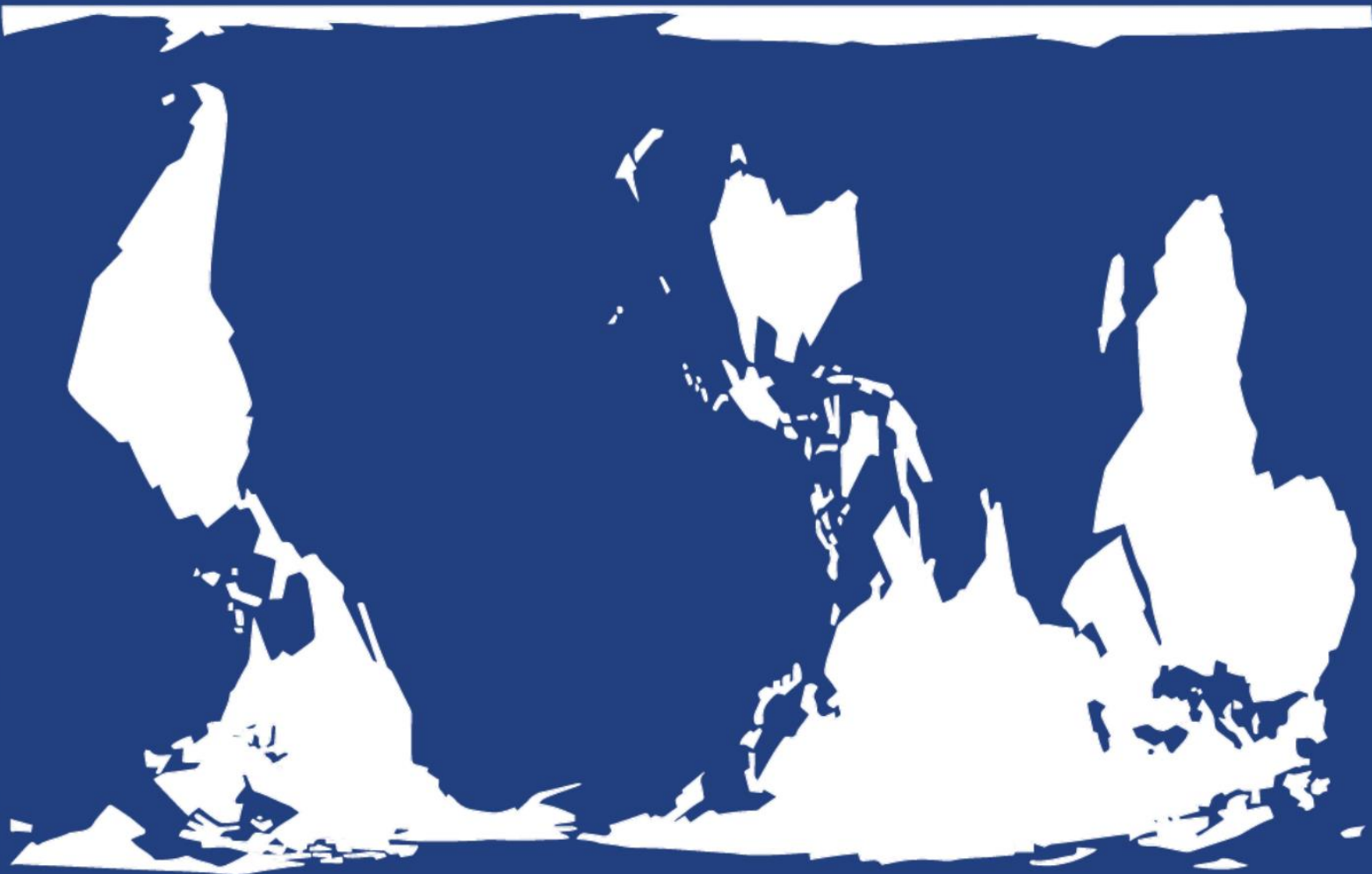


What is the role of Northern organisations in global justice advocacy?



Summary

As Northern international development organisations finally begin to acknowledge the colonial legacies that shape the sector, it is time for a critical examination of their roles in global justice advocacy which is intimately tied to this legacy.

The growth of the so-called aid industrial complex in the last 50 years has not been accompanied by sufficient critical introspection on what Northern organisations' purpose should be in the face of escalating global injustices – if indeed there is one. Many organisations with primary centres of power in the Global North are announcing transitions to justice-oriented approaches, or claiming to be 'decolonising' their work, but their practices still perpetuate unequal and harmful power dynamics. These neo-colonial relationships between Northern and Southern organisations are sustained by the continued replication of charity and 'white saviour' approaches, the problematisation of the Global South and the definition of agendas by Global North imperatives.

In this paper the Gender and Development Network (GADN) shares reflections, dilemmas and suggestions for change, based on a review of relevant work by others and a series of interviews conducted in 2022 with 31 advocates and activists from around the world. GADN is a Global North organisation that benefits from the legacies of European colonialism and we recognise that by collating others' views in this paper, we bring in our own biases and positionality, including along lines of location, race, age, gender, class and connections to diaspora communities. The challenges we outline are ones we acknowledge and share.

Global North power and privilege

In considering the role of Northern organisations in global justice advocacy, the first step must be to recognise and acknowledge the way European colonial legacies and white supremacy continue to frame and determine the complex power contexts in which international development organisations operate.

Our proposal then is that organisations that benefit from 'Global North power and privilege' have a responsibility to reflect on what role, if any, we should be playing as part of global justice advocacy. We use this term to describe the advantages an organisation – or individual – derives from their affiliation with the Global North, including from the legacies of colonialism. It goes beyond location to include factors such as access to power and funds, alongside history, values and worldview. In this, we recognise that organisations with 'Global North power and privilege' vary greatly in their degree of privilege and the way they use it, and organisations are also made up of individuals with their own complex histories, privileges and oppressions, all of which add nuance to what might constitute a 'Global North' or 'Global South' organisation.

A willingness to reflect honestly and openly about what we are doing and why emerged repeatedly as central to the work that needs to be done, whether our motivation is charity, solidarity, or justice and atonement. But so too did the need to move beyond self-reflection and into action.



Redistributing assets, information, and power

The role that most organisations aim to play currently could be seen as a distributive one – acting as a conduit for funds, access to decision-makers or other resources. In doing so we should be careful to consider whether and how this role perpetuates colonial relationships. The resources sent back to the Global South in aid are a small fraction of the resources that have been, and continue to be, extracted by the Global North whether through colonialism, or neo-colonialism via onerous debt payments or unfair trade terms within the international financial system. We should be honest too about the gains these roles can bring at the expense of those in the Global South, whether through exploitative communication images, siphoning of funds or control of influencing spaces.

Efforts to be more ‘Southern-led’ have been an important part in all our attempts to be more accountable in our work but, however well-meaning, may obfuscate underlying power relations. Suggestions on improving this role were discussed in the paper, some of which are outlined below. Ultimately this raises the question as to whether being ‘Southern-led’ suggests a need to step back and consider whether we are best placed to undertake these ‘intermediary’ roles, or whether in fact our aims could better be achieved by others. Some interviewees suggested Northern organisations should consider sunseting such roles, gradually shutting down their operations entirely and transferring roles, resources and access to Global South actors.

Challenging Northern power brokers for past and present harm


What we heard loud and clear was that actors with ‘Global North power and privilege’ have another more important ‘challenger’ role, and even a duty to hold their Northern governments to account for past and present harm. Priyanthi Fernando of International Women’s Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific was unequivocal: *“It is because of the legacy of colonialism and its perpetuation that you must act, ‘action’ has to focus on using your privilege and your positionality to challenge those very institutions and processes”*.

That those with ‘Global North power and privilege’ should take responsibility for what their governments do, and have done, in their name was echoed across our interviews. As such, the imperative to act and challenge comes from a recognition of past and present damage, while supporting Southern actors in pursuing reparations, recognising that some countries are more culpable than others. The motivation and legitimacy for our work should therefore derive from this responsibility, rather than from representing partners in the Global South.

Such an approach moves away from the neo-colonial model of aid and the power inherent in resource transfers. Global North actors linking up with domestic activism in their own countries, whether through their organisations or otherwise, can also help to recognise common causes and resist problematising the Global South.

Proposals for change

Underscoring many of the concrete proposals and challenges we have collated is the need for organisations and actors with ‘Global North power and privilege’ to acknowledge this power and understand and challenge how it shapes working relationships. We must go beyond the eminently doable, to consider changes that may be challengingly



disruptive. Below are just some of the many suggestions collated in the paper that Northern organisations could consider:

- Reflect on our positionality as organisations and individuals, in terms of our relative power and privilege, even when this entails uncomfortable discussions on white supremacy and colonialism and turn this into a commitment to make visible and address these structural oppressions in our work.
- Re-examine organisational structures and agendas and their limitations, particularly in relation to growth imperatives that drive a focus on funder deliverables and brand recognition, and instead assess achievement against long-term transformative change.
- Be intentional and transparent about how we are ‘Southern-led’ including who we work with, and who they in turn represent.
- Develop genuine consultation that is acted on, however disruptive to prior assumptions and organisational boundaries, and remunerated with recognition and respect for the time and expertise committed by Global South actors.
- Address the power conferred by funding relationships and step back from intermediary roles, connecting Southern actors directly to funders, and not competing for funding.
- Remember that the funds we raise could have gone directly to organisations and actors in the Global South, and so use them wisely and intentionally.
- Commit to advocacy that is bold and led by Southern agendas, language and tone, even at the risk of losing access to decision-makers.
- Redress extractive relationships by providing full citation as well as credit for ideas and remuneration for the work and analysis from Global South actors.
- Change the current global division of labour in advocacy to one that recognises the wealth of strategy, analysis and experience that comes from Global South actors rather than limiting them to the provision of case studies and ‘lived experience’.
- Support national struggles and priorities across the Global South rather than incentivising Southern organisations to provide evidence and examples for Northern advocacy priorities.
- Understand differences in language, context and culture recognising diverse modes of interaction, cultural norms and practicalities like planning around multiple time zones and providing interpretation.
- Work in global coalition to build our collective power, but intentionally step back from using ‘Global North power and privilege’ to dominate agendas.
- Speak up and call out racism and colonial practices wherever and however they show up, particularly those who are racialised as white. Recognise the emotional toll for Black, Indigenous and people of colour working on anti-racism and decolonisation.

Moving forward

Examining these questions is not a one-time checklist but rather an ongoing effort to critically self-reflect on our work as Northern organisations seeking to combat global injustices. Such reflection must also be followed by action to correct the ongoing harmful power dynamics that shape our work, however challenging that may be. This is crucial if those with ‘Global North power and privilege’ are to become part of the solution rather than the problem.



To provoke further debate and fundamental organisational reforms, the paper concludes with a set of questions aimed at actors with 'Global North power and privilege' to re-examine their motivations, structures and ways of working. For GADN, the process of writing this paper has surfaced as many questions as it has answered. Our challenge to ourselves, which we invite you to share, is to ensure that these reflections lead to real change in the way our organisations operate in global advocacy against injustices.

- From what kind of 'Global North power and privilege' do you think you benefit, as both an individual and as an organisation?
- Why are you/your organisation engaged in combatting global injustices – does your motivation include responsibility and solidarity rather than charity? If so, what implications does this have for the way your organisation works?
- How does you/your organisation benefit from working with Southern organisations on global advocacy?
- Does your organisation take responsibility for holding the UK government and corporations to account for their current and historic harm and if so, how?
- What work that your organisation does could better be done by an organisation located in the Global South? Is your organisation's work actually redressing power inequalities – or reinforcing them?
- Beyond for example having Southern partners that you fund - how might you look at other ways of being Southern-led, and what challenges might this pose?



The full paper is available [here](#). It was written for the Gender and Development Network (GADN) by Sophie Efange, Yamina Ouldali and Jessica Woodroffe. We are extremely grateful to our interviewees and peer reviewers for sharing their reflections, thoughts, criticisms and dilemmas with us: Anita Nayar, Regions Refocus and Gender and Trade Coalition (GTC); Âurea Mouzinho, Global Alliance for Tax Justice (GATJ); Caroline Othim, formerly of Global Alliance for Tax Justice (GATJ); Constanza Pauchulo, International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP); Crystal Simeoni, Nawi – Afrifem Macroeconomics Collective, in a personal capacity; Dinah Musindarwezo, Womankind Worldwide; Emilia Reyes, Equidad de Género; Emma Burgisser, Christian Aid; Gopika Bashi, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID); Joanna Pradela, International Women's Development Agency (IWDA); Dr Kamna Patel, Christian Aid; Kate Donald, formerly of Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR); Katie Tobin, Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO); Mae Buenaventura, Asian Peoples' Movement on Debt and Development (APMDD), in a personal capacity; Marta Musić, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID); Memory Kachambwa, African Women's Development and Communications Network (FEMNET); Noelene Nabulivou, DIVA for Equality; Patricia Miranda, Red Latinoamericana por Justicia Económica y Social (LATINDADD); Pontso Mafethe, African Women's Development Fund (AWDF); Priyanthi Fernando, International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP); Sachini Perera, Realizing Sexual and Reproductive Justice (RESURJ); Sanam Amin, independent consultant; Sanyu Awori, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID); Sehnaz Kiyamaz, Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) and Women's Major Group; Shereen Essof, Just Associates (JASS); Shereen Talaat, Arab Watch Coalition; Stefano Prato, Society for International Development (SID); Theo Sowa, independent consultant; Tim Jones, Debt Justice UK; Verónica Montúfar, Public Services International (PSI); zohra moosa, Mama Cash. We note that the views expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent the views of any one contributor, that involvement in the process of consultation does not imply endorsement and that GADN alone takes responsibility for any errors.

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