

# ***TOWARDS A MORE DECOLONIAL, ANTI- RACIST AND FEMINIST PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT***

DECEMBER 2022



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# Introduction

The Inter-Council Network (ICN) is a coalition of eight provincial and regional councils for the international cooperation committed to global social justice and social change.<sup>i</sup> The ICN's work is guided by five strategic directions: (1) inspire Canadians to act as global citizens; (2) inspire decision-makers; (3) increase the capacity of member network; (4) strengthen the ICN and Councils; and (5) deepen and broaden thought leadership.

This report is a summary of a research project on public engagement conducted by the ICN between November 2021 and June 2022. Public engagement is central to the Inter-Council Network's work. The ICN defines public engagement as those activities and processes which enable individuals and organizations to traverse along a continuum from basic understanding of international development practices and the underlying principles directing those practices, through to deeper personal involvement and informed action on sustainable human development around the world. The research described here extends ICN's previous research and work on public engagement.

The research focuses on better practices in public engagement in the international cooperation sector. To strengthen sector actors' public engagement work, the ICN explores decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches. Broadly, this research focuses on big social justice questions around equity and power.

As racial justice and equity gain more attention within the sector this research is timely and urgent. It is also particularly important with the deepening of global inequalities in the last few years. Besides affecting livelihoods, the pandemic has impacted the international cooperation sector in general and public engagement more specifically. Engagement that is mediated by digital platforms raises critical questions around participation and ethics for social justice actors.<sup>ii</sup> With more virtual programming, it is important to be cognizant of the effects of digital inequalities on public engagement. This research provides space for introspection and aims to:

- Highlight decolonial, anti-racist and feminist practices in public engagement from different locations with different actors.
- Curate tools and practices that can inform more ethical practices in our decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work.
- Shape narratives and priorities in policy and practice within the sector that will hopefully contribute to transformative change.

## Methods

Recognizing that knowledge making processes, such as this research project, are political and are sites in which inequalities can be reproduced, this research adopted a participatory action research approach. Participatory Action Research (PAR) prioritizes participation and aims at transforming unequal power relations.<sup>iii</sup> This method enables research participants to set research agendas and participate in decision making processes throughout the research process with the aim of formulating action for change.<sup>iv</sup>

In using PAR, decisions are made collaboratively with research participants throughout the research process from design to data generation to research dissemination. In this research it was not possible to involve participants in all stages; for example, the research topic was identified at an organizational level by the ICN in accordance with ICN's strategic directions. For accountability and in line with participatory action research principles, it is important to acknowledge here that this research adopted elements of PAR and did not fully use PAR throughout the process. Since this research focuses on decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches, it is fundamentally important that these principles are reflected in the methods. This includes acknowledging the limitations of doing a research project such as this and the politics of doing politically conscious work within the international cooperation sector.

Various research tools including roundtables, focus groups and secondary literature review were applied in this research to explore the use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement.

To understand priority issues and challenges in public engagement for sector actors in the wake of the pandemic, the ICN convened two round tables. The first roundtable with grassroots organizations in Canada, Kenya, South Africa, Bolivia, Brazil and Ghana, focused on the shift in public engagement for grassroots organizations. They provided insights into the challenges exacerbated by the pandemic and identified resources, expertise, and infrastructure as priority areas for public engagement. The second roundtable focused on the intersection of digital divide and public engagement. Civil society organizations highlighted the need for better funding mechanisms and investment in digital technologies to ensure a meaningful, participatory and transformative participation of marginalized groups in public engagement activities.

Following the roundtables, the ICN recruited a group of thirteen participants (fourteen including the ICN's policy officer) from Canada, Peru, Haiti, Ecuador, Bolivia, Kenya, DRC, Burkina Faso and the Dominican Republic to participate in monthly focus groups. The recruitment process was done via an open call that resulted in over fifty applications from across the world. Of all these excellent applications, the ICN could only accommodate a few participants to enable for a deeper dive into the topic.

This methodological choice without a doubt shaped the research process and outcomes. Cognizant of the politics of knowledge creation processes<sup>v</sup> the ICN used this research process to create and expand space for the participation of minoritized groups. The historical exclusion of these groups and voices in knowledge making processes<sup>vi</sup> and spaces shapes knowledge systems in ways that limit their liberatory potential. In this research, therefore, the ICN prioritized the participation of minoritized groups based on age, gender identity, class, race and ethnicity, among other identity markers.

This approach resulted in a group of participants that brought their lived experiences, knowledges and expertise from their work in non-profits, feminist collectives, activist organizations, community organizations and other organizations that use decolonial, anti-racist, and feminist approaches in various ways. To explore various themes in the use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement, two focus groups were held each month in English-Spanish and English-French from January 2022 to June 2022. These focus groups were facilitated by the ICN policy officer and the participants.

To situate this work within on-going decolonial, anti-racist and feminist scholarly, activist and community work, this data generation process also involved a review of secondary data. In a project that ultimately aims to contribute to social change, it is important to consider and learn from existing work and, hopefully, inform existing work.

Data was analysed using both deductive and inductive data analysis methods. In analysing data, a set of preconceived concepts were used to develop a coding framework. These concepts were influenced by the initial thematic mapping of key concepts in decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work conducted collaboratively with research participants. In addition to this procedure, emerging concepts were identified during the categorization process. This was followed by an examination of key themes drawing connections and contradictions among them. Through this process a story began to emerge through the data.

To conclude the data analysis process, a research validation exercise was held with some of the research participants. Through this validation exercise, the researchers went over the research outcomes making clarifications and offering more suggestions to further bolster the case for a more decolonial, anti-racist and feminist public engagement within the international cooperation sector. They also discussed concrete actions that different actors including the public, governmental actors, and non-governmental actors can take. This was also an opportunity to discuss research participants' participation in further knowledge sharing processes.

## Methods as a site of action

In this research process, the method was both a means to explore decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement as well as a means to embody these three principles in the research process. Besides being reflected in the group of research participants itself, these principles were evident throughout the research process from convening focus groups, analysing data, communicating research outcomes, to knowledge sharing more broadly.

Approaching this research in this manner, provided space to examine broader politics of knowledge creation processes such as who participates in knowledge creation and how do they participate, what counts as knowledge creation processes, whose knowledge and experiences count, what protocols guide research processes and how are those protocols developed. PAR creates space for co-learning and cultivating change both throughout the research and in the research findings.<sup>vii</sup> The ICN approached the research process in this manner.

To use method as a site of action, as in this research, involves creating and nurturing space for marginalized groups particularly those who are historically excluded from knowledge creation processes such as this. It also involves intentionally creating space for diverse groups to come together and reflect on current systems and conceptualize alternative systems. This approach provided space for research participants to not only map key themes for the group to explore but also to facilitate focus group discussions. It also enabled participants to foster a community of care in which participants held space for each other.

Using methods as a site of action in public engagement entails centering the public by accounting for geographical, historical, social, and political contexts. These contexts in turn inform the design of public engagement activities. It also involves fostering a space for diverse perspectives, ways of being, and ways of knowing. This approach implies different goals and strategies co-constructed by the participants in public engagement activities.

Using method as a site of action also involves adopting ethical commitments. Ethics are critical to methods both in research and in public engagement. A research participant emphasizes the need for an ethical framework in their work:

“Decolonial and antiracist approaches are ethical lines of actions for us ... we must have a constant questioning of our practices. We always try to adapt an ethical framework. An ethical framework is very important for us in the work we do with our communities. Any proposal we make, any action, any type of communication, we always have to ask where it is coming from, what and how we are formulating it. We always try to adapt that framework.” – R10

This research finds that ethical commitments are best developed in collaboration with communities. The process of developing ethical commitments with communities also provides space for dialogues as a research participant emphasizes:

“It is important to think about and develop ethical principles and framework with the people we work with and even with people who do not necessarily agree with us – this way we can find commonalities through the process of coming up with an ethical framework.” – R4

## Methodological reflexivity

Reflexivity is a useful tool to highlight the situatedness of knowledge.<sup>viii</sup> The idea that knowledge is created within specific contexts and the political location of communities within those contexts. In this research, the use of a participatory approach enabled different voices and perspectives to come together to co-produce knowledge. This provided a nuanced approach to explore how multiple forms of oppression and multiple systems of power function to produce racist, colonial, imperial and patriarchal systems. Participatory approaches created space for participants to collaborate and learn from each other in the co-creation of knowledge.

In knowledge creation processes, methods are political in that they are informed by broader power relations, and they also (re)produce those power relations.<sup>ix</sup> Participatory methods focus on broader questions of power. For example, who sets the agenda in research, who makes critical decisions in research, which participants form the research group. These questions require a deliberate effort to create space for particular ideas, practices, and people, which in turn implies that other ideas, practices and people have to give space. This can be a challenge in research processes and requires organizations to learn how to navigate such situations while using participatory methods.

A research project that focuses on deep structural issues including racism, colonialism and patriarchy is intense by account of the heaviness of these issues. To create a space for this kind of work that is attuned to the ongoing effects of racist, colonial and patriarchal systems requires plenty of time and resources. A space to cultivate and nurture the care and trust that is needed for open and respectful conversations. Participatory methods, regardless of the research topic, are also intensive. Therefore, overall, this research required a lot of time, space and resources. These factors shaped the direction and effectiveness of the research. Similarly, decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work requires more time and resources.

Finally, although digital platforms have created and expanded space for more participation in knowledge making processes<sup>x</sup> digital connectivity is still a



hinderance to meaningful participation as seen in this research process. Unfortunately, the acute inequalities in the availability, accessibility and affordability of digital technologies have far reaching ramifications<sup>xi</sup> for development agendas more broadly and for decolonial, anti-racist and feminist methods. As this research finds, without addressing digital inequalities the marginalized risk further marginalization. Therefore, as more organizations adopt hybrid systems of operation, questions around inclusion are clearly social justice questions and can benefit immensely from a decolonial, anti-racist and feminist lens.

## **Key Findings and Areas of Action**

### **A. Mapping obstacles**

“We have seen that these obstacles are part of our system. They are deeply rooted in all areas of the society” – R1

To adopt more decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement activities requires sector actors to first map and address factors that impede the use of these approaches. These obstacles, as this research finds, are systemic and therefore require a more systemic approach to address.

Coloniality is at the root of these obstacles. Coloniality - defined as the ongoing effects of colonialism in current systems and structures<sup>xii</sup> - continues to influence people’s ways of knowing and being. It is maintained in new faces, structures, and forms. Coloniality functions in different areas including gender relations, knowledge creation, and power relations to organize societies in particular ways that shape people’s ways of life within those societies.<sup>xiii</sup> In the international cooperation sector, this is evident in how decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work is done and in the public perception of these concepts. It can also be seen in the channels, systems, and processes through which resources are invested in this work.

Research participants that work closely with national and local organizations in the majority world – or the so-called developing nations - observe that decolonial, anti-racist and feminist efforts in the minority world are yet to meaningfully translate in the engagement with national and local actors in projects and funding systems. More work is needed to break the links between international cooperation work and colonial legacies and practices. However, decolonial theorists have argued that insofar as the international development work is a project of modernization it cannot be extracted from its colonial and racist roots.<sup>xiv</sup> This is a critique that organizations have to attend to in their use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches.

Mapping obstacles therefore involves moving beyond the realization that the sector is inherently colonial and racist to attending to the tensions and challenges that arise with the use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in a sector that is built and sustained by colonial and racist practices. The task, therefore, for all actors in the sector is to first map obstacles by identifying how these practices influence their programs, projects, cultures and policies. It is crucial to draw connections between broader structural factors for example coloniality to more specific practices and processes at an organizational level that hinder their use.

## **B. Addressing Obstacles**

A multifaceted approach is needed to address the obstacles that hinder the use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement. An approach that triggers processes of change at various levels including internally at an organizational level and externally at a public and community level. Although this approach has to be tailored to specific contexts, this research highlights three key concepts that organizations need to pay attention to including power, language and broader social justice projects.

### **Power**

“We have seen that these obstacles are part of our system. They are deeply rooted in all areas of the society” – R1

Power is central to decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work. Unequal power relations are enmeshed in political, cultural, and economic systems. Changing unequal power relations in the international cooperation sector is a first step towards addressing structural factors that hinder the use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement. This requires a critical power analysis. To devise strategies to change unequal power relations, it is essential to first understand how power works in - and through - institutions, policies, norms, and organizations to produce and maintain inequalities. Locating sites of power in organizations and in the sector is critical to crafting concrete actions that shift power dynamics.

As a sector, this is evident in the formulation and implementation of global development agendas, the relationship between the minority world and the majority world, the relationship between INGOs, National NGOs and grassroots organizations, and in funding infrastructures. Research participants report that current international cooperation structures, for example funding models, are still characterized by unequal power dynamics that influence communities access to - and experiences with - resources, freedoms and rights.

Broadly, these unequal power relations have varying effects on communities across the world.

Communities experience multiple forms of oppression as a few research participants demonstrate:

“...we are seeing power inequalities being reproduced in and by immigration laws that determine migrants’ access to education and labour and means of livelihoods.” – R8

“... legal systems treat migrants as commercial objects. Lots of undocumented people who do not fit into a certain idea or ideal are seen as irregular and illegal. There are lots of police raids. So, we see judicial categorizations that support the exclusion of certain people.” – R7

“... gender identity work is influenced by cultural norms that hinder self-determination ... but donor funding is also a factor. Which resources are available, who has access to resources and what issues are prioritized in the allocation of resources. If you want to have an impact, you need to do a power analysis to know who you need to engage in this space.” – R5

“Inequitable power relationships between donors and national and local organizations contribute to power imbalances and inequitable partnerships. This happens when we fail to take into account local organization and communities.” – R4

Recognizing that power is central to international cooperation more broadly and to public engagement more specifically, it is possible to cultivate power relations that are divested from colonial, imperial and racist structures and systems. This research highlights alternative power relations as critical in the use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement.

Cultivating alternative power relations includes prioritizing collective power. Power with the people provides immense possibilities for conceptualizing alternative ways of being that are in resistance to colonial, racist and patriarchal systems. Collective power is critical in processes of change:

“Power lies in the hands of the people; the collective, their experiences and resources. In our case, for example, they [colonizers] tried to steal our ways of lives and worlds and we said no. We are part of a continuum of refusal. We are here years later, talking about resistance through music, art, dance. Our essence is here ... This is the power that I am talking about.” – R8

Transnational feminist movements are important in supporting processes of cultivating alternative power relations.<sup>xv</sup> To build solidarity across borders requires tracing connections between struggles and fostering space for exchanges and connections.<sup>xvi</sup>

Recognizing the importance of women's rights movements, a research participant emphasizes the need to nurture and support collective power:

“Formal structures of power (nation state, companies) set up patterns of domination. But women in different countries have a parallel form of power that is transmitted through different movements. The meaning and sensation of power histories by diverse women resisting within land. Their own local knowledge is a form of power. Bringing diverse women together like here [women's event] allows that kind of power to circulate. This way we are building power relations collectively. We need to experience this different perspective of power.” – R10

Nurturing power relations that are divested from colonial, racist and imperial systems imply a shift in public engagement approaches and activities. Public engagement that puts communities at the centre and is responsive to their specific experiences and needs.

## **Language**

Language is extremely important in public engagement and in decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work. Therefore, it is critical in addressing structural hinderances to the use of these approaches in public engagement. As a tool of change, language can be used to deconstruct colonial, racist and patriarchal systems and structures as well as to cultivate alternative structures and systems.

To deconstruct current systems, this research finds that it is fundamentally important to understand how these systems came into existence and the factors that bolster and sustain them. To understand coloniality, for example, calls for a critical look into colonialism and the mechanisms that were used by colonizers to assign value and power to certain ways of life and render others inadequate. Language is helpful in this regard; it provides tools for this critical analysis. As this research finds, decolonial, anti-racist and feminist projects have to involve critical conversations about the connections between colonialism, racism and patriarchy to the international cooperation sector in general and public engagement specifically.

Efforts to deconstruct current systems have to be accompanied by more forward-looking work that aims at cultivating different and better systems that can foster the co-existence of humanity and the environment. Decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches provide an opportunity to conceptualize alternative realities and build solidarity around the work that is required to realize alternative systems. Research participants argue that there is an urgent need to “look back in history to reclaim ways of life or cultural aspects that were lost during the colonial processes.”

Indeed, this is central to rethinking and cultivating alternative ways of life and relations.

In public engagement, language can be used to foster discourses that aim to change unequal power relations in current systems. Used in this manner, language is a site of political struggle as it aims to change not only how social issues are problematized and articulated but also how they are addressed. Language is inextricably linked to action and as a research participant reminds us, “language will only serve to strengthen decolonial efforts as long as it comes with an honest intent of being translated into action.”

Although fundamentally important in decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work, language can also undermine this work. As a research participant explains, language might do more harm and contribute more to the plight of minoritized people:

“... the language used in organizing around the plight of gender minorities is important for programmatic purposes but what happens is that in the process we end up erasing a lot of people. Programmatic language dehumanises some people for example non-binary people. The issues we are addressing are not theirs because we are using terms which are not theirs ... so as an ethical commitment, consider the language the community you are working with uses.” – R5

Language, particularly as used in the social justice space, is easily coopted and can also inadvertently help maintain the status quo.<sup>xvii</sup> It is therefore important to examine language by looking at how well it translates in our actions. This includes ensuring that language considers intersecting forms of oppressions as a research participant explains:

“Language as a place of struggle and as a tool in public engagement must be fundamentally intersectional, challenging systems of oppression that include patriarchy, capitalism, ableism, classism, homo/transphobia, fatphobia, xenophobia, anti-blackness, amongst others.” – R9

## **Broader Social Justice Projects**

As this research confirms, the main obstacles in the use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement are structural and are evident in how the international sector functions. Therefore, a multifaceted approach that connects decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement to broader social justice projects is required to address such structural factors.

Within the international cooperation sector, global hierarchical structures threaten solidarity around social justice issues.<sup>xviii</sup> Feminist scholars and activists have emphasized the need for better collaboration and coordination.<sup>xix</sup> This is the case that researchers make here: efforts towards a decolonial, anti-racist and feminist public engagement that are divorced from broader social justice work are likely to be laborious and, in some cases, futile. Thus, an approach that informs and is informed by social justice projects is essential in addressing structural obstacles in the use of these approaches in public engagement.

## **C. Navigating Complexity: Context and Definitions**

This research finds that a nuanced approach to context is a prerequisite to decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work. For the key areas of action identified below to be effective, they have to be accompanied by a robust understanding of the context within which public engagement is done. Contextual factors are critical in this work, they shed light on the intersections between institutions, discourses, knowledges and peoples.

Context requires accounting for economic, socio-cultural, and political factors that shape particular communities and the organizations involved in public engagement activities. Power works in concert with these factors to influence a people's ways of life, their access to resources and opportunities. By looking at these factors, for example, the historical exclusion and oppression of particular communities comes to light which should, in turn, be a central factor in the design and implementation of public engagement activities focusing on those particular communities. Public engagement that accounts for and centres a community's histories, struggles and aspirations is likely to resonate with members of that community and enhance their participation.

In the use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches, attending to the complexity that arises with different contexts includes focusing on how these concepts are understood and used in different ways by different communities, activists, advocates, organizers and movements. Indeed, this research brings together a group of diverse participants who work with organizations that approach all these concepts in a variety of ways. Below a few participants show how they use these terms and the complexity that comes with such choices:

“For us, decolonization has to fight the Eurocentric basis of power and break that Eurocentric gaze. Everything that is produced, everything that is disseminated including knowledge has a Eurocentric basis. Decolonization, therefore, is a break in the system that sets Europe as the centre of knowledge. Knowledge is produced in our communities, from our standpoints, from Indigenous peoples and others. That is our practice.” – R8

“I think of decolonial as encompassing repatriation of land and life, restorative justice and being intentional about not reproducing colonial systems. Anti-racist approaches involve attending to injustices along racial lines and are concerned with how racialized people are called into existence in society. They all call for us to be attentive to the specificities of particular struggles across the world.” – R14

“We consider ourselves an organization that links together different struggles. We talk about decolonial feminism for example. We use these terms to mobilize partners here in Canada, for example funding partners. In Latin America we consider what they [partner organizations] are doing and use that as a guide for the terms to use. Terms coming from the global north to describe dynamics in the global south do not always capture realities in the global south. In terms of terminology, we don’t use feminist analysis we just say analysis of women because this is what our partners in Latin America use. On the other hand, just using the term women can be limiting. We tend to use decolonial, anti-racist and feminist terms more in internal contexts or with partners here in Canada.” – R1

“Many rural women will ask what feminism is. As a concept it may not speak to them but in practical lives, they are indeed feminists. We need to listen to them. And yet, the word feminist can be questioned for how it is used within a colonial and neoliberal context. This is why we must reflect on these terms. Where are we starting from in our use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches? We cannot impose our concepts on them [rural women] and their lives. Building alliances outside of these theoretical concepts is critical in identifying ruptures that can lead to taking action and building a path forward.” – R10

In this research, participants agree that language is political and therefore definitions work is crucial. From their work, participants find that in practice these approaches work together and cannot be decoupled. However, clarity in definition is fundamental to their success. Not to imply that there is one true definition that all actors should aspire to, but that this is something that has to be integrated in public engagement work that uses these approaches. Actors need to be transparent about the approaches they adopt in public engagement and clearly articulate their definitions and the reasons behind their definitions. Defining terms not only serves to position the actor and their work but it also signals to the public the need to do the political work that is involved in crafting definitions.

Although all these terms can be traced to marginalized and oppressed peoples, and decolonial, feminist and racial justice theorists and activists, the definitions and use of these concepts as tools of social justice work have, undoubtedly, been influenced by the very colonial, racist and patriarchal systems that they seek to upend. As such, even in social justice spaces these concepts are contested.<sup>xx</sup>

This is indeed positive. Contesting these concepts is important as a way to critically reflect on our use of these approaches in public engagement as a research participant notes:

“What is really fascinating is how these different experiences manifest across different contexts. It is important to have that clarity and to specify the feminisms we embody for example. Even more important to have those conversations within feminist movements and to accommodate differences. We have to always question and look at new and better ways of doing things. That’s how we grow as activists and develop new ideas. Also, the idea of thinking about all this work as an ongoing project challenge us to be better in our work. We are pushed and motivated to respond to current challenges such as the immigration policies.” – R14

Specific contexts might require a strategic use of these approaches in public engagement. A blanket use of these approaches in public engagement might be counterproductive. It might alienate some members of the public. Consider, for example, a research participant’s process of designing a public engagement workshop on gender-based violence:

“We have to give a workshop next month at a technical university and most of the people we are expecting are men. So, we are thinking about topics associated with masculinity. If, for example, we include gender violence no one will show up and we want people to come. We have to decide what language to use but still include gender violence in the workshop. But then again, how can we talk about gender violence without naming it but also create space to have that conversation?” – R9

Such complexities are part of doing public engagement in more decolonial, anti-racist and feminist ways. To navigate such complexities requires a better understanding of the context within which public engagement occurs, a community’s approach to these concepts and space to build trust because without trust and care the differences around these approaches cannot co-exist. Here is R9 again with more recommendations:

“Maybe it is not so important to be so rigid/militant/strict about the terms we choose to use, as long as we introduce the approaches in the work we do ... In my experience, sometimes using these terms is counter-productive. In a way, we should try to think about the specific public we want to reach. Think about the audience, use the problems they face. Use the problem, present that in decolonized/feminist/anti-racist approach, as an entryway.” – R9



## **D. Envisioning change: Key areas of action**

For a more decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approach in public engagement, this research highlights five key actions that both governmental and non-governmental actors can take including: centre communities, invest resources, foster open dialogues, build relations of trust and solidarity, and develop critical reflexivity mechanisms.

### **Center communities**

“It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept and celebrate those differences.” - Audre Lorde

The use of participatory approaches in the international cooperation sector includes adopting processes that prioritize local communities. But what does it mean to prioritize communities? Does it mean engaging them as mere beneficiaries? Giving back? Or standing with them? These are all questions that actors have to grapple with in their public engagement work with the communities.

While important in challenging paternalistic tendencies in the international cooperation sector, a critique of participatory processes and approaches is necessary to avoid reproducing similar dynamics within communities. Indeed, in an analysis of the intersection of digital story telling and participatory methods, Parvin<sup>xxi</sup> argues that participatory methods are also at a risk of reproducing inequalities:

“... in spite of their intentions to highlight social issues or bring about social change, these projects even risk a continuation of extraction practices and a commodification of the stories of marginalized groups. These practices are most beneficial to the curator, artist, or researcher and risk advancing unjust practices that are recognized as colonial.” (p. 523)

In public engagement, this research finds that the first area of action has to focus on communities. How communities are valued and engaged. Cultural sensitivity is a key competency in this regard. The understanding, respect and responsiveness to the belief systems, customs and institutions of a group of people or community<sup>xxii</sup> is crucial to understanding a community’s experiences, aspirations and priorities in terms of public engagement.

This process also involves recognizing and acknowledging difference; the idea that different communities have different ways of being and different knowledge systems. The ways in which difference<sup>xxiii</sup> is conceptualized, problematized, and attended to is inherently rooted in colonial processes as a research participant recalls:

“If we go deeper and look at difference, it is a matter of the world order and the forces that organize the world in certain ways. The world order based on colonial and racist histories is often organized as presences and absences. Anything that is different is immediately labeled as an absence. Black bodies, for example, are seen as ‘absences’ ... as ‘lacking’ ... as ‘less than’ the bodies that are idealized. This is all related to the idea of what/who is human and what bodies are seen as worthy and valuable. This is why we must criticize the construction of difference – Who is defining difference and how is it being defined?” – R7

From this perspective, therefore, it is evident that difference in and itself is not the problem. Instead, factors that lead to the weaponizing of difference and the actors that mediate such processes are the problem. Rather than attempt to erase all differences, the idea is to embrace that difference and identify possibilities that arise from such differences:

“There is no way we can collapse some differences. We have to find ways to work in that space where we fundamentally disagree over some things. How do we navigate such a space? Is it possible to come up with practices and policies that allow for difference?” – R12.

To center communities in public engagement in ways that embrace difference requires acknowledging that communities are integral to public engagement not only as mere “recipients” or “beneficiaries” of public engagement activities but also as agentic actors in their own right. This includes creating space for a people’s self determination, space for a people’s voice in public engagement as a research participant illustrates:

“We try to be more inclusive in our work and to reach the unreached by using a participatory approach that is not colonial or top-down. We engage communities without a hidden agenda. We try to not be performative. We take into consideration the needs of the community and the way the community understands their issues. For example, in monitoring and evaluation, some monitoring and evaluation techniques used by many non-western countries may seem ‘strange’ because they use a different lens that is not necessarily what is used in the West.” – R15

Listening to communities is another important step that can strengthen the use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement. Rather than prescribe specific agendas or even these concepts to communities, an approach that does not always work, participants emphasize that:

“You have to listen and see what others in the community are doing. Integrate their ideas to the public engagement activities. As an example – I would take the case of our coalition. In this coalition, we bring

together different groups. It was very difficult in the beginning to integrate all ideas from different groups. It was interesting to see how political goals converged and where similar politics and methods emerged. Over time we saw that it was doable. It is possible to integrate different ideas from different communities and groups.” – R13

Besides recognizing and amplifying communities’ work, listening to communities also involves recognizing their autonomy. Safeguarding the autonomy of communities that are already engaged in decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work is a priority in centering communities:

“... one key element would be to start from a state of autonomy. Respecting and making sure that people are independent. Not only their organizing, and decision making, but also how they govern themselves. Communities’ ability to make decisions. Encourage dialogue. These are pillars that need to be built. All the voices and ways of looking at things are taken into consideration and amplified instead of being censored by other organizations or the state.” – R10

Centering communities also involves a critical look into the inadvertent effects of particular public engagement activities on communities. Here organizations need to first ask is this an activity that the community needs? And second, how do we know if this is what the community needs or not? These two questions should be answered at the initial stages of designing public engagement.

International cooperation projects, including public engagement activities conducted within the international cooperation sector, impact communities in different ways over a period of time. Researchers have emphasized that the NGO-ization of development, as it has come to be termed, could negate the very goals that development aims to achieve whether by directly impacting local communities or grassroots organizations that work closely with communities.<sup>xxiv</sup> Indeed, a participant in this research finds that the NGO culture in their country has impacted relations between communities and more local grassroots groups:

“In our work with women in rural areas we are faced with ethical issues. We have noticed that women have started asking us for money which was a surprise because we have spent time creating relationships that are not transactional as a foundation for our work. We have started thinking about how to respond to this dynamic.” – R10

Although the request for money by women in the above example is much more complex, such changing dynamics are useful as a way to think about how development projects more broadly and public engagement activities specifically change community dynamics.

## **Invest resources**

Resources are indeed political<sup>xxv</sup> and are perhaps the most critical in the use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement. The allocation and distribution of resources within the international cooperation sector is heavily influenced by acute inequalities that exist within the global capitalist system.<sup>xxvi</sup> Investing resources in this work therefore requires a more critical look at the funding systems, processes, practices and channels. It is not enough to look at how resources are allocated, it is also important to look at access to resources; who has access to funds, who has decision-making power around resources? To answer such questions, this research emphasizes the need to look internally and externally.

Internally, adequate resources are needed to evaluate current policies, practices and cultures. Besides informing general programming for organizations, these aspects shape the design and implementation of public engagement activities. Staff members are also an essential part of this work. Resources are needed to strengthen and support their skills, experiences, and expertise in their use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches. This has to be a long-term investment that is built within an organization's overall programming.

Equally important, external changes are needed. Participants in this research that work closely with national and grassroots organizations highlight resources as a major hindrance in their work. Existing funding systems continue to alienate them and their communities. Although the adoption of feminist foreign policies by governments is useful in the institutionalization of feminist practices in global development, for such policies to transform funding systems, they have to move beyond symbolic gestures and commitments to concrete actions.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Inadequate resources, lack of access to some resources, and conditions attached to funds determine fundamentally shape organizations and their work. For more smaller, grassroots organizations this situation is complicated further by their informal structures that often disqualify them from accessing particular funds. Therefore, participants make an urgent plea to funding organisations to provide resources to communities and organisations that need it the most. Women's rights organizations and feminist funds are paving the way in this regard by adopting innovative funding processes.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Organizations also have to contend with ethical dilemmas around resources particularly when funds are linked with various conditions as these research participants show:

“Take for example, funding. The conditions attached to some funding might result in difficulties for marginalized communities. For example, in central Africa today there is a project on mining extraction – we have to think about how that project will infringe on the rights of local communities, we have to think about land rights, we have to think about how different members of the community will be affected.” – R4

“Funding contradictions and all the conditions that come with funding from donor organizations operating within a global system that is characterized by unequal relations. Also – as someone who strives to use decolonial, anti-racist and anti-colonial approaches working within grassroots orgs that have minimal funding and then having to sit for a minute with the discomfort of where you take funding from as a small organization struggling with resources.” – R14

Yet, it is not as straightforward. Funding practices as the following research participant demonstrates always interact with contextual factors to either reinforce or change existing inequalities:

“We see a lot of ethical dilemmas around finances. Funding processes and practices create a situation that can be very manipulative – for example bigger national NGOs have more power to say no to conditions attached to funding compared to smaller more grassroots organizations. I also think about the trauma from religion and colonial legacies that plays a big role in the tensions and ethical issues that we see around human rights and queer trans movements. There are tensions among organizations working on gender identity issues, sexual orientation issues and general sexual reproduction rights and health and this comes to affect how these issues are resource. We can see a struggle for resources and funding organizations will sometimes weaponize such differences. So, if you are working in this space, you have to deal with so many ethical issues that are deep rooted. This calls for a critical conversation on racism, colonialism, trauma and colonial legacies.” – R5

Resources are central to decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work. This research, therefore, recommends that the sector as a whole rethinks its approach to resources, adopts a redistributive approach to global resources and invests more resources specifically in decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work. Changing how funding flows is also important. One way is by directly funding local partners, ensuring their autonomy and removing restrictive conditions attached to funding.

## **Foster open dialogues**

“People would rather do programmatic work than engage the public. Unfortunately, without public engagement there is no support from the public which, in turn, is a challenge for the programmatic work within the community.” – R5

As the research participant observes, public engagement is a challenge for most organizations particularly those that use decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches. This research finds that public perception of decolonization, anti-racism and feminism is a major factor in the use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement. There is a fragmentation in how these concepts are understood and perceived by the public in different contexts. Consider, for example, feminism and anti-racism:

“Think about feminism as a concept. How accessible is it to ‘regular’ people? We need to understand what ‘feminist in society’ means. We must raise awareness on what feminism means within the community ... People have to understand that feminism is not specific to gender/-sex.” – R4

“In Ecuador, for example, most people are ‘mixed’ with an Indigenous – Spanish descent. However, most people refuse to acknowledge that there is racism in Ecuador. I don’t know if that’s the same in post-colonial countries. “Racism doesn’t happen here; it is something from the states” makes it hard to make racism visible.” – R9

To navigate a public space where these concepts are already always laden with biases, organizations have to be strategic in how they use these concepts in their public engagement work. How do you, for example, create public engagement activities for an audience that has negative opinions about decolonial work? One research participant demonstrates some of the tensions they have to navigate as an organization in such a situation:

“If you are vocal about the type of approaches (you might want to strategically not mention it), there is apprehension of “What do they want?” probably this is more related to how people perceive decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches. Because of the biases that we already have, if you mention these words, you are probably going to reach the same people. So, it is really hard to move beyond the echo chamber. Sometimes that is more related to the terms you use. But people have to get used to the terms. So we struggle with when to use certain terms and with who so as to not ‘scare’ people.” – R9

In response to such tensions, this research recommends open dialogues. Open dialogues provide an opportunity to create links between organizations' definitions and work on decolonization, anti-racism and feminism, public perceptions and communities' definitions and work on these areas. Rather than act as a space to craft singular understandings of these concepts, these dialogues are better used as a bridge to bring different voices and perspectives together in conversation.

To bring diverse perspectives together requires safer spaces in which critical conversations are possible. Although useful for deconstructing and addressing biases, open dialogues are also fundamentally important for building trust and co-imagining alternative realities. They can also be spaces for dreaming:

“Systems change is both disintegration and dreaming. So, any critical reflexivity exercise has to put this in mind and create an opportunity to question current systems but also to imagine alternative systems. We need to create space to dream, and I think it is important to prioritize these spaces and the kinds of power that come from such spaces.” – R7

## **Build relations of trust and solidarity**

As this research has emphasized, this work cannot be done in isolation. There is an urgent need to connect and harmonize efforts in decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement to broader processes of social justice. However, this is a challenge within the international cooperation sector. Forming relations that are fundamentally opposed - and in active resistance - to extractive and imperialist practices is essential for decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work.

What does re-imagining relations entail? What do relations of trust and solidarity entail? How do we cultivate such relations? These are key questions that the sector needs to grapple with as an initial step towards building better relations. To answer these questions, the research finds that a critical lens is imperative to the understanding of the various ways in which current relations within the sector have been shaped and continue to be shaped by colonial processes and neo-colonial processes. There is a lot of deconstructive work needed in this regard.

This research finds that this also involves valuing communities' ways of life and local knowledges. Part of this includes reclaiming practices, values and norms that have been 'lost' or replaced over time through colonial, racist and capitalist processes. Creating space, embracing and celebrating aspects that are either devalued or negated in the practice of development is part of building trust and solidarity.

A research participant provides an example of what this looks like in their work:

“Alternative systems allow us to work with what is not accommodated by large organizations. We are able to nurture practices that are often invisible. For example, we are able to demonstrate affection, emotion and embody horizontal relations in our work. Through this we are able to give political status to people and engage them in a different manner. These systems help us go towards the very essence of the problems that we are analysing. We work with Indigenous women from the Amazons, whose lands, the places where they live, are destroyed by large construction projects. Looking at this problem in a different way allows us to analyse it based on the women’s experiences and sentiments. Alternative systems and practices allow for this kind of work in a decolonial, anti-racist and feminist way.” – R10

This is what relations of trust and solidarity enable. They enable actors to put the heart into the work and to create space for communities to express their connection to their work, their lands, and their aspirations in a variety of ways. They enable external organizations to locate communities in a more comprehensive way beyond the damage narratives that portray communities in singular dimensions.<sup>xxix</sup> They create the space that is needed to move beyond top-down approaches to approaches that foster co-learning and the co-construction of projects based on the priorities of the communities as identified by the communities.

Yet, building relations of trust and solidarity takes time and resources. How such relations are cultivated critically shapes their impact. There are complexities involved in such processes. For example, based on previous experiences with international cooperation sector actors, some communities might be hesitant to accept ‘invitations’ to such processes. Refusal is indeed a political choice<sup>xxx</sup> and valid response in the face of upheavals caused by development projects in communities. Therefore, these relationship building processes are effective when they centre communities and are not imposed on communities.

## **Develop critical reflexivity mechanisms**

“ ‘It can’t be me!’ Self reflection is the beginning of a lot of this work. A lot of people think because they are oppressed, they can’t be the one oppressing. But even the ‘oppressed’ are in the same system.” – R5

“No insurgent intellectual, no dissenting critical voice in this society escapes the pressure to confirm...we are all vulnerable. We can all be had, co-opted, bought.” - bell hooks



Critical reflexivity is essential for the effective use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement. Critical reflexivity provides an opportunity to interrogate the relationality between knowledge creation processes and communities and organizations.<sup>xxxi</sup> Asking questions around how power shapes such relations highlights the intricate channels via which structures of power function in systems, institutions, discourses, and knowledges to shape people's lives. This is important for public engagement as it shows the otherwise "invisible" factors that inform how communities participate in public engagement activities.

Working on and with decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches does not necessarily preclude one from activities that are in direct opposition to the principles embodied by these approaches. Therefore, it is essential for actors using these approaches to examine their work because they work within a system that is inherently flawed. Working in a system that is still colonial, racist, capitalist, patriarchal among others implies that actors can reproduce and perpetuate these practices in their work.

Critical reflexivity is not in any way a neutral exercise. The mechanisms via which reflexivity is conducted are indeed sites of political action and therefore central to decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work. They enable actors to attend to complexities around action, impact and power as the research participant below shows:

"Who is the authority to say our work is decolonial, anti-racist and feminist? What standards do we use to determine this? Is it that we care more about concepts and our work being labeled decolonial, anti-racist or feminist or putting these concepts into practice? Isn't it dangerous to put these standards on work people are doing? This may be valuable but may alienate others that use different terminology or those that don't classify their work as decolonial, anti-racist or feminist at all. Although we need labels to describe and understand different actions, we have to be careful about getting caught up in these kinds of tensions." – R9

Creating space to critique the use of these approaches is indeed important as part of embodying decolonial, anti-racist and feminist principles. It is an example of walking the talk. It involves creating mechanisms via which actors can ask critical questions such as:

- Why this work?
- Why, for example, do you need to decolonize public engagement practices?
- What are your goals in using decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches?
- Who are you accountable to in this work?

- Who are you in community with?
- What are your relations with the communities you work with?
- How do the communities you work with use these approaches?
- Who else is doing this work? How are they doing it?
- How does this work relate to existing social justice projects? Why, for example, do you need to decolonize public engagement practices?
- What are your goals in using decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches?
- Who are you accountable to in this work?

These questions enable organizations to evaluate their internal goals, practices and policies that inform their public engagement and their relations with communities. Reflecting on such aspects provides space to reconcile organizational needs with the communities' as well as decolonial, anti-racist and feminist principles.

Critical reflexivity has to be done in community. In answering the question, how do we know our public engagement work is decolonial, anti-racist or feminist, organizations need to look towards the communities they engage. Critical reflexivity mechanisms therefore need to include channels and space for communities to provide feedback in this regard:

“Have other organizations, and racialized groups decide if our organizations and our work qualify as either decolonial, anti-racist and feminist. Ensure these practices are reflected in our organizations and our work, and also have communities represented in these organizations.” – R14

Critical reflexivity is also a useful tool to examine the impacts of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work on communities. A community's insights and feedback, for example, might require an organization to step back. This is, indeed, part of embodying these approaches in practice as the research participants below emphasize:

“Sometimes being decolonial is not doing anything. Often, we think solutions to the problem is giving inputs and recommendations. Maybe what we need to do sometimes is step back and not interfere.” – R9

“It is also good to be cautious about things we proclaim to do. Accept where we are limited in our use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches and where we are not in a position to fully embody these practices. Think about systems as living and think about change in that sense - continuous.” – R14

Critical reflexivity also creates space to question biases and politics. This reflection is fundamentally important in the case of concepts that are heavily contested. Yet, this can be challenging in social justice spaces where the urgency of societal problems is often a priority:

“It is easier to go all so fast in our work because of different conditions so sometimes there is no space and time for this type of debate. For example, one of my colleagues doesn’t agree with my idea of selectively using some terms because we have no time to deliberate and discuss. This comes though through the people we work with – the survivors of violence because we centre them in our work. It is nice to discuss these things because in our work we just don’t have time for it. By staying open to discussion, we can stay true to our political goals.” – R9

Equally important, potential repercussions of critical reflexivity exercises especially across organizations and communities is also a challenge. Communities might be hesitant to give genuine feedback especially if that feedback includes a critique that could result in backlash. Despite this challenge, one research participant encourages communities and community-based organisations to:

“Be critical of big institutions. Consider the different pressures related to relationship-building. Think of an ethical framework (to base our actions), redistributing tasks and support. Be critical and share exactly what is happening (sometimes based on this you don’t receive resources from funders). So it is important to remember that not all funders will come, but some will come!” – R7

Done from a point of honesty and good intentions, critical reflexivity will strengthen decolonial, anti-racist and feminist public engagement in various ways. It will transform approaches to public engagement, the relations that inform public engagement work and the communities involved in public engagement.

## **Conclusion: Change as process**

“We have to understand that this is not something we can achieve in our first attempt.” – R9

This research explored the use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement. To identify specific actions that can strengthen actors’ use of these approaches, the research focused on issues around social justice more broadly and public engagement specifically.

Rather than think of these approaches as something that has to be achieved in public engagement work, this research finds that this work is best approached as a process rather than an ideal that can be achieved within a short period of time. This work is responsive to systems that are structural and global in nature and therefore will require a structural approach coupled with global mobilization and solidarity as a research participant emphasizes:

“Measures and concrete actions can be put into place. But it is important to know that the outcome is not the goal. We should not look to achieve that outcome instead we should look at this as continuous work that requires thought and reflection every step of the way from the design to implementation to evaluation. Structures within the international cooperation sector feed into capitalist and extractive systems and as long as these systems exist, we need to be doing the work.” – R1

As this research has demonstrated, decolonial, anti-racist and feminist work is complex, continuous and communal. To strengthen the sector’s use of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist approaches in public engagement, this research recommends that actors center communities, invest resources in this work, foster open dialogues, build relations of trust and solidarity, and develop mechanism of critical reflexivity.

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