

NGOs and neo-colonialism: are they part of the problem?

Western NGOs have been receiving a bad press in recent years, accelerated by recent scandals involving abuse of vulnerable communities. How far is this a reflection of neo-colonial attitudes?

It has been argued that NGOs are part of the problem rather than part of the solution to neo-colonialism, which legitimizes the abuse of indigenous population by multinationals (1), even though the huge majority of people in NGOs have the best of intentions and fight to eradicate poverty and inequality. The rich “north” helping the poor “south” immediately suggests a power imbalance in favour of the former: we help; you are helped. Though apparently descriptive terms, binary categories such as developed / undeveloped or traditional / modern are not neutral: they tend to be value judgments.

Some critics argue that the presence of NGOs de-fuses radical confrontation with exploiters rather than empowering indigenous communities and increases dependence (2). The scandals that rocked Oxfam in 2018 and more recently, involving abuse of indigenous women, shocked the organization as much as and more than the public by revealing that individuals, many in positions of responsibility, were exploiting the vulnerable with impunity, as latent neo-colonial attitudes came to the surface in the form of abusive behaviour: the NGO was shocked at the revelations and has been struggling to deal with them through intensive safeguarding campaigns, tighter hiring and awareness heightening whilst suffering a major impact on their reputation and funding.

NGOs are sensitive to the charge that initiatives that come from the “north” perpetuate dependence rather than empowering the non-Western indigenous communities with and for whom they are working.

They argue that in the last few years decision-making has been progressively shifted from Western-based staff to local organizations; nonetheless, some affiliates have money to distribute while others are receivers (3).

Big NGOs recognize that it is contradictory to make decisions for the people you want to liberate; such externally imposed “liberation” smacks of neo-colonialism, while local NGOs working in the field are still squeezed out by lack of funds, NGOs in developing countries receiving an estimated 1% of total funding even though they are close to communities (4).

Neo-colonialism is the creation and maintenance of unequal relationships favouring the more powerful society in such a way that their capital impoverishes rather than enriching less developed communities. To fight this, NGOs conduct active advocacy campaigns against big company abuse, thus fighting neo-colonial forces of power imbalance, and working to empower the disenfranchised, often also victims of climate change tragedies largely caused by developed countries.

Critics of NGOs argue that it is trade not aid that pulls developing countries out of poverty, but this is only true insofar as there is no unfair advantage for one side. Fair trade policies work to combat such imbalances and are actively supported by NGOs including Oxfam. However, as long as development work is dominated by “northern” organizations, critics will argue that NGOs are perpetuating rather than combating neo-colonial interests; NGOs, as a colleague put it, are fighting to redeem their original sin.

1 Bannerjee B: personal communication, Paris, 31/10/19

2 Godrej D, New Internationalist Dec 2014

3 Orenes P, interim director, Oxfam Intermón: personal communication Jan 2020

4. Moorhead J & Sandler Clarke J, Big NGOs move south but will it make a difference? the Guardian 16/11/15



Roger Bell is a retired professor of cross-cultural management at ESADE business school, Barcelona.

rogermatthewbell@gmail.com

