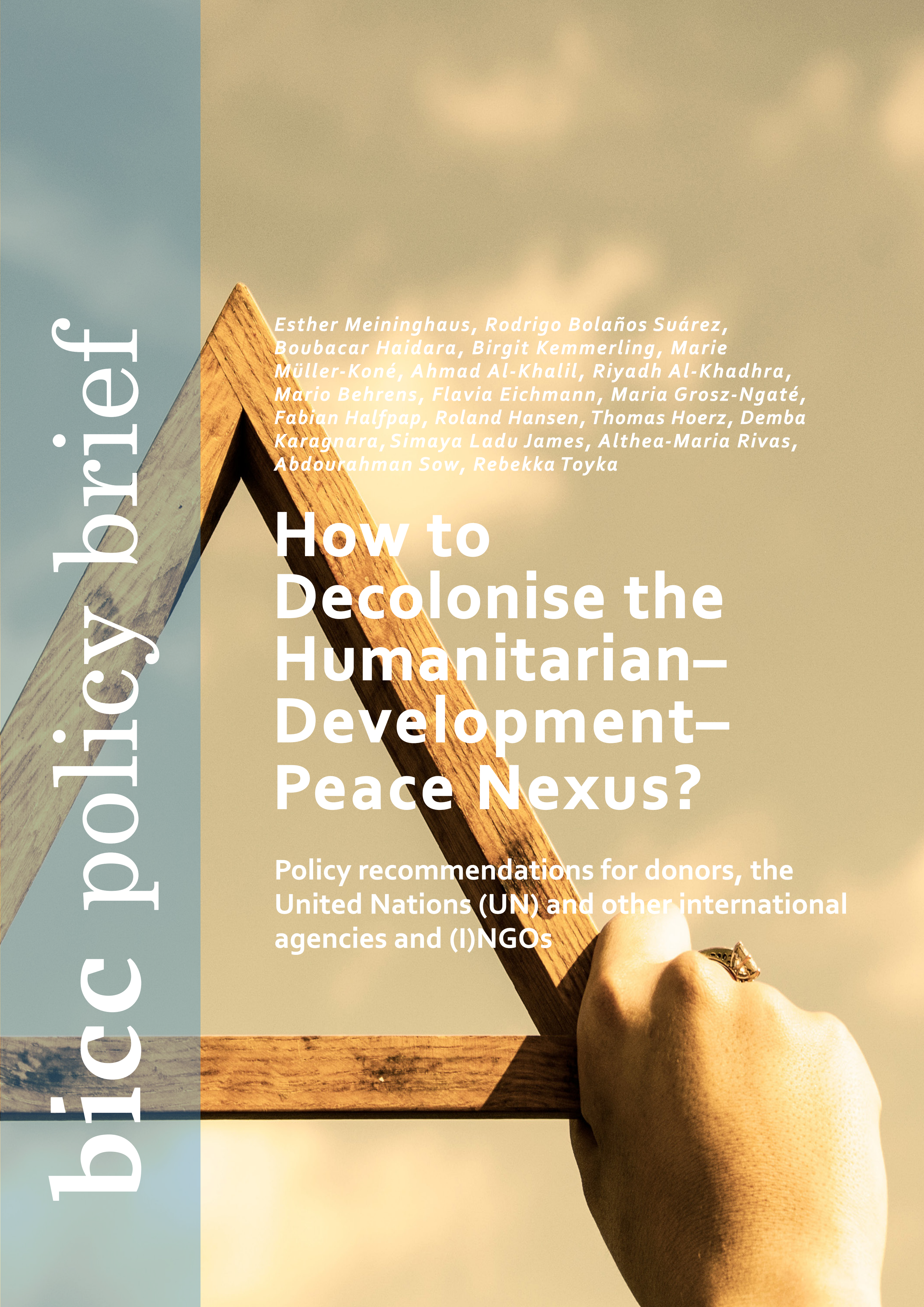

bicc policy brief

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How to Decolonise the Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus?

Policy recommendations for donors, the United Nations (UN) and other international agencies and (I)NGOs

Recommendations

1 Increase the ratio and decision-making power of local staff in UN agencies, international agencies and non-governmental organisations (INGOs)

UN agencies and INGOs should employ qualified local staff as a rule and expatriates only in exceptional cases. Qualified local staff should occupy leadership positions at the local, national, regional and HQ/global levels. As much value should be placed on knowledge of the context, social practices and local languages as on technical expertise.

2 Initiate processes of individual and collective reflection within organisations to overcome prejudices and structural racism

Local staff in (I)NGOs or UN agencies are often seen as less capable and more corrupt, while expatriates are seen to be more capable and neutral. Nationality, ethnicity or religion do not determine capacity and corruption. Organisations need to initiate processes of reflection on the structural racism behind such assumptions (e.g. one-to-one dialogues, externally facilitated sessions) and establish tangible audit mechanisms on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

3 Create equal working conditions and security measures for local and international/expatriate staff in international organisations

The salary gap between local and expatriate staff with the same qualifications and in the same positions should be reduced by bringing expatriate salaries into line with local salaries. Local staff, who face the greatest security risks when entering high-risk areas should no longer be required to do so in a personal capacity but should remain contractually protected as UN agency/INGO staff.

4 Substantially increase funding for local and national aid organisations as agreed in the Grand Bargain

International donors should allocate at least 25 per cent of funding directly to local or national organisations and gradually increase this to over 50 per cent.

5 Reverse the culture of upward accountability to donors to build a culture of downward accountability to affected communities

UN agencies and (I)NGOs need to increase their accountability to the populations they serve and to change their assessment criteria for aid projects from measuring success based on outputs to process-oriented, adaptive programming with community consent. The use of funds and impact assessments of projects must be made transparent to affected communities, publicly available and accessible.

6 Make the official/working language of the country of intervention a minimum requirement for staff

Knowledge of an official/working language of a country should be a minimum requirement for all staff of INGOs operating in that country. Knowledge of local languages should be considered as a crucial advantage when recruiting staff.

Background: How Does the HDP Aid System Reflect Colonial Legacies and Power Imbalances?

Recent calls to decolonise aid from within (I)NGOs in the aid sector stem from a fundamental critique of the international aid system that emerged from the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020. The decolonial critique draws attention to power imbalances and structural racism that can be traced back to the colonial era. These colonial legacies continue to permeate the international humanitarian system, most visibly in the dominance of international (non-)governmental organisations that shape the aid structure. The "decolonise aid" debate has been taken up by humanitarian, development and peacebuilding organisations (Aloudat & Khan, 2022; Peace Direct, 2021; Schirch, 2022). It is broadly defined as a process of reflection, critical analysis and action that identifies and dismantles such power imbalances and structural racism in order to work towards a more equitable aid system that focuses on the shared humanity of all staff and the communities they serve.

The decolonial critique is particularly relevant to the HDP nexus (Müller-Koné et al., 2024): The HDP nexus debate emerged around the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) as part of the "New Way of Working", which means better integrating 'local' governmental and non-governmental aid actors into the humanitarian system. In line with the Grand Bargain, an agreement that emerged from the WHS, signatories are supposed to work towards "collective outcomes" and "localisation" in a bottom-up approach through joint analysis and direct access to funding for these local actors.

A decolonial approach would need to address the power imbalances head-on by working to dismantle the structural disadvantages that current funding structures and administrative regulations place on local aid actors.

We argue that the current implementation of the HDP nexus fails to address power asymmetries and structural inequalities in the international aid system (Müller-Koné et al., 2024). Beyond a bottom-up approach to localisation, we call for a decolonial rethinking that analyses and acknowledges how colonial legacies affect funding flows, the distribution of staff and decision-making power, as well as norms and attitudes within the aid sector. This requires an examination of the power relations between actors in the global North and the global South, and between local and international/expatriate staff within organisations. It also requires a close analysis of the power relations that create competition for funding/staff between INGOs, as competition often leads to duplication of aid when combined efforts could have a deeper and broader impact. We also argue that local aid organisations should have a reserved funding quota of at least 25 per cent from international donors. By local actors, we mean organisations and staff from the countries concerned, from local to national level, with as much local ownership as possible. In our view, international NGOs with country offices should not be counted as 'local', although this is the current practice under UN rules.

The implementation of the HDP nexus could potentially have a positive effect if it reduces competition within the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors. A decolonial approach prioritises the needs and visions of local populations while recognising that 'the local' is a space of diverse and competing actors. Based on reflection and analysis, a decolonial approach would need to address the power imbalances head-on by working to dismantle the structural disadvantages that current funding structures and administrative regulations place on local aid actors.

Decolonise aid movements critique the structural racism of the aid system, which is expressed in a particular use of language. Terms that have become key to a sustainable response, such as "capacity-building," reflect structural inequalities, with international organisations defining who lacks what kind of capacity. It therefore tends to refer to a lack of capacity in certain concepts or methods needed to deliver aid, but does not acknowledge, for example, the lack of ability of international actors to design programmes in a way that is sensitive to socio-cultural, customary practices, to speak the language of the communities or to understand the context and history in which the organisation is working. As a result, capacity-building is a term used for local staff, NGOs and communities in countries of the global South, while organisations from the global North are usually seen as the holders of capacity and the providers of capacity-building and expert knowledge.

In practice, such structural racism, some of which stems from colonial legacies, is reflected in funding structures for programmes and research that favour a relatively small number of mostly INGOs that benefit from pre-existing relationships with donors over local NGOs. 'Local' humanitarian actors are largely invisible in media reporting of crises and are disadvantaged in terms of funding opportunities. Structural racism is also evident in the unequal treatment of international staff and local/national staff from the country of intervention by INGOs. This unequal treatment sometimes covers a number of aspects, including different salaries for equivalent positions, unequal deployment in insecure areas and different protection mechanisms for international and local staff.

An aspect specific to the HDP nexus debate is the fact that international aid agencies stress the need to overcome institutional silos between the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors and to set a new HDP agenda and attendant rules for local organisations in the global South. However, local organisations receive very little direct funding (1.2 per cent of humanitarian funding globally in 2022), despite the Grand Bargain agreement to increase direct funding to local/national NGOs to 25 per cent of total humanitarian funding by 2020. This is particularly striking as many local aid organisations already combine the three pillars of the HDP within their organisations.

The Way Forward: What Would a Decolonial Approach to the HDP Nexus Look Like?

This *bicc policy brief* aims to constructively engage with the existing aid structures to push for a critical and proactive engagement with their colonial legacies, resulting power imbalances and biases. We argue that such reflections need to be translated into concrete policies to achieve tangible change and action, to which we contribute with the following six key recommendations:

1 Increase the ratio and decision-making power of local staff in UN agencies, international agencies and non-governmental organisations (INGOs)

UN agencies, international agencies and INGOs should hire local staff as a rule, and expatriates only in exceptional cases, such as when the required skills are not available among staff from the same locality or country. The aim is not to nationalise the job market but to redress structural inequalities in the global job market. Moreover, qualified local staff should be in decision-making positions from the local to national, regional and HQ/global levels. This can be facilitated by setting clear benchmarks for the proportion of local to international staff at decision-making levels to ensure accountability and progress towards more localised leadership. It also means that expert knowledge of the context of local conflicts, geography, power relations and social practices, as well as local language skills, should be valued as much as technical expertise in a specific sector. All staff should be expected to acquire knowledge in all three fields.

Contextual knowledge is the most important prerequisite for do-no-harm and conflict-sensitive humanitarian aid. The lack of knowledge of local conflicts and local networks, primarily among expatriate staff, creates risks of doing harm. For example, when expatriate staff in recruitment positions are unaware that the majority of local staff recruited in a country belong to the same ethnic or religious 'group,' the wider population may perceive this as a form of privileging that 'group' and discriminating against others, leading to conflict and tension. In some instances, this can also lead to violence. For example, an INGO office in northern Uganda was looted because it was perceived as not employing local staff, but mainly staff from other regions of Uganda. Similarly, in Upper Nile State, South Sudan, NGOs recruiting only outsiders amid high unemployment, led to violent protests. For these reasons, recruiting practices need to be conflict-sensitive (Grawert & Shirzad, 2017), and contextual knowledge of the localities where aid programmes are implemented is crucial to understanding and adhering to do-no-harm not only for a specific project but for aid operations as a whole. Contextual knowledge and local language skills should no longer be seen as a specific role of, for example, security focal points and coordinators, but as a requirement for the recruitment of all staff.

2 Initiate processes of individual and collective reflection within organisations to overcome prejudice and structural racism

Often, donors, UN agencies and INGOs do not perceive local actors as 'neutral' because they are embedded in local social networks. Conversely, the question of expatriate staff bias is often not asked. Local staff in (I)NGOs or UN agencies are often assumed to be less capable and more corrupt, while expatriates are considered more capable and neutral. These assumptions reflect structural racism or power imbalances because no one is 'neutral'. Nationality, ethnicity or religion do not determine capacity and corruption. In fact, local and expatriate staff are biased—sometimes referred to as positionality—and these biases can have either negative or positive effects. For example, expatriates can also be driven by self-interest, such as professional ambitions, rather than the interest of serving local communities. This may be the case if someone chooses to apply for a management position in a high-risk working environment (even if they often live in relatively well-protected areas in the capital) to be promoted to a higher position elsewhere. Such ambition may also encourage reporting that omits real difficulties and struggles in project implementation, which are particularly severe when expatriate staff are in higher positions of power. While the interest in securing a promotion may motivate some to be particularly diligent, it may lead others to overlook risks to other staff, the organisation and the local community. Alternatively, expatriates may also be focused on serving the local community—both scenarios occur in practice.

In fact, local and expatriate staff are biased—sometimes referred to as positionality—and these biases can have either negative or positive effects.

Local staff or local organisations may also be biased in the sense that they are part of local social networks and are under pressure to act in the interests of their own social, political, tribal, religious or other 'group'. Yet, many local staff who join NGOs, INGOs or UN agencies do so to work for an end to the violence in the communities to which they belong and to use their networks to facilitate dialogue. Meanwhile, expatriates, new to a country, often have little or no in-depth knowledge of local conflicts and their history or have formed their opinions about the conflict from abroad. Upon arrival, their knowledge is often shaped by their newly growing social circle, which can lead to a polarised view of local conflicts.

Another common justification for low aid allocations to local NGOs is that local aid actors are more prone to corruption. However, while several investigations have found corruption among local NGOs, the same is true of UN agencies, such as the recent study on UNDP corruption in Iraq, and how UN agencies and INGOs deal with corruption are not subject to the same level of public scrutiny. For example, in some cases, UN agencies and INGOs have transferred the practice and risk of paying kickbacks (bribes) to local NGOs or logistics companies transporting aid. This puts local NGOs in the position of either accepting the wrongdoing and not speaking out, or losing their contract. The mechanisms for dealing with corruption among UN agencies and INGOs need to be made as publicly transparent as they are for local NGOs.

As many of the negative perceptions of international actors about the risks associated with local actors are rarely based on evidence (Barbelet et al., 2021), we argue that many of the prejudices against 'local' staff in countries of intervention are related to racial prejudices and a White saviour complex. White saviourism refers to a state of mind and a concrete unequal power structure between the global North and the global South that associates Whiteness with benevolence and superiority of intellect and capacity—in short, as more 'developed'—while ignoring the role of Whites of European descent in the exploitation and dispossession of people from the global South. This form of racialisation deprives those it racialises of agency on the false assumption that those who are White can or should act as their 'saviours' (Khan et al., 2023). Based on such a racialised logic, it is our understanding that White saviourism also often assumes that local people working in the aid sector in crisis contexts are driven more by material considerations and less by altruistic values than White staff.[1]

The term 'capacity-sharing' rather than 'capacity-building' reflects recognition of the different capacities that different individuals and organisations (local and international) have in relation to different dimensions relevant to project implementation.

To make visible the structural racism, colonial legacies and power relations behind such assumptions, (I)NGOs and UN agencies need to create safe spaces for individual and collective reflection processes and to establish trusting, dignified and equal partnerships. These processes should be accompanied, not replaced, by the establishment of an internal audit mechanism to regularly assess and report on diversity, equity, and inclusion within the organisation and to ensure that reflection leads to tangible action.

The term 'capacity-sharing' rather than 'capacity-building' reflects recognition of the different capacities that different individuals and organisations (local and international) have in relation to different dimensions relevant to project implementation. A 'capacity-sharing' intervention levels out hierarchical thinking, as it is based on the mutual appreciation of the capacities of both trainers and trainees in different areas of life.

1 "White" in this context denotes a privileged position on the top of a power hierarchy in the sense of "critical Whiteness" studies, not necessarily a particular skin colour. Powerful positions are often occupied by people from former colonial powers, who are typically lighter-skinned but not necessarily so. Co-authors experienced that expatriates from neighbouring African countries independent of skin colour do also have more privileged positions in INGOS than local staff, for example.

3 Ensure equal working conditions and security measures for local and international/expatriate staff in international organisations

When living in the same country, local and expatriate staff should receive at least roughly the same salary, especially when they occupy the same position. Currently, expatriate staff often earn three to ten times more than local staff, even when hired for the same position. In addition, expatriates are sometimes given privileges such as free accommodation, drivers, or recreational leave. In contrast, local staff, who often work under high levels of stress because they and their families are constantly living in the same conditions of war and conflict as aid recipients do, do not receive the same pay or privileges and usually work on short-term contracts without social insurance. As a result, many are traumatised by years of living in war and violent conflict, which also affects their families, while working under greater existential pressures. In line with the principle of do no harm, it is not possible to raise all salaries to the level of expatriate salaries as this would risk further increasing inflation and contributing to the brain drain from local institutions, thus harming the local economy. However, expatriate staff should not receive higher salaries for similar positions with the same qualifications, and local staff should also have access to additional benefits such as social insurance.

In the implementation of aid programmes, it is local staff who work in areas with high security risks, such as attacks by the military or armed groups, bombings or kidnappings.

Second, local staff who are exposed to the greatest security risks should no longer be asked to access high-risk areas in a personal capacity but should remain contractually protected as UN agency/INGO staff (no risk transfer). In the implementation of aid programmes, it is local staff who work in areas with high security risks, such as attacks by the military or armed groups, bombings or kidnappings. While local staff may be able to negotiate access to such areas to reach aid beneficiaries, expatriate staff are often unable or unwilling to do so. Problematically, the past and current practice of some organisations is that in such situations, some UN agencies and INGOs waive their protection of local staff, who are paid extra but have no legal and contractual protection. Instead, local staff are required to work in these areas in a personal capacity even though, if this is their place of residence, risks to their safety and security remain beyond the contract period. In recognition of the risks that local staff take on their behalf, UN agencies and INGOs should change this practice and ensure that local staff continue to be legally and contractually protected, especially when working in high-risk areas, and extend the same security measures to all their staff.

4 Substantially increase funding for local and national aid organisations as agreed in the Grand Bargain

International donors should step up their efforts to reform their funding and reporting structures so that, as a first step, 25 per cent of aid per country is allocated directly to local aid organisations, as agreed in the Grand Bargain, and then gradually increased to 50 per cent according to clearly agreed timelines. Another important step is to enable the registration of NGOs from intervention contexts in donor countries to facilitate the channelling of donor funds directly to organisations from crisis countries.

In Iraq and South Sudan today, only between 2.4 and four per cent of aid funding is channelled directly to local NGOs. These funding structures reflect a severe power imbalance that strongly privileges UN agencies and INGOs dominated by the global North and marginalises local NGOs. Even when local NGOs do receive aid funding, it is often through a process of UN agencies 'handing down' payments through various agencies and INGOs, which means that significant amounts of funding are lost in administrative costs. This practice must be changed. Based on the Grand Bargain, concrete country-wide capacity-sharing programmes for local NGOs should be implemented, for example to enable them to effectively manage and report on funding where needed.

> International donors should step up their efforts to reform their funding and reporting structures.

The advantages of channelling funding through local organisations in terms of bridging H-D-P silos are that many local NGOs in crisis contexts already combine work in the different sectors in a more holistic approach, as several studies and common practice show. Another advantage is that the administrative costs of local NGOs are often lower than those of international NGOs.

5 Reverse the culture of upward accountability to donors to build a culture of downward accountability to affected communities

UN agencies, INGOs and local NGOs must increase their accountability to the populations they serve. At present, aid agencies tend to be accountable to international donors outside the country, rather than to the people who receive (or do not receive) aid inside the country. Even when annual reports show how aid money has been spent, they tend to focus on the overall 'success' of implementation. Such a change in the culture of accountability would start with the informed consent of affected communities and include transparency and various mechanisms of accountability to affected communities, as well as a change in the evaluation criteria for projects.

> UN agencies, INGOs and local NGOs must increase their accountability to the populations they serve.

Accountability to people in the countries where aid programmes are implemented can be achieved in the following ways: First, the free, prior and informed consent of affected communities should be sought wherever possible. Second, the use of funds should be made publicly available: How much of the allocated funds is spent on salaries and to what extent (local/expatriate staff), how much is spent on direct project activities (e.g. tools, buildings, services), but also how much is lost in transfers along the way. Similarly, assessments of the impact of aid programmes on local conflicts and communities should be made transparent. The information must be accessible not only to UN and (I)NGO staff, but also to local communities where aid projects are implemented. For example, how much money aid agencies have in a given community and how much of that is spent on staff, project and administrative costs should be made transparent in an easily accessible public space (e.g. local bus stop, central bulletin boards). Accountability mechanisms to affected communities, such as community scorecards, should be introduced. Third, evaluation criteria should change from output-oriented measures of success to process-oriented adaptive programming that values learning from mistakes. Last but not least, the question of who does the monitoring and evaluation also needs to be reconsidered: whether it is necessary to fly in international consultants to evaluate projects, which also increases the global carbon footprint, or whether local experts are available. Calls for application should be distributed not only internationally but also in the country where the projects take place.

6 Make the official/working language of the country of intervention a minimum requirement for all staff

It should become a requirement that expatriates, too, have a working knowledge of at least one of the official working languages of the country in question. At present, UN agencies and INGOs implementing aid programmes in crisis contexts expect local staff to speak English or French to be eligible for recruitment. As a result, highly qualified local staff are considered unqualified for UN and INGO positions if they are not fluent in English/French, irrespective of their technical expertise and their knowledge of the local context. In contrast, expatriate staff are rarely required to know an official or working language, local language(s) or have detailed contextual knowledge.

This requirement is also important given that in most organisations, expatriates rather than local staff hold decision-making positions, effectively excluding local staff from senior management positions. While in some countries, English and French are the widely spoken and accepted languages for communication, the requirement to speak these languages is much more problematic in other contexts. This is the case, for example, for much of Latin America and the Arabic-speaking world, where neither English nor French are official or working languages. In Iraq, for example, there is an ongoing debate about the hegemony of English-speaking staff in a country where the official languages are Arabic and Kurdish (and not English).

This reflects a twofold colonial logic: a) the ability to communicate in Western languages is valued over the ability to listen to, speak to and be in direct contact with the local communities that aid programmes serve; and b) public reporting in English/French to reach an audience of Western donors is valued over public reporting that would be more accessible to the population, civil society and decision-makers in the country of operation.

It should become a requirement that expatriates, too, have working knowledge of at least one of the official working languages of the country in question.

Often, local staff also find themselves in a situation where concepts and thus terms coined at the international level of the aid system, such as the 'HDP nexus' or 'resilience', cannot be easily translated to explain what they mean to participants in aid programmes, but meaningful local translations are often difficult to find. Therefore, it is necessary to recognise that aid programmes can only be implemented in a sustainable manner if efforts are made to meaningfully translate the international terms into local languages, taking into account social and political sensitivities in a given context. This can be supported by creating a collaborative platform for local and international staff to jointly develop a lexicon of translated terms and concepts, ensuring that they are culturally resonant and understandable.

In practice, reporting should be inclusive and transparent, for example, by being bilingual or multilingual, or by encouraging forms of oral reporting to make information more accessible to the wider public and especially to affected communities.

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