Decolonising Evaluation - Whose Value Counts?

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christian aid

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Photo front page:

Community members in Maseya, Malawi reviewing the video they produced using a Participatory Video and Most Significant Change methodology to document, from their perspective, the effects of the support received after Cyclone Idai. **Photograph: Christian Aid/Joseph Mkanthama.**

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Introduction and background

Along with some other organisations in the wider development and humanitarian sector, Christian Aid is undergoing a process of internal critical reflection regarding the legacy of colonialism on who we are, how we work and what we do. The formal development sector and the current aid architecture emerged at the end of the colonial period, and many argue[1] it still replicates the same asymmetrical global power relations and assumptions that characterised previous relationships between high-income and low-income countries. As an organization, we have challenged ourselves to critically reflect on our practices and make shifts to decolonise our thinking and actions.

Christian Aid recognises that how we evaluate our work is a key area which has been shaped by colonial history, structures and understandings of knowledge and power. We propose that "traditional" evaluation is problematic in that outsiders with power are the ones setting the evaluation agenda, deciding what is valuable, defining what success is and putting in place criteria by which success is assessed. These top-down approaches neglect the perspectives, values, and knowledge of those who experience poverty and inequality, and continue to reflect colonial structures, placing Western ways of knowing and seeing the world as superior. This paper aims to critically reflect on evaluation practice through a decolonisation lens, considering who decides what success looks like, how we assess and measure results, and how Christian Aid as an INGO could take forward a decolonial approach to evaluation. This aligns with other initiatives ongoing at Christian Aid and in the wider sector, such as Peace Direct's work on decolonising aid[2] and decolonising peacebuilding[3] and the Start Network's Anti-racist and Decolonial Framework[4].

Rapid literature review

There is an extensive body of literature exploring the concepts of decolonisation and coloniality and how global structures, systems and practices are influenced by the legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Scholars including Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni[5] and Anibal Quijano[6] explain coloniality as an invisible power structure. Ndlovu-Gatsheni talks about the coloniality of power (how power is structured), coloniality of knowledge (who generates knowledge and for what purpose) and coloniality of being (how one's sense of being or personhood is enabled or constrained). Robtel Neajai Pailey talks about the "white gaze of development"[7]. She sets out that black and brown people from the 'Global South' are seen as subjects of development whose lives and futures are shaped by mostly white decision makers in development institutions situated in the 'Global North'. These and other scholars and practitioners talk about the colonization of the mind, in which Western ways of doing, being and knowing about the world are seen as superior to others. Western frameworks and concepts (for example 'development', 'progress', 'modernity') are

[1] G. Esteva, (2009) 'Development' In Sachs, W. (ed) The Development Dictionary: A guide to Knowledge as Power, London: Zed Books; Hulme, D. (2014) 'Poverty in Development Thought: Symptom or Cause', In Currie-Adler, B. et al (Eds.) International Development. Oxford: Oxford University; Rodney, W. (1974). How Europe underdeveloped Africa. Washington, D.C.

[2] Peace Direct in collaboration with Adeso, the Alliance for Peacebuilding and Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security (May 2021), *Time to Decolonise Aid; Insights and lessons from a global consultation*

[3] Peace Direct in collaboration with the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), and United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY), April 2022, *Race, Power, and Peacebuilding; Insights and lessons from a global consultation*

[4] Start Network, June 2022

[5] Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa: Myths of Decolonization,* 2013

[6] Anibal Quijano, *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America*, 2000

[7] Robtel Neajai Pailey, *De-centring the 'White Gaze' of Development*, 2019

universalised and held up as the standard to which all should aim. Western practices (such as notions of professionalism) are assumed to be better or seen as requirements to work in the development and humanitarian sectors. Evaluation as a discipline originated in the West, based on the worldviews, philosophies and culture of the West and methodologies and tools used in the sector apply a Western way of knowing to the management of data and information.

Literature on evaluation ethics leads in a similar direction. Mathea Roorda and Amy M Gullickson set out that *"evaluation is, by definition, judgmental and values-based"*[8] and therefore there are valid concerns around the values of evaluators affecting their assessments of the programmes they are evaluating – for example, their conceptualisations of what is good and what is valuable. Evaluation is not a neutral technical process, but rather takes place within a social and political context and assigns value and meaning. There are critiques of evaluation practice being premised on Western frameworks and ideologies, which results in the potential to miss out on valuable learning, as well as the serious possibility of doing harm to evaluation participants. Many evaluation practitioners have identified ways of designing evaluations that bring the perspectives of the "evaluated" into the practice, building on the participation movement in the 1980s and 1990s, which explicitly sought to shift power to people and communities. These include participatory evaluation, empowerment evaluation (David Fetterman), developmental evaluation (Michael Quinn Patton), culturally responsive and equitable evaluation, Made in Africa evaluation (Bagele Chilisa), as well as innovative methodologies such as storytelling and participatory video.

There is growing discussion bringing these two areas of enquiry together. Bagele Chilisa and others describe evaluation as *"the worst instrument of epistemological imperialism"*[9], as a discipline dominated by Euro-Western research paradigms and methodologies. In the current climate as the sector focuses its (overdue) attention on racism, continued inequalities and the legacies of colonialism, it is important to take stock of earlier debates on shifting power and reflect with a decolonising lens. We are prompted again to question who sets the evaluation agenda and to challenge our underlying assumptions, both in terms of framing concepts of development and progress and at the more micro level of what success means in a particular context at a particular time for specific people and communities. This paper builds on the thinking of Chilisa and others to critically reflect on current evaluative practice and explore how we might employ a decolonial lens in evaluation.

A note on terminology: Decolonisation and decoloniality are contested terms. *Decolonisation* is often used to describe the ending of something to do with colonialism, such as the divesting of colonial state administration through independence, while *decoloniality* is the process of reclaiming or rebuilding, for example the reaffirming of local languages, and the re-centring of indigenous cultures and ways of knowing. Both terms are used throughout this paper: where we are suggesting shifting our practice, there are elements of ending current ways of working (*decolonisation*) and rebuilding our practice in new directions (*decoloniality*).

Methodology

This paper is based on the findings of 5 focus group discussions (with 61 participants, based in 15 countries[10]) and 10 semi-structured interviews. Participants were purposefully selected to include people in different roles and locations and with diverse experiences of and perspectives on evaluation. This included Christian Aid colleagues in global and country programme-based roles, and external MEL colleagues and peers in

[8] Mathea Roorda and Amy M Gullickson, *Developing evaluation criteria using an ethical lens,* 2019

[9] Bagele Chilisa, Thenjiwe Emily Major, Michael Gaotlhobogwe and Hildah Mokgolodi, University of Botswana, *Decolonizing and Indigenizing Evaluation Practice in Africa: Toward African Relational Evaluation Approaches,* 2016

[10] Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Dominican Republic, Honduras, India, Ireland, Kenya, Malawi, Myanmar, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, UK, Zimbabwe

INGOs and evaluator/ consultancy roles. The paper also integrates feedback and comments received from peers at the European Evaluation Society Conference in Copenhagen in June 2022.

The research was limited by the main author's networks and relied on people's willingness and ability to freely give of their time to participate. In addition, it is important to acknowledge the power relations that underpinned the research methodology. As a white researcher in an advisory role based in the 'Global North', the researcher is aware of the limitations of her particular worldview, biases, and assumptions. There are unequal power relations underpinning the research, both in terms of race and the author's identity as a white woman, but also because the research was commissioned from Christian Aid's office in London, a space of power and decision making. As much as we tried to create safe spaces for open and honest discussion, it is unclear whether all the participants felt fully comfortable to express their views and share their experiences openly. This research is a first step for Christian Aid in reflecting on our practice and will inform ongoing internal discussions around ways in which we might shift our practice.

Findings

"Traditional" evaluation is problematic

There is broad agreement among research participants that the concepts of decolonisation and decoloniality cast a light on the problematic nature of 'traditional' evaluation. Evaluations involve making a judgement on the effectiveness or value of an intervention – but who is making the judgement and how are they determining whether something has value? In what might be described as 'traditional' evaluation practice in the international development and humanitarian sectors, evaluations are very often carried out by external experts who are acknowledged to have expertise in a particular thematic or geographical area and whose views and judgements are therefore sought in relation to a specific intervention. Evaluators use technical and academically respected methods to extract data from people and communities involved in an intervention, analyse the data based on their (often limited) knowledge of the context and draw conclusions in line with pre-determined criteria. At one end of a scale, an evaluative process could be brief, extractive, and limited to quantitative methods, while at the other end, an evaluation could be implemented using participatory and inclusive methods, and feedback and learning would be shared with communities. However, wherever we are on this scale, by following a 'traditional' evaluation model, we are continuing to practice in line with colonial structures that prize Western or scientific understandings of how we generate knowledge and what type and whose knowledge counts in our assessments of value.

Evaluation design

Firstly, in relation to evaluation design. Generally, evaluations in this sector are externally or donor driven and respond to donor requirements in their design and criteria, rather than being community-led. Most Christian Aid evaluations respond to donor priorities first, rather than starting with community-led priorities. In this way, power asymmetries or imbalances rooted in coloniality are sustained. Research participants noted a sliding scale of participation in evaluation design, with donors and Christian Aid staff setting evaluation criteria, external consultants working with Christian Aid to develop approaches and tools, civil society partners being consulted (to varying extents) and people and communities with whom we work participating by responding to pre-defined questions in extractive data collection processes (albeit sometimes conducted using participatory processes). Partners are often also involved in logistics and operational support to evaluations, opening doors for external 'experts'. At Christian Aid, those most involved in evaluation design are programme advisers (who are often based in different locations to the projects being evaluated), country-based programme and MEL staff and programme funding colleagues. One research participant explained that, in the planning and design of a recent evaluation, while civil society partner frontline staff were involved

in discussions about evaluation methodology and the consultants might have seen this as a way of bringing in a community perspective,

> *"[the evaluation was] essentially designed and driven and decided by someone completely external" [to the project and context].*

The most commonly used evaluation criteria are externally or donor driven, including the OECD DAC criteria[11], 4Es Value for Money criteria[12] and the Research Excellence Framework assessment criteria[13] for academic research. Evaluation questions are also based on the objectives of projects and set during the design phase of the evaluation cycle. In addition to the criteria around the results and implementation of a project or programme, Christian Aid evaluations often also look at programme quality and learning, and some evaluations focus on inclusion and participation. However, in most cases, evaluation questions are pre-defined and, crucially, project participants and stakeholders do not decide what is assessed or valued. Rather, they are seen as subjects of evaluation, excluded from the design and framing of an evaluation and they only participate after the assessment criteria has been set. Project participants are not able to define what success means to them. As one focus group participant said:

> *'Communities participate in giving us the data - but they don't decide if the project is a success. They are subjects of evaluation study, but do not define what makes it a good project.'*

This kind of participation can be very extractive. One interviewee mentioned that consultants sometimes appear to:

> *'grab information from people" and "don't pay much attention [to them]'*

as they move quickly between different communities to reach their targeted evaluation sample. This resonates with colonial extraction and the need to "give back" - in this case information and evaluation space to project participants and stakeholders.

Implementation of evaluations

The implementation of evaluations is also problematic when we reflect on our practice with a decolonial lens. When external consultants are sought, very often Terms of Reference are rigid, copy and paste documents outlining strict requirements of academic qualifications and years of professional experience that exclude potential candidates with less 'typical' backgrounds. Evaluations often seek 'international' consultants and 'local' consultants, placing 'international' consultants in leading roles and on more generous terms and conditions, while 'local' consultants are asked to leverage their contextual knowledge and social power through networks and connections to facilitate discussions, often with minimal recognition of this. The UN system is particularly known for this hierarchy of terms and conditions between international and local actors. There are clear parallels with the academic discussion on the colonization of the mind, in which scholars outline the universalisation of Western standards – for example, the insistence on Western recognised and accepted academic qualifications and notions of professionalism. It seems as though in this 'traditional' evaluation paradigm, knowledge only counts (or counts for more) when it is generated through academic, scientific, 'robust' methods. These perceptions of what knowledge counts exclude other ways of seeing and understanding the world, such as indigenous practices of generating and sharing knowledge (like tok stori, a practice of storytelling in the Solomon Islands). If our methodologies are excluding or perpetuating a practice of perceiving worldviews of formerly colonised and racialised peoples as inferior, we risk coming to

[11] Relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability
[12] Economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity
[13] Research outputs are assessed in terms of their originality, significance and vigour; and reach and significance of impacts.

narrow conclusions, missing valuable opportunities to enrich our learning and doing harm. An interviewee explained:

> *"Sometimes it feels like the methods and frameworks we use are not equipped to acknowledge some of the important changes or effects on people and groups. We are still looking for numbers. Being here, talking to people, meeting people – that is a satisfying part of the process. Discovering personal stories of change and growth. Like a woman who has liberated herself from an abusive relationship. To me it means the world, but if we report one person who has changed their life, it's not good enough for a donor – it's not a headline result. Donors are not prepared to value that, but in the field that's what matters."*

This universalisation of Western academic practice continues in how evaluations are written up, presented and used. Research participants felt that Christian Aid evaluations have their focus on upward accountability to funders of our work, with Christian Aid staff and our civil society partners seen as secondary audiences for evaluations, and little consideration for accountability to communities. This means that evaluation findings and recommendations are always presented in formal, written reports that conform to accepted (Western) norms. They are usually in English and sometimes, but not always, translated into other languages. As one research participant noted,

> *"fixed templates often do not leave space for centring marginalised voices".*

There are sometimes feedback sessions in which evaluation findings and learning are shared with project participants and community members in other ways (for example, orally at stakeholder meetings), but this has tended to be in larger projects where these activities were budgeted for. Under-resourcing of evaluations exacerbates the challenge, both financially (limited budgets for translation of findings into appropriate languages or for feedback sessions) and in terms of staff time.

The focus on upwards accountability and compliance with external requirements, rather than on the interests and needs of project participants and other local stakeholders, underlines the significant power imbalances in current evaluation practice. One interviewee mentioned the incentives of evaluation consultants to provide a good report for the donor (in line with their preferred language, format and even findings), so that they might be selected for future assignments, rather than focusing their attention on what is useful for project participants and stakeholders. Another interviewee said:

> *"the bottom line is – who are evaluations for?"*

This may be where we could consider a normative shift if we are to move towards a decolonial approach to evaluation.

Moving towards a decolonial approach

What counts as knowledge

In order to shift our evaluation practice in a way that aligns with a commitment to decolonisation and decoloniality, we should start with resetting our intentions around what counts as knowledge. This will involve uncovering our assumptions around 'rigour' and 'robust' data and challenging them. A helpful way of thinking about this might be to look for evidence, rather than proof, of changes in project locations. We will need to dismantle our assumptions around hierarchies of evidence and, as outlined in an internal Christian Aid paper, *"challenge the way that colonised ways of knowing the world have been naturalised and*

normalised as the main way of knowing the world. This means challenging and unlearning practices rooted in Western conceptualised rationality, logic, and objective ways of knowing."[14]

We might move *towards* exploring and understanding changes and move *away* from a focus on measuring what is quantifiable and valuing quantitative data over people-centred stories. This proposes a normative shift so that we proactively seek other forms of knowledge, such as practice-based knowledge, stories and oral history. This would involve understanding how knowledge is generated and shared in different contexts, and prioritising people's lived experiences.

As one interviewee argued:

> *"We start from the assumption that people [involved in projects we are evaluating] have knowledge."*

Decolonising evaluation means proactively including the world views, practices and experiences of the formerly colonised. It may also mean problematising the concepts with which we work, for example development and gender, and exploring how these concepts are understood and experienced in different contexts. (For example, development is understood by some African indigenous scholars as the freedom to do what you want, as opposed to meeting needs defined by Western donors.) We can learn from efforts to indigenise evaluation, for example Made in Africa Evaluation which aims to articulate an evaluation theory and practice that is rooted in African worldviews.

This links closely to the localisation movement and thinking around locally-led development that is being championed in the sector. For organisations like Christian Aid who work with civil society partners, it might involve challenging ourselves around the roles our partners play. Indeed, one focus group participant raised Christian Aid's partner network as an opportunity that could help us in taking forward a decolonial approach to evaluation:

> *"[Our partners have] diverse knowledges on evaluation. We should draw from this to identify our blind spots."*

Taking a decolonial approach will mean promoting a greater role for civil society partners, as well as for project participants. This would include making efforts to disrupt unequal power relations, delegating decision making and leadership to partners, and avoiding tokenistic participation.

Intentionality

A decolonial approach to evaluation requires an intentional and clearly stated commitment to shift power away from those who have historically held power towards those who have been systematically denied it. At the global level, this has mostly been white people in the global North, but at the national level in the global South this has also been 'in-groups' and 'elites' who have accumulated the most power and benefitted the most since the formal end of colonial administration. This means promoting genuine participation and leadership of people and communities involved in a project throughout the evaluative process, starting from design and criteria setting through to data analysis and use.

> *"[We] need to reverse the idea that we are the ones who need information. People and communities should be seen as leaders needing information. It is for them. We are facilitators as Christian Aid." (Focus group participant)*

[14] *Journey to Justice: Christian Aid's Principles of Decolonisation and Anti-racism*, Christian Aid internal paper, February 2022

As part of this intentionality, a values-based approach or set of commitments might support new ways of working. The African Evaluation Principles[15], San People's Code of Research Ethics[16] and the Washington Evaluators Anti-Racism Principles[17] provide good examples. One research participant described this as having *"a list of non-negotiables"* which must be put in place before starting an evaluation.

Participant led

A decolonial approach would require involving project participants from the outset in evaluation design and in determining the frame. We could consider moving away from externally-driven evaluation criteria, which are often rigid and based on Western understandings of progress and success, and instead work with project participants to explore more openly what they see as important, what is not, and how to understand change. An example of this is the Everyday Peace Indicators methodology (Dr. Pamina Firchow and Dr. Roger Mac Ginty), which takes a bottom-up approach to exploring change in conflict-affected communities: *"Instead of 'experts' or 'scholars' defining what peace means and what it looks like, communities define for themselves the everyday indicators that they use to measure successful peace in their own communities."*[18]

We might also consider adapting and adding to external criteria, if we are required to use this in evaluation design (for example due to contractual obligations with a donor). Criteria such as relevance and effectiveness can be broadened and re-interpreted to focus on project participants' perspectives and experiences. We might also consider adding criteria - like the Green Climate Fund, who have added gender equality, innovation and country ownership amongst others to the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria.

Furthermore, recognising that evaluation findings belong not to us but to those who contributed the knowledge means that we need to shift towards new ways of presenting our findings back to project participants and communities.

> *"[It is] important processes are owned by project participants. Projects are by them and with them, so [evaluation] findings should be by and for them, rather than just documented and shared with donors." (Focus group participant)*

Culture shift

Placing people at the centre and resetting our intentions around what knowledge counts and indeed whose values count may require cultural shifts at an organisational level. We will need to think about what enables these normative shifts around whose knowledge and what kind of evidence we value. As explained above, taking a decolonial approach would mean letting the evaluation process, and in particular the decisions about what will be evaluated, be led by those who should have benefitted from an intervention, rather than by those who provided the funding. It seems logical that those who are funding an intervention ultimately want to see positive impact as perceived by the target group. As one focus group participant mentioned:

> *"[We] need to create space and shift power to challenge us – aiming for people to feel free to say we are not honouring the way they do or see things."*

This might involve encouraging collaborative learning spaces, breaking down hierarchies, facilitating openness to challenge, and building trust. For Christian Aid, this might happen at multiple levels, within different parts of the global organisation, with and between Christian Aid and our civil society partners, and

[15] African Evaluation Association, 2021

[16] San-Code-of-RESEARCH-Ethics-Booklet_English.pdf (globalcodeofconduct.org)

[17] WE Antiracism Commitments - Updated October 1 2020.pdf (washingtonevaluators.org)

[18] What we do | Everyday Peace (everydaypeaceindicators.org)

with the people and communities with whom we work. The aim would be to promote a culture that is less about imposing a viewpoint on others and more about valuing multiple viewpoints and ways of generating and sharing knowledge.

> *"Organisational culture needs to facilitate decolonial methodologies – otherwise, we are trying to find space within rigid structures."*

We may encounter challenges with unlearning habits from current practice at various levels and the literature on colonisation of the mind resonates here. One research participant described how, when they (as a funder) had expressed their greater openness to receiving qualitative data, civil society partners had continued to share quantitative data in their reports.

Putting decoloniality into our evaluation practice

External requirements

During research discussions with INGO colleagues, internally and externally, ever-present donor requirements were a frequent concern and seen as a significant barrier to shifting our practice. Focus on accountability for money spent, completion of rigid reporting templates and aligning with fixed requirements and criteria precludes innovative evaluative processes and does not leave space for project participant-led approaches. Accountability itself is a positive thing, but in order to apply accountability in line with decoloniality, where the ways of knowing in project communities carry as much weight, if not more, than the compliance approach of funders, flexibility is needed. A focus group participant said:

> *"We are data people, and data has its value, but we always need to ask why we need it, and refrain from using it only for compliance processes."*

In the short term, there may be a middle road here that INGOs can forge, by reframing our evaluation approach to be more community/project-participant-led and finding a way to "translate" to fit in with donor requirements. INGOs like Christian Aid could also invest resources in piloting evaluations that are as community-led and decolonial as possible, and developing results-based recommendations for other organisations. In the medium and longer term, INGOs can play an advocacy role in promoting the importance of decolonial approaches. As one research participant said:

> *"We need to convince donors that a detailed story is as valuable as numbers".*

Many organisations and governments have committed to supporting the localisation agenda. Linking decolonisation and decolonial approaches to evaluation to this agenda may support the advocacy case.

Going beyond participation

The research uncovered some examples from current and previous practice of participatory and community-led approaches to evaluation, including using participatory photography in Nigeria[19] and El Salvador[20] and "Community Voices" storytelling and Most Significant Change methodology in South Sudan. Using these approaches has brought out new insights and allowed a richer and deeper exploration of how change happens in these places and times.

[19] Picture Power Nigeria - Christian Aid

[20] *Participatory Communications: Communities gather photographic evidence for social change*, Paula Plaza, internal Christian Aid paper, December 2018.

However, when reflecting with a decolonial lens, focus group participants emphasised the importance of *how* these methodologies are employed, noting that:

> *"Often, we stop at participation, not acknowledging the power imbalances which affect how people relate to us and each other."*
>
> *"Participation isn't pure, and we can still manipulate these processes for our own end goals."*
>
> *"Powerful people have stronger voice."*

There are well-documented critiques of the limitations of participatory methodologies (such as those developed by Robert Chambers) relating to unequal power dynamics in communities[21]. We are challenged to question who is better able to participate in participatory planning and monitoring and evaluation processes and who is excluded due to multiple factors of disadvantage that they experience. However, thinking about this from a decolonizing angle requires one to go further and to consider the power dynamics involved in who is asking the questions, and by the framing that we put in place around participation. If participation is limited to data collection processes, people have not contributed to defining the evaluation questions and they are responding to pre-defined questions that may or may not cover all the areas which they see as important, or which have the most meaning in their lives. Furthermore, people analysing data bring their own lens to the analysis, so it is important that where possible, we do our analysis collaboratively, ensuring diverse worldviews are represented in the process, and that we allow projects participants the opportunity to critique our analysis in case we unintentionally misrepresent a perspective. Taking a decolonial approach requires us to reflect on when and how we are using participatory methodologies and to open up towards genuine participation at all stages of an evaluative process.

Role of evaluators

This also leads us to rethink the roles of evaluators, in line with thinking on empowerment evaluation[22] and participatory evaluation[23]. If we are shifting power to project participants, it follows that we unpick our assumptions about where expertise lies. Rather than seeing evaluators as the experts, we come to see evaluators as facilitators of an open process in which people and communities are recognised and credited as holding expertise in their own experience and knowledge. As one research participant said,

> *"[we need to] think through people's roles and power in the [evaluation] process – from advising to facilitating, creating space for people [project participants] to put themselves at the centre."*

Viewed in this way, evaluation becomes a collaborative sense-making exercise, bringing together diverse views and experiences and collectively finding meaning (or multiple meanings). The evaluator takes on a "humble, inquisitive, facilitative stance"[24], while project participants have space to freely share their thoughts and ideas, without being confined to a rigid structure.

If we are working with consultants for evaluations, it follows that we should open up our Terms of References, widen the lens and take a broader view of what counts as expertise, not restricting ourselves to the 'usual' technical specifications and qualifications. One possibility would be to collaboratively identify people within project communities as "experts by experience" - people who are experts on a thematic or geographical area because of their lived experiences. They could be trained, remunerated, and supported to

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[21] Nici Nelson and Susan Wright, *Power and Participatory Development: Theory and Practice,* 1995; and Ilan Kappor, *The Devil's in the Theory: A Critical Assessment of Robert Chambers' Work on Participatory Development*, 2002

[22] David Fetterman, *Empowerment Evaluation*, 1994

[23] Irene Guijt, *Participatory Approaches, Methodological Briefs: Impact Evaluation 5*, UNICEF, 2014

[24] Silvia Ferretti

facilitate discussions with their peers. This may work particularly well in specific project contexts, for example interventions aiming to address gender-based violence and following a survivor-led approach.

Reflexive praxis

We discussed above the unequal power relations at play in 'traditional' evaluations. Even with a commitment to a values-based approach and taking a facilitative evaluation stance, it will be important to think through and address the effects of power relations in an evaluation space. Carrying out reflexive praxis – reflecting on our own ways of knowing and understanding the world, how we perceive others and how we are perceived – can help to uncover power dynamics at various levels. This includes with and between external evaluators and project participants, but also within project communities, remembering the well-documented challenges of participatory approaches (communities are not homogenous; there are gatekeepers; people may have incentives to withhold or share information, etc). While we will not be able to fully mitigate the effects of unequal power relations, a better understanding of how power affects different relationships could help in designing a process that allows greater ownership by project participants and more genuine participation throughout. Christian Aid has a guide to conducting research ethically[25], which includes a discussion of reflexive praxis. As set out in an internal Christian Aid paper[26], taking a decolonial lens to reflexive praxis *"requires a prioritisation of diverse voices and knowledges whilst continually evaluating our own positionality, individual institutional power and geographical locations."*

If consultants are being considered to facilitate an evaluation, reflexive praxis may lead to a decision to seek local consultants rather than international consultants, as they may be more grounded in the project context with greater awareness of power dynamics, and there might perhaps be less of an unequal power dynamic with project participants (although it will still exist).

Practical considerations

It is important to recognise that taking forward these recommendations will require resources, both in terms of time (for reflection and learning, plus the additional time it takes to work with communities in a participatory way) and money. It is already well understood that carrying out participatory processes is more time-consuming, and taking a decolonial approach, as established above, will require going beyond participation in data collection to full participation or ownership of the evaluation initiative. As an interviewee explained:

> *"[we need to] think through people's roles and power in the [evaluation] process – from advising to facilitating, creating space for people [project participants] to put themselves at the centre."*

Adequate budget will be required to enable these processes, for example for appropriate venues (where people are safe and comfortable, and have dignity and privacy), refreshments, transport costs, translation and interpretation, and for more innovative methodologies that promote the centring of marginalised voices and perspectives (such as participatory video or photography and creative approaches with storytelling, art, and drama). We should also take into consideration opportunity costs for participation and try to avoid worsening time poverty that people may experience.

It is particularly important that the language or languages being used are those most appropriate for the people and communities at the centre of the evaluative processes. Often, we have documents or events translated into local languages, but taking a decolonial approach might mean holding events and producing

[25] Doing research ethically - Christian Aid

[26] London International Development Centre, Applying a decolonial lens to research structures, quoted in *Race, Ethnicity, Colour and Poverty: Methodology Paper,* Christian Aid, 2021, quoting

documentation in local languages and translating to English (or French or Spanish, etc) where needed. In this way we can try to reduce the unequal power dynamic and alter the actors being centred in the process.

Changing our practice and finding adequate budget will require significant organisational buy-in and support. It also might mean doing less, in order to do things differently.

Conclusion

This research has shown that current evaluation practice is highly problematic when we reflect with a decolonising lens. By taking an intentional and values-based approach, resetting our assumptions around what counts as knowledge to bring in excluded voices and marginalised perspectives, with less rigid criteria, we can create more open and reflective, collaborative evaluation spaces, participant-led and facilitated by humble evaluators or experts by experience. Continuous reflexive praxis, and adequate investment in resources and time will underpin and support these approaches.

Ultimately, if we can take forward a decolonial approach to evaluation, this may contribute towards shifting power to those who have been historically excluded. As one research participant said:

> *"This is a real opportunity to bring the 3Ps[27] to life: addressing poverty through shifting power to communities and supporting their own prophetic voice and agency to solve the problems they face."*

[27] Christian Aid's understanding of how to address and eradicate poverty is based on three pillars – the 3Ps:

1. **Poverty** - We reach those most in need, in some of the hardest to reach places around the world.
2. **Power** - We challenge the systemic and structural causes of poverty by holding those in power to account.
3. **Prophetic voice** - We speak truth to power and build local and collective agency