



Finnish NGOs and decolonisation: insights from a survey on civil society initiatives



Deaconess
Foundation



Deaconess
Foundation

**Partnering
for
Change**



Filantropia



With support from
Finland's development
cooperation

Why this survey?

In spring 2023, Partnering for Change (PARC) distributed a questionnaire among employees, volunteers and others involved in development cooperation in Finland. The purpose of this questionnaire was to map and analyse the level of engagement and knowledge regarding the concept of decolonisation within the aid industry and to determine the areas in which PARC could support the development cooperation community in their activities.

PARC is a project funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland and implemented by the Deaconess Foundation and Filantropia ry with a consultant, Mwila Agatha Zaza. PARC was developed in recognition of the often negative perception of Sub-Saharan Africa that is reflected in Finland's development cooperation narrative. In addition, PARC aspires to facilitate mutually productive and respectful relationships between Finnish NGOs and businesses and the Global South and to encourage Finnish businesses to invest in developing markets – sustainably.

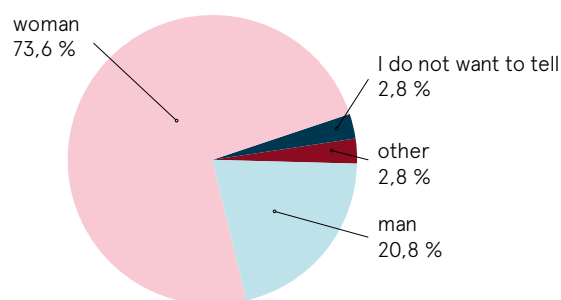
The questionnaire was developed by the PARC team and disseminated in May-June 2023 with the following objectives:

- to map and find out the level and quality of current decolonising activities in Finnish development cooperation NGOs and
- to investigate the needs of NGO employees regarding training and further knowledge about the subject, and
- to determine what topics to prioritise in future training courses and what advisory support to offer.

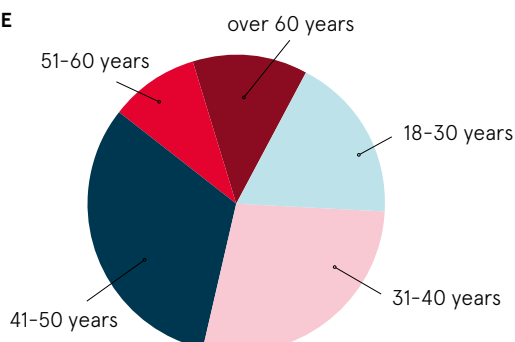
A diversity of roles were represented

Our respondents represented various organisations, small, large and medium. We received 71 responses, 6% of which were in English and the rest in Finnish. 90% of our respondents spoke Finnish or Swedish as a first language and 76% said they were female. Most notably, 55% had over 10 years' experience from the field of development cooperation, while 17% were at director level, 19% were supervisors and 64% employees. 48% were project staff, 11% involved in communications, 10% in fundraising, 3% in finance, 12% in leadership and 16% categorised themselves as being in support services.

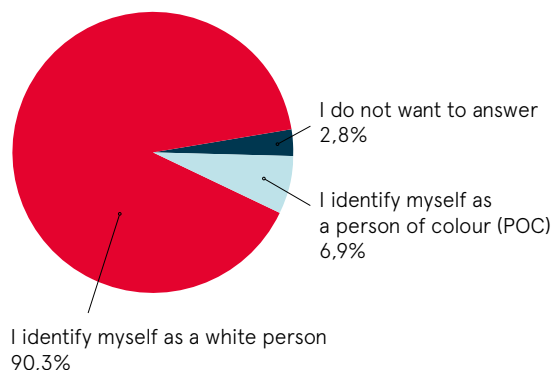
GENDER



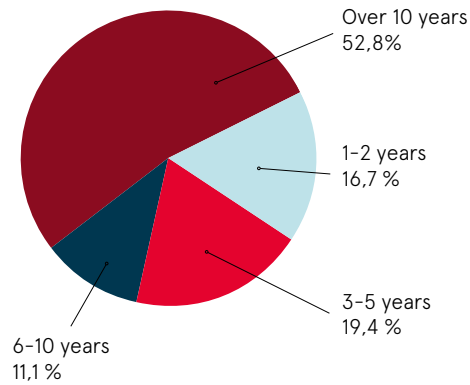
AGE



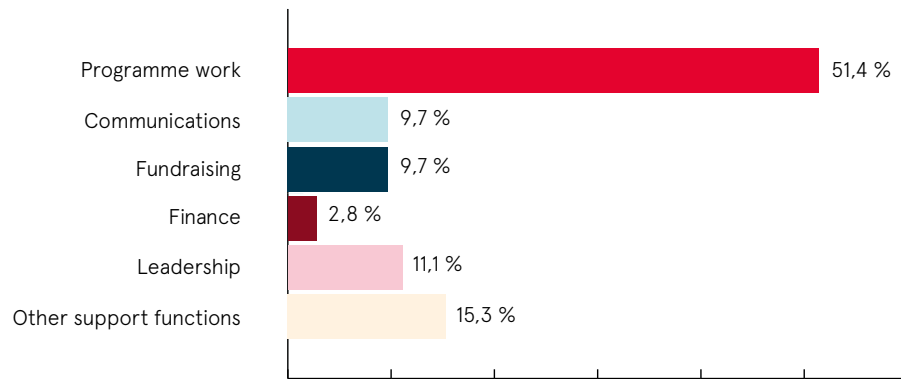
BACKGROUND (IDENTITY)



YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN DEVELOPMENT SECTOR



PRIMARY ROLE WITHIN THE SECTOR



Perceptions of inequality in development cooperation were revealed

The vast majority of respondents when asked if they, as individuals, had previously reflected on the power structures and hierarchies between development cooperation non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the global South and North, replied that they had to

some extent. Over half said they believed there was inequality and hierarchy between Finnish and local partner organisations, and that there was inequality and hierarchy between their own organisation and their local partner organisations.

Responses outlined the work that has been done

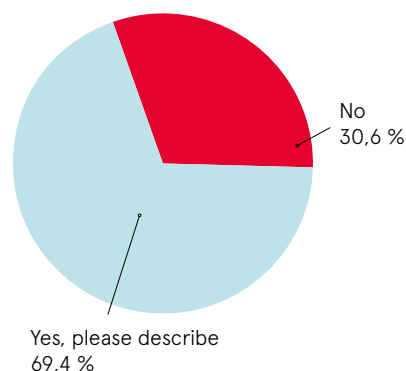
According to the respondents, Finnish development agencies have already started addressing the issue of unequal power relations in their work – 69,4 % of those who answered our questionnaire said their organisation had already made changes or began orienting themselves on the topic. Many examples of these efforts were given including awareness training and promoting localisation through training.

We classified the extent to which organisations had made progress in their localisation strategies as follows:

1. Some organisations had explored basic themes or discussions regarding changing power relations, decolonisation, and associated ideas such as racism. Several respondents said that they had attended training and other capacity building events. These organisations could be described as being in a discussion phase.

- We have started an internal anti-racism study circle and participated in other training and events that have dealt with decolonisation.
- The team's personnel have participated in anti-racist training and events dealing with the power structure.
- Discussions related to the theme and the effects on the activities started recently
- Training on the subject, several internal discussions
- The theme has been considered together and separately. We have thought about e.g. terminology, work ownership, etc.
- On many levels: in strategy, trainings, reflections and discussions at all levels.
- The team's personnel have participated in anti-racist trainings and events dealing with the power structure
- We have started, but we are still more at the level of discussion and familiarisation. Some of the employees (like me) have participated in trainings organised by others.
- The decolonisation debate is about to begin. Training on recognizing your own racism and other things is starting.

HAS YOUR ORGANIZATION ALREADY MADE ANY CHANGES OR BEGUN ORIENTING ITSELF ON THE TOPIC?



2. A second group of organisations could be said to be at a stage in which the need to incorporate decolonisation and localisation themes into their work has been agreed and they are preparing for future activities

- With our international consortium, we are doing a process related to decolonisation under the leadership of a consultant. Internally, we have a workshop series going on, where we deal with advocacy, communication and programme work.
- Localisation working group

3. Some other organisations had progressed to including these themes at strategic level by including them in programme planning and implementation for instance. Some have adopted an intersectional approach to their work.

- The topic has been included in international seminars, e.g. in the discussion session. It has also been taken into account in programme planning. We bring up the topic constantly with our staff and when we talk with our partners.
- Awareness trainings and localisation
- Localisation of decision processes
- Trainings, development of internal processes, development of organisational culture
- Efforts have been made to create thematic cooperation, continue to enable feedback processes at the village level, also independently of the caring organisation and also through visits and monitoring visits.

4. A few respondents described working for organisations that had already made significant progress in the localisation of their strategic processes and programme implementation.

- This is a very central part of the orientation in the programme processes from the beginning, planning power rests with the partners in the south, in communication and influence work, whenever possible a voice is given to the partners in the south.
- The issue is strongly highlighted and it is already visible in attitudes and practices.

5. The last category of respondents described equality, giving voice to the Global South and other related concepts as being founding principles of the organisations in which they worked.

- Increasing global equality, also in partner relations, was the starting point for the development of operations
- Equality is at the centre of our work, intersectional feminism guides the work

Understanding priorities

When asked to rate which themes should be tackled to enhance decolonisation in Finnish development cooperation in order of importance, the following were ranked highest:

- Increasing the utilisation of local knowledge and contextual expertise
- Incorporating decolonisation into organisational/ programme strategies
- Building more equitable relationships with partner organisations and their staff

WHICH THEMES DO YOU THINK SHOULD BE TACKLED TO ENHANCE DECOLONIZATION IN FINNISH DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION? CHOOSE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THEMES.



The answers to the Finnish questionnaire stressed the importance of incorporating decolonization into organizational and programme strategies and increasing the utilization of local knowledge and contextual expertise. The answers given to the English language questionnaire considered identifying structural racism as the most important topic with adjusting funding requirements to support decolonization efforts as the second most important topic.

Identifying the need for support

14% of respondents said they required a lot of help when asked “Do you feel that you need more training and support in order to contribute to dismantling decolonisation in development cooperation?” The following were identified as the most critical areas in which respondents wished to have capacity building in:

The most popular were

- Incorporating decolonisation into organisation and programme strategies, and
- Monitoring and reporting requirements and decolonisation

WHICH TOPICS WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAVE TRAINING ON? PUT THE TOPICS IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE.



The answers to the Finnish questionnaire stressed the importance of incorporating decolonization into organizational and programme strategies and increasing the utilization of local knowledge and contextual expertise. The answers given to the English language questionnaire considered identifying structural racism as the most important topic with adjusting funding requirements to support decolonization efforts as the second most important topic.

Providing an opportunity for ideas and opinions

The final section of the questionnaire offered the opportunity for thoughts, opinions, or ideas regarding the topic of localisation of power in Finnish development cooperation.

Some were critical of the actors in development cooperation's ambitions to change and suggested barriers to PARC's mission saying:

- *If one has the money and the right to dictate the terms of its use, the relationship can never be equal. In addition, the situation has gotten worse all the time as the various support conditions and reporting requirements have increased.*
- *The arrangement in which a Finnish organisation finances a partner organisation is fundamentally hierarchical. In my view, this will continue as long as development cooperation is financed with tax funds. Citizens have the right to monitor the use of their tax funds. Could we hope for a larger share of self-financing from the partner organisations of the global south, either in money or in kind? Then the ownership would very concretely shift to a more south-oriented one.*

Some remarks suggested the idea of localisation was built on faulty assumptions, for instance the characteristics of Finland's partners:

- *Employees of partner organisations do not always represent the target group of development cooperation; they can also be part of the force that maintains it. Especially in fragile regions, the partners are rarely truly democratic member organisations, they are development cooperation professionals.*

PARC received some recommendations about clarifying the terminology in the discussion and the concepts that are in use:

- *The language should also be discussed - is it about decolonisation, transfer of power or locally led development? A lot has already been done in the world - both from the side of non-governmental organisations and financiers.*

- *"Decolonising aid" has become a buzz term in the sector. However, I would prefer alternative terms and go the core of the issue: a new model for humanitarian aid that puts anti-racism and power shifts at its centre. Colonial is as a term heavy marked by past heritages with a risk of getting stuck in a "the colonisers vs the decolonised". We need to build today for a future unified world, without forgetting the mistakes from the past.*

Many remarks suggested ideas to proceed with PARC's work or goals for Finnish development cooperation regarding the decolonisation agenda:

- *This discussion is a healthy trend in development cooperation and is welcome.*
- *We need a broad discussion about the entire sector.*
- *I hope that the training and events of the project would find ways to introduce the process of decolonisation into the everyday life and working methods of organisations. It would also be interesting to consult diaspora organisations as part of the project, especially perhaps through examining the processes and structures that support diaspora development cooperation.*
- *I think it would also be important to concretely address whether Finnish organisations are ready for more development cooperation funding to be directed directly to local organisations, whether they are ready to do advocacy work for this and what the role of Finnish organisations would be after this.*

The survey was immensely useful. From it, PARC was able to identify the concerns and ambitions that those working in the sector regarding the work that's required to fulfil its aims. The responses received provided insight into the sector's work regarding unpacking the concept of decolonisation and creating an agenda to help guide the sector towards a new, more equitable and realistic depiction of the Global South and more equal power sharing among actors in development.

Annex 1:

Responses to open ended questions

Has your organisation already made any changes or started orienteering to the topic, for example through training?

In English

- Awareness trainings and localisation
- Through trainings and policies
- PARC project, intersectional approach

Provided in Finnish (translated)

- An open and continuous discussion of observations, based on which operational models, responsibilities, communication, etc. have been changed.
- Dismantling the hierarchy, e.g. localisation of decision processes
- Preparation of localisation strategy 2023
- I don't know when I work in a different sector. In the discussions within our office, this is a very central part of the orientation in the programme processes from the beginning, planning power rests with the partners in the south, in communication and influence work whenever possible a voice is given to the partners in the south, etc.
- Discussions related to the theme and the effects on the activities started recently
- I've done a lot of short-term work relationships, so it's hard to answer, but on average, on the programme work side, power motives have been identified and there is some talk about them, e.g. wanting to be an equal partner. Several organisations have been praised in the south for their partnership approach compared to other organisations. However, there is room for improvement.
- E.g. training and conscious development of the matter. A lot is already being done, but the hierarchy will not disappear in an instant.
- Training on the subject, several internal discussions
- Discussion on the topic
- The theme has been considered together and separately. We have thought about e.g. terminology, work ownership, etc.
- On many levels: in strategy, trainings, reflections and discussions at all levels.
- The team's personnel have participated in anti-racist trainings and events dealing with the power structure.
- With our international consortium, we are doing a process related to decolonisation under the leadership of a consultant. Internally, we have a workshop series going on, where we deal with advocacy, communication and programme work.

- We have started, but we are still more at the level of discussion and familiarisation. Some of the employees (like me) have participated in training organised by others.
- Education and discussion, slow change of the organisational structure
- The decolonisation debate is about to begin. Training on recognising your own racism and other things is starting.
- We have started an internal anti-racism study circle and participated in other training and events that have dealt with decolonisation. However, an equal partnership has been sought for a long time.
- The topic has been included in international seminars, e.g. in the discussion session. It has also been taken into account in programme planning, and we bring up the topic constantly with our staff and when we talk with our partners. The topic is very important and should not be excluded from discussions.
- Training, development of internal processes, development of organisational culture
- Localisation working group
- At the supervisor level, training on this theme (a little), discussion about it a little more.
- Efforts have been made to create thematic cooperation, continue to enable feedback processes at the village level, also independently of the caring organisation and also through visits and monitoring visits.
- Discussion, learning to some extent - although from employee initiatives (not driven by management, and not systematic)
- Process to dismantle power structures
- The issue is strongly highlighted and it is already visible in attitudes and practices.
- Increasing global equality, also in partner relations, was the starting point for the development of operations
- Equality is at the centre of our work, intersectional feminism guides the work
- Our partner organisations train each other without us
- The theme has been discussed, e.g., at the team's planning days
- The discussion is to be taken into account in the operating methods
- Internal and external discussion on the topic
- Localisation, management systems, ethical communication and fundraising development, discussion and reflection
- Just a few joint training sessions.

Other comments and regards to the PARC team

In English

- “Decolonising aid” has become a buzz term in the sector. However, I would prefer alternative terms and go the core of the issue: a new model for humanitarian aid that puts anti-racism and power shifts at its centre. Colonial is as a term heavy marked by past heritages with a risk of getting stuck in a “the colonisers vs the decolonised”. We need to build today for a future unified world, without forgetting the mistakes from the past.

Translated from Finnish

- Difficult to answer the questions on the first page as a representative of the organisation, because I myself work as a consultant on framework topics for both large and small organisations. They often have a different situation. This option is missing.
- Many thanks for the theme - a much-needed opening to the question. Now the so-called high time (in relation to the new government, etc.) to start discussions and initiatives on the structures of development financing, emphasising the strategic programme and partnership model and wider cooperation (in relation to project financing). This is especially the so-called to fragile areas. Enabling Finland’s direct participation and flexible cooperation structures vs. primary allocation of regional aid and humanitarian funding to UN programmes and large INGOs (here, diaspora cooperation, not only NGOs (which have their own “problems”))
- An important theme, great that you have picked up on this!
- In my opinion, the weakness of the survey was the idea that always having an equal attitude towards the partner organisation means decolonisation. Employees of partner organisations do not always represent the target group of development cooperation, they can also be part of the force that maintains it.

Especially in fragile regions, the partners are rarely truly democratic member organisations, they are development cooperation professionals.

- Glad you are starting this programme!
- If the other has the money and the right to dictate the terms of its use, the relationship can never be equal. In addition, the situation has gotten worse all the time as the various support conditions and reporting requirements have increased. The

end result is largely jargon and the ritualisation of cooperation. A better outcome would be achieved if the conditions and requirements were agreed upon in cooperation on a case-by-case basis. In this way, the cycle of development could be made to move in a certain direction.

- “These selection tasks are often such that none of the options seem to correspond to reality. I think the big problem is how the UM conditions enable and often even encourage the prevailing ‘modern’ globalised Western conceptualisation of planning, evaluating and implementing projects and the social interaction connected to it under the terms of practices in a way that does not equally treat the life legacies of other cultures and communities, which are often much more sustainable.”

After years of development cooperation, it seems that in many Finnish organisations the situation is recognised and attempts are made to crack down on the issue.

- Prejudices can also be mutual. I now also work with companies operating in developing countries, and there is still a lot to crack on that side.
- I would say that the colonial power structure of development cooperation has been well recognised in our organisation, and a lot of work is being done for decolonisation in all teams. Of course, the challenge in communication and fundraising is the whiteness and privileged position of employees (like me), and the resulting blindness towards many things. As an industry, we have a lot to develop in order to attract more non-white workers to the industry. In addition to that, there is also a need for more extensive and systematic training for all the workers in the field. Now, diversity training and the use of consultants depends on the employer, and there seem to be very different perceptions between the organisations, for example, about the problematic nature of the image.
- In addition, I would like to say that the programme work recognises the power structure and aims to dismantle it and make cooperation more equal. There is a lot of discussion about it. I believe that, however, more tools and long-term cooperation between organisations are needed, because history alone creates a hierarchy between Finnish organisations and partner organisations.
- So it’s great that this work is being done! I’m looking forward to the progress of the project :)
- I think it would also be important to concretely address whether Finnish organisations are ready for more development cooperation funding to be directed directly to local organisations, whether they are ready to do influence work for this and what the role of Finnish organisations would be after this.

- It would also be good to address how development cooperation structures contribute to maintaining global inequality and how we are all benefiting from this development complex. Of course, development cooperation will not be stopped suddenly, but as long as we benefit from this, it would be important to think about how we can truly change our operations and reflect on our position.
- Comment on point 16 (and 17): all options are important together. Change starts with recognition. However, the requirements of background funders and the competitive landscape determine the strategies and practical work of the organisations/ programmes, so a change is needed in the so-called from the top level, so that we can really create a more equal relationship with partner organisations. You can immediately review and change e.g. language use and fundraising inventory.
- Thank you for the Partnering for Change initiative, it's important!
- Influence work to change structures is also important. It can be quite difficult for one small organisation to make an impact.
- A very important project! We need a broad discussion about the entire sector.
- Thank you for an important project!
- Current right now, when Finland's interest is emphasised in development policy as well.
- The topic is really important and this should be looked at objectively.

Even if our background is not so-called colonialist in the old sense of the word, every actor must recognise his responsibility and his own role in it. This discussion is a healthy trend in development cooperation and is welcome.

- Super important topic ❤️
- The arrangement in which a Finnish organisation finances a partner organisation is fundamentally hierarchical. In my view, this will continue as long as development cooperation is financed with tax funds. Citizens have the right to monitor the use of their tax funds. Could we hope for a larger share of self-financing from the partner organisations of the global south, either in money or in kind? Then the ownership would very concretely shift to a more south-oriented one. And then Finnish organisations should be even more ready to hear criticism against the global north.
- It's difficult to prioritise when the question sets also overlap. -- Colonisation is the background of capitalism, in which case decolonisation would require the promotion of community livelihoods and self-sufficiency efforts, also here in the North. Only in this way would we be able to achieve actual development JOINT work: mutual learning regarding global climate and biographical challenges and reducing overconsumption.
- All the things you listed are needed. The language should also be discussed - is it about decolonisation, transfer of power or locally led development? A lot has already been done in the world - both from the side of non-governmental organisations and financiers. There is no need to reinvent everything in Finland - Finland is lagging behind in this. However, change starts with individuals recognising the problem. The most important thing is to bring together those who have done it. You also have to be able to imagine things differently. I personally see that the most challenging thing is to get the management and boards of large organisations to grasp this.
- The theme of the survey is really important and I hope that the trainings + events of the project would find ways to introduce the process of decolonisation into the everyday life and working methods of organisations. It would also be interesting to consult diaspora organisations as part of the project, especially perhaps through examining the processes and structures that support diaspora development cooperation.
- A great and important project!
- I think the financial requirements are one of the biggest challenges. They "force" solutions that are not always healthy, which e.g. the Finnish experts have to follow. A difficult challenge, but it would be important to intervene.
- "This is a very important initiative, thank you! PS. It was a shame that I had to answer everything. For example, we as a global organisation do not have this: ""13. Do you think there is inequality and hierarchy between your own organisation and your local partner organisations? Therefore, I would have left it unanswered, so as not to misrepresent the data. Now I put the number 5 in that to show that it is not on either side, so there is no answer."
- Exploring the option that all aid is in some way reciprocated, but local partners define what is meaningful reciprocity
- Thank you for breaking down a hugely important matter and the whole. We hope for concrete measures to improve the situation!

Boldly
working for
human
dignity



Deaconess
Foundation