The meanings of humanitarian innovation

Reflections from the Community-Led Innovation Partnership using a postcolonial lens

Community-Led Innovation Partnership

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About the partners

Elrha is a global charity that finds solutions to complex humanitarian problems. Its vision is of a world equipped to mitigate the impact of humanitarian crises. It is an established actor in the humanitarian community working in partnership with humanitarian organisations, researchers, innovators and the private sector to tackle some of the most difficult challenges facing people all over the world.

Start Network is a global network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), made up of more than 50 national and international aid agencies from five continents. Its mission is to create a new era of humanitarian action that will save even more lives through innovation, fast funding, early action and localisation.

The Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN) is a network of national civil society organisations across the Asia-Pacific region. Since 2002, ADRRN has rapidly evolved from an awareness-focused network to a regional voice in advocacy and capacity-building issues as well. Its main aims have been to promote coordination, information sharing and collaboration among civil society organisations and other stakeholders to strengthen effective and efficient crisis reduction and response in the Asia-Pacific region.

ASECSA (la Asociación de Servicios Comunitarios de Salud, Guatemala), representing the Start Network Guatemala Hub, is an association of over 48 community-based organisations in Guatemala fighting for rural, Indigenous health access. Since its foundation in 1978, ASECSA has developed experience in humanitarian response. For 15 years, it has implemented the management strategy for disaster risk reduction (DRR) in rural communities at most risk.

The Center for Disaster Preparedness (CDP), the Philippines, works with NGOs, people's organisations, communities and government agencies at all levels to enhance crisis prevention and mitigation, preparedness, emergency response, and rehabilitation and recovery across the archipelago. Innovation is a strategic element of CDP's core work, spanning DRR, response and recovery.

Yakkum Emergency Unit (YEU), Indonesia, has a mandate to deliver inclusive emergency response – encouraging community participation in needs assessment and relief distribution. YEU works to build community resilience through community-led DRR and climate change adaptation. YEU is the national coordinating organisation for the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction, a key member of the national DRR platform, the provincial DRR platform in Yogyakarta and Sigi, and Humanitarian Forum Indonesia national clusters including the health cluster. YEU is also a member of the Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance, and works closely with older people's and disability organisations.

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Introduction

In 2020, the Community-Led Innovation Partnership (CLIP) was established by Elrha (UK), Start Network (UK) and the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN)'s Tokyo Innovation Hub (Japan) to support operational programming in humanitarian innovation by the Center for Disaster Preparedness (CDP, the Philippines), Yakkum Emergency Unit (YEU, Indonesia) and the Start Network Hub in Guatemala hosted by la Asociación de Servicios Comunitarios de Salud (ASECSA). The partnership is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

Since the partnership was established, there has been a resurgence of interest and debate about the role of structural racism in society, in general, as well as in the development and humanitarian sector, which is once again facing a reckoning about its past, present, and future (Ali & Murphy, 2020). Organisations are rightly being challenged to reflect on the role they play in a system characterised by power imbalances, inequity, and structural racism, and how they can change it through education, policies, and practice.

The CLIP itself sits at the intersection of the Grand Bargain[1] commitment to support localised humanitarian response and the 'innovation turn' of the last decade, in which innovation has been established at the heart of humanitarian policymaking (Scott-Smith, 2016). The many ideas that underpin humanitarian innovation have direct and indirect global policy influence. As Kristin Sandvik writes, "The humanitarian innovation agenda, its projects, stakeholders, and visions of improvement… *do things*. How the humanitarian innovation discourse contemplates change says much about power, resource distribution, and humanitarian governance" (Sandvik, 2017).

It is in recognition of the power of this discourse that we seek to interrogate it. As a partnership that operates across borders and cultures, we want to step back, reflect, and examine the knowledge and beliefs upon which our partnership is founded. This means examining our varied perspectives on the humanitarian sector, and questioning how the humanitarian innovation agenda is conceptualised, implemented and evaluated. We want to understand how our partnership reinforces problematic knowledge and power systems, and how we might successfully do things differently.

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[1] The Grand Bargain is an agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations that have committed to get more resources into the hands of people in need, and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action. See: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain.

While it is based on substantial discussion, a thorough literature review and initial research carried out by Royal Roads University, this paper primarily aims to record our conversations and reflections, and to discuss the role of community-led innovation initiatives in addressing power imbalances in the humanitarian sector. We hope this will be interesting and valuable to others, particularly in the policy and funding field of innovation and humanitarian aid.

Approach, methodology and positionality

This paper is the culmination of a learning journey in the Community-Led Innovation Partnership. In 2021, as the partnership was establishing itself, we commissioned Royal Roads University to undertake a research project examining how colonialism manifests itself in humanitarian innovation models and innovation support approaches and to propose ways forward to build a more equitable and inclusive practice. The results of this research provided insights which, in turn, sparked further conversation across the partnership.[2] As ASECSA, CDP, and YEU established their programmes in Guatemala, the Philippines and Indonesia, respectively, the paper took a new direction as we wanted to incorporate their reflections on the partnership and use the opportunity to explore and document our evolving perspectives. The resulting paper is a record of this ongoing discussion.

In this paper, we root our thinking in the history of academic engagement with colonialism, which is long, complex, multilingual and geographically diverse. Much of the activism that has generated the recent phase of self-reflection in the international development sector draws precisely on these concepts and frameworks, which we believe are important to acknowledge. Chapter 1 outlines postcolonial theories and questions of power, voice and representation, based on a short literature review of postcolonial theory, inspired particularly by *Postcolonialism, Decoloniality and Development* (McEwan, 2019) and the online directory globalsocialtheory.org. Chapter 2 presents and engages with a literature review of humanitarian innovation and key associated terms to provide an outline of the body of knowledge that has largely shaped the humanitarian innovation agenda.

Having understood the questions postcolonial theories requires us to ask, and having considered the roots of humanitarian innovation that underpin perspectives in the Global North,[2] we looked at the CLIP itself. This process included sharing a summary of chapters 1 and 2 with ASECSA, CDP and YEU, and discussing the content in a two-hour 'learning exchange' call. We then asked each partner to share their thoughts and perspectives on how coloniality manifests itself in the CLIP. Chapter 3 covers insights from this exercise.

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[2] While imperfect, this paper uses the terms 'Global North'/'Global South' because, while they are not necessarily geographically correct, they reflect the interconnected nature of global poverty and inequality (McEwan, 2019).

Chapter 4 discusses community-led innovation as a distinct approach to humanitarian innovation, based on experiences and perspectives from within the CLIP. It applies postcolonial theories to thinking and practice within the CLIP and contextualises this within the wider humanitarian innovation agenda and debates around decolonisation and localisation.

This paper was drafted primarily by Isabel Medem and Ian McClelland at Elrha. We, the authors, recognise that while the debate about decolonising aid is currently popular in the English-speaking development and humanitarian sectors, it has been prominent in the Global South for much longer. As actors in the Global North, our interest in this matter risks being condescending, imposed on others and/or ill-informed. We therefore endeavour to be "hyper self-reflexive", meaning that we constantly and carefully reflect on how our work is "intimately linked to our positioning (socioeconomic, gendered, cultural, geographic, historical, institutional)" (Kapoor, 2004).

At the same time, we seek to avoid a self-centred critique, which can prevent us from listening and seeing and accepting seemingly contradicting realities. We believe that taking decolonisation of the humanitarian sector seriously means understanding that the discussion itself risks turning into a form of power when it only seeks to hear a certain truth, while silencing another. For instance, given the trend within the development sector to critically reconsider all practices, we might not have wanted to hear what all three of our partners have repeatedly said: that the innovation framework has, in fact, had a positive impact on their way of working.

Taking this a step further, we do not only intend to present perspectives regardless of whether they perfectly fit a given decolonial critique, but to also draw conclusions from it through which we continue to challenge our work. For instance: despite humanitarianism still being considered a neutral and apolitical endeavour, we must accept and embrace the fact that all our partners' work not only happens within deeply political power dynamics, but that our framework can, itself, be a space for political engagement. Throughout the entire process of drafting this paper, therefore, we strive to strike the right balance between engaging with multi-directional critique towards the issues at hand and remaining open to a plurality of perspectives.

1. Postcolonial theories and developmentalism

The term 'postcolonialism' might be understood to mean 'after colonialism', describing the world after formally colonised countries achieved political independence. In fact, postcolonial scholarship refers to the collection of frameworks and concepts through which we can critically engage with a world still shaped by colonialism. With its focus on decolonising the production of knowledge and, thus, of power, postcolonialism is less concerned with the historical shift than with a discursive one.

The complex field of postcolonial theory seeks to:

- destabilise dominant discourses about how our world is known
- challenge the way knowledge is produced, asking who is being spoken for and by whom
- rewrite the dominant accounting of time (known as history)
- disrupt the spatial distribution of knowledge (which results in power)
- recover the voices of marginalised and oppressed people by radically reconstructing history and knowledge production (McEwan, 2019).

Postcolonial scholars have often focused on analysing coloniality in literature and imagery, but it is also a powerful lens through which to critique the development and humanitarian sectors. Its treatment of knowledge and representation as a form of power (who is represented by whom, who speaks, who appears as subjects and objects) is crucial to understanding postcolonialism's usefulness to critiquing them.

Postcolonial theory is suspicious of the 'development project', which it considers to be *the* screen onto which the Global South is projected, creating a seemingly true representation of the very regions that were formerly colonised. It considers development itself a form of power held up by a very particular discourse that places the Global North at the centre, as the knowledge holder and originator of benevolent development ideas, and the Global South at the periphery, as without knowledge and as in need of development (Mignolo, 2017).

Applying postcolonial critiques to development, then, "aims to understand the power of development ideas, knowledge and institutions and their consequence in particular places at particular times" (ibid). In relation to global health research

funding, E. S. Koum Besson (2022) summarises the dynamics of global coloniality in terms of the coloniality of power, of knowledge and of being (Figure 1).[3]
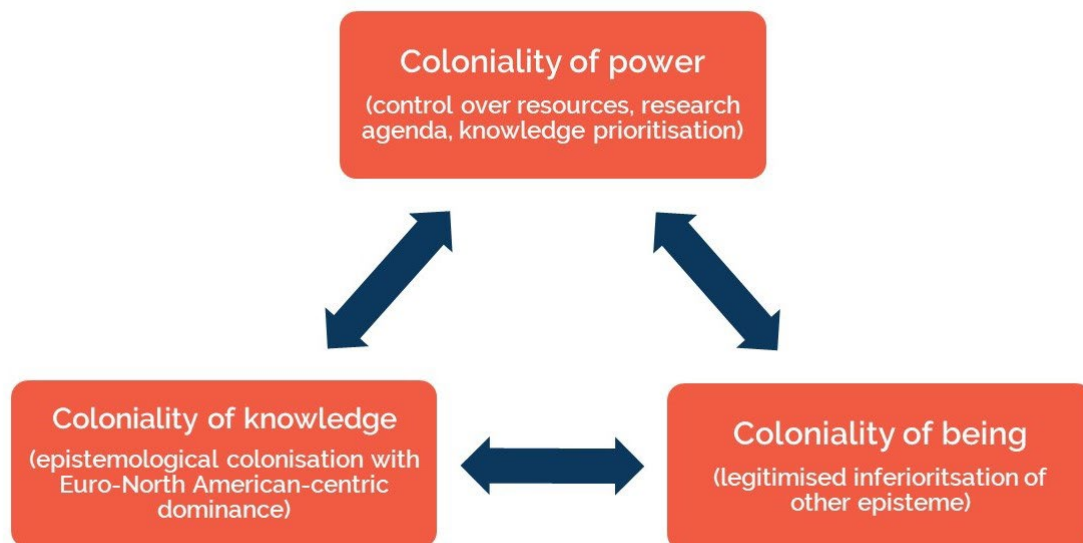
Figure 1: Dynamics of global coloniality. Source: Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2014) in Koum Besson (2022).

The following sections outline some the most important concepts in postcolonial theory that inform the discussion and analysis in this paper.

Coloniality

Coloniality refers to the cultural, political and economic oppression of subordinated groups by dominant racial groups, *beyond the period of colonial rule*. As such, this term describes the current global power relations that have emerged from imperialism. These power relations, in which superiority, authority and knowledge rest in the Global North, are capitalist, racist and heteronormative at their core, and have directly influenced specific ideas of who is considered human/less-than-human (see the works of A Quijano, W Mignolo and M Lugones, among others).

For postcolonial scholars, coloniality is the state of the world in which we all live, shaped by the aftermath of colonialism not as a historical fact but as the central, determining structure of our lives today. It is therefore impossible to consider oneself as outside of this state and, rather, one must begin to realise the extent to

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[3] For a definition of epistemological/episteme, see page 12.

which colonialism has been incorporated into our knowledge, behaviour and attitudes.

Decolonisation and decoloniality

The concept of decolonisation is most commonly understood and used as a metaphor for the liberation from colonial oppression – past and ongoing. There are, however, interpretations and uses of this term to refer to the restoration of national sovereignty: 'to decolonise' is the quest to revert the original act of colonisation and to repatriate Indigenous land and life (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Relatedly, the term 'decoloniality', which emerged from the work of Latin American scholars, such as the previously mentioned A. Quijano, W. Mignolo, M. Lugones, is the practice of actively challenging the power relations that currently shape the world, in particular, the idea that Western knowledge is universal and superior. It is an ongoing act that pushes back against the erasures of knowledge and history of the marginalised and oppressed.

Epistemology and knowledge/s

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that seeks to understand the nature of knowledge and what should pass as acceptable knowledge (Bryman, 2016). It therefore asks questions about what we can claim as 'true' knowledge, and the appropriate methods for arriving at such knowledge (Heylighen, 1993). If one accepts that Western 'scientific' methods are not necessarily the only ways of arriving at 'true' knowledge, it follows that there can be different 'knowledges' based on different cultural histories and means of enquiry. Knowledge becomes 'valid' only when presented by and in the Global North, where research projects are often presented with an - implicit or explicit - claim to being 'the 'first' to discover, do, or go somewhere' (Liboiron, 2021).

Feminist theorists have pointed out that knowledge can never be entirely objective and that 'uncovering the identity of the 'knower' and the nature of 'knowing' is key to understanding knowledge as a form of power (Evans and Madhok, 2014). They argue that by claiming knowledge to be universal and for the researcher and knower to be transparent in that process is not only untrue, but a form of exercising power by 'othering' entire regions of the world in relation to the knowledge holders.

Gayatri C Spivak, a feminist and postcolonial scholar, coined the term 'epistemic violence' (1988) to refer to the silencing of marginalised groups, and the dismissal of knowledge gained through non-Western methods of enquiry as 'non-scientific'. To counter this and challenge the "privileged views of the world",

standpoint theorists like Sandra Harding suggest "starting thought from the lives of marginalised peoples". (Evans and Madhok, 2014)

Developmentalism

Postcolonial scholars use 'developmentalism' to refer to an understanding of development as a post-WWII project that has constructed the notion of underdevelopment as well as an institutionalised apparatus that produces knowledge and power (Escobar, 1995). As such, they argue that development has created a domain of language and knowledge that holds a problematic form of power because it can decide that whole regions of the world are seen (and see themselves) as underdeveloped according to very particular standards that are rooted in coloniality.

The development and aid apparatus works through a language of 'professionalism' that ends up "neutralising or depoliticising activism and social movements" by locking entire populations into statistics and indicators, and by situating them on a linear understanding of time and progress in relation to the Global North (Time to Decolonise Aid, 2021). As a consequence, rights-based approaches are obfuscated, and conversations are framed in relation to 'aid' rather than "systemic reparations for the violence inflicted in many donor countries' colonial and imperial past." (ibid)

Coloniality of gender

Gender is considered an important category in postcolonial theories because it has played a crucial role in the creation of what was understood as human. Throughout colonialism, people were categorised into humans and not-quite-humans, allowing for one to dominate the other. Lugones argues that it was through gender, and then race, that the non-humanness of people was established: the white European man was the full human; the white European woman was less of a full human and existed only in relation to the man; and those who were colonised and enslaved were less human not only because they were not white; it was through their construction as male or female, and not man or woman, that colonised people were rendered non-human (Lugones, 2008).

As numerous feminist scholars point out, gender is not a single category, but one that intersects with other relationships and power systems, such as race, class, sexuality, nation and disability (Crenshaw, 1989). It therefore plays a crucial role in any postcolonial and development analysis, for instance by pointing out that development conceptions of 'Third World women' treats this groups as passive recipients rather than active agents (Mohanty, 2003).

Challenges to postcolonialism

Despite the strengths of postcolonial critique, it has also been pointed out that postcolonialism is insufficient in dealing with the 'lived experiences and material realities of postcoloniality' (McEwan, 2019). It focuses on language and representation while ignoring the lived realities of those affected by the very inequalities pointed out by postcolonialism. Because so many of its most prominent scholars work for universities in the Global North, postcolonialism has also been 'accused of becoming institutionalized, representing the interests of a Western-based, metropolitan, intellectual elite [...] perpetuating the exclusion of the colonized and oppressed' (various authors in McEwan, 2019). At the same time, there are a number of postcolonial scholars working in Global South universities, but for whom it is a challenge to access prominent academic journals. This is not only for linguistic reasons but also due to the system of accessing academic journals itself, whose politics on peer reviews, co-author demands and path to publications represent a significant hurdle for scholars from the Global South (among others, see: Bhaumik S. & Jagnoor J., 2019).

2. The dominant discourse and workings of humanitarian innovation

Innovation is not new in humanitarianism. But there is a difference between innovation as an outcome and innovation as a proactive intentional process (Ramalingam, Scriven & Foley, 2009). As Obrecht and Warner state (2016), "While innovation has always been an intrinsic aspect of humanitarian action, the systematic recognition and study of innovation is recent, linked to wider shifts in humanitarian actors' application of innovation management theories from outside the system."

Current conceptions of humanitarian innovation are frequently traced back to the 'innovations fair' at ALNAP's 2009 annual meeting, which was followed by an influential paper, *Innovations in International Humanitarian Action* (Ramalingam, Scriven & Foley, 2009). The Humanitarian Innovation Fund at Elrha

In 2016, 'Transformation through Innovation' was one of the main themes of the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, establishing the concept at the heart of humanitarian policymaking.

To understand the inherent power and authority dynamics in humanitarian innovation, and its meaning in the dominant discourse, it is helpful to examine three prominent areas of critique:

> – power over the allocation of resources
> – how problems and solutions are constituted
> – the methods and approaches considered to fall within humanitarian innovation.

Power over resources

In 2017, a global mapping of the humanitarian research and innovation ecosystem found that most research and innovation funders and funding recipients were headquartered in Europe and North America, with a high concentration in the UK and the US (Gelsdorf et al, 2017). More recent research shows that local NGOs and CSOs in aid-recipient countries have produced less than 1% of the volume of humanitarian research and innovation outputs visible through desk-based review (Elrha, forthcoming).

These findings suggest both that local NGOs and CSOs are insufficiently able to access sources of funding for humanitarian research and innovation, and that their work is underrepresented within source materials. This echoes the previously mentioned concept of 'firsting' by scholars in the Global North, whereby locally or regionally driven innovation initiatives may not be recognised because they were not discovered, produced or financed by practitioners from the Global North.

Because 'humanitarian innovation' is primarily constituted and adjudicated by actors in the Global North, it is arguable that large organisations headquartered in the Global North have retained power over resources and have largely captured the benefits of knowledge generated via humanitarian innovation. This risks the Global South remaining a place where innovations are applied but where local organisations remain passive recipients of part of this knowledge, with reduced self-determination.

Framing of problems and solutions

Kristin Sandvik (2017) suggests that the predominant feature of humanitarian innovation, "is the firm turn towards the market and new technology as catalysts for change and improvement in the humanitarian field." This, in turn, means that "the way in which problems are framed, solutions are proposed, and stakeholders gain relevance and credibility has changed quite radically… the rhetorical emphasis on social justice, empowerment, and participation emphasized by the rights-based approaches is absent" (ibid).

Tom Scott-Smith (2016) similarly characterises humanitarian innovation as 'humanitarian neophilia' that places technology and 'neoliberal' faith in markets at the centre of efforts to drive change. He argues that innovation initiatives "risk reducing complex humanitarian problems, which need political engagement and have a significant social angle, to the provision of material goods.

This product and technology-centric understanding is reflected by ALNAP's 2022 *The State of the Humanitarian System report* which, alongside mention of innovations from non-traditional and local actors, emphasises operational innovations from international actors, such as improvements in information systems and digital data-gathering technologies, and programme innovations such as EdTech solutions and biometric cards for voucher, food and NFI distributions (ALNAP, 2022).

Methods and approaches

Mark Duffield (2019) argues that the humanitarian innovation agenda has seen design supplant politics. Andrea Jiminez and Tony Roberts (2019) highlight the influence of Silicon Valley in common conceptions and understandings of innovation. They charaterise the Silicon Valley-style approach as "hackathons and pitching events that…assess innovations in terms of whether they are patentable, monetisable, or scalable, and calculate the value of innovations as dollar return on investments."

Indeed, the Silicon Valley-originated 'lean startup' approach – encouraging rapid experimentation and user testing – has been used to describe an entire generation of funding and support for humanitarian innovation (McClure, 2019). Ann Mei Chang, a former Google executive and Chief Innovation Officer at USAID, published a book called *Lean Impact* (2019) that explicitly draws from case studies in the development and humanitarian sectors. Her book informed support for the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office's Frontier Technologies Hub (Vigoureux, 2020).

Design-led approaches such as 'design thinking', 'human-centred design' and 'user-centred design' have all been advocated as ways to improve humanitarian practices and meaningfully involve people affected by crises in designing humanitarian products and services.[4] A number of humanitarian funders and implementers have explicitly used and promoted these approaches, with examples including Elrha's User-Centred Sanitation Challenge (Sandison, 2017), Start Network and CDAC Network's Disaster and Emergency Preparedness Programme Innovation Labs (DEPP Labs) (Konda et al, 2019), and the Global System for Mobile Communications Association's Mobile for Disaster Fund (Hamilton et al, 2020).

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[4] See Bourne (2019) for a further breakdown of these concepts and their application in the development and humanitarian sectors.

3. Reimagining humanitarian innovation

CLIP – and its predecessors such as Start Network and CDAC Network's DEPP Labs and Elrha's work with ADRRN members – provide an opportunity to reappraise the meaning and practice of humanitarian innovation. The following sections outline the perspectives of CLIP's operational partners as expressed by their (mostly female) leadership teams.

ASECSA – Asociación de Servicios Comunitarios de Salud (Guatemala)

ASECSA's leadership team in Guatemala is well-grounded in feminism, gender and postcolonial critique. Our perspective is rooted in a strongly articulated commitment to the Mayan cosmovision and the *buen vivir* philosophy of Latin America. Within this philosophy, well-being is not conceived in an individualistic sense, but is recognised as "only possible within a community. Furthermore, in most approaches the community concept is understood in an expanded sense, to include nature" (Gudynas, 2011).

The existence of Guatemala goes back to the colonisation by the Spanish, so ASECSA sees the state itself as a colonial structure that has imposed a particular way of thinking and being, and sought to eliminate the identity of Indigenous peoples. The genocidal, racist, discriminatory and patriarchal state has created a situation in which Indigenous communities have difficulties exercising basic rights like life, health, education, housing, work and dignified salary.

In this context, ASECSA views CLIP as providing a powerful new way for Indigenous communities to resist the status quo. Through the CLIP it has applied a highly participatory approach involving deep dialogue and collective reflection, supporting the involvement of community members who are frequently left out of collective decisions, particularly women, young people, children and elderly people.

By implementing an approach that focuses on community perspectives and action, ASECSA has seen people begin to critically analyse their reality and its underlying causes. This type of inclusive and collective learning, organising and acting, which motivates community members to search for their own solutions, has created a dynamic in which previously marginalised people have begun to recognise themselves as subjects of rights.

The CLIP approach contrasts with the usual way of working in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), where projects are pre-defined and then delivered in communities with little involvement of the people they are designed to benefit. Humanitarian innovation has thus become a vehicle through which the communities that ASECSA works with can speak out and push against the state, which in Guatemala is a more immediate oppressive colonial power than the international humanitarian sector.

CDP – Center for Disaster Preparedness (the Philippines)

CDP has been at the forefront of community-based climate and disaster risk reduction (DRR) and management for over 20 years. We have observed the clear colonial power dynamics in the international humanitarian sector as the Global North decides what issues to support and where. This results in development being shaped by those who have the resources, rather than 'recipient' countries.

The relationship between global donor and local NGO leads in the Philippines is often unbalanced. Local NGOs are either an implementing partner or a subcontractor of the services and deliverables needed by the donors, but rarely treated as experts. While local NGOs are put in charge of executing projects, they are not part of designing them or setting the agenda. This has direct implications on the sustainability of CDP's work because the passive position of recipient impedes long-term planning. Donors from the Global North outline the desired outcome and leave local NGOs to submit proposals to reflect these priorities.

For CDP, there is a clear distribution of roles among humanitarian actors that reflects former colonial lines of power. This means that local or regional actors like CDP have little say in setting the focus of aid in their country, leaving the communities directly affected by their work voiceless.

In a similar way to ASECSA, CDP sees the CLIP as an opportunity to decolonise. In fact, localisation through humanitarian innovation goes hand in hand with decolonisation by:

– empowering communities to determine problems and priorities for themselves
– engaging local actors to participate in the various phases of innovation
– capacity sharing and learning through these activities.

All these elements of community-led innovation have the potential to bring to life a vibrant community that no longer sees itself merely as the recipient of aid. Recognising that communities have assets to bring to the table – including financial, non-financial, human and social capital – builds the confidence to assert and implement community-led solutions.

Given the limiting parameters and conditions of aid, CDP works to ensure that funding and project implementation aligns with the overall goal of community empowerment. This is the main reason why CDP developed participatory approaches and centred them in every engagement. From the beginning, CDP has spearheaded inclusive community-based DRR and management across the Philippines in all of its projects and partner communities, laying the foundations for community-led risk assessments, planning and actions.

CDP is also taking on the challenge to bridge funders/facilitators and communities. At the community level, good practice requires risk-informed local development solutions and that funding support should encourage or enhance – not limit – community potential. CDP engages funders/facilitators to work flexibly based on local aspirations, while remaining conscious of the long-term aims of each project so that community organisation, government and private partners can deliver sustainable and replicable solutions.

YEU – Yakkum Emergency Unit (Indonesia)

YEU welcomes thinking about colonialism in the way that has been discussed in this paper. As Kapoor and Rahmawati (2022) note, YEU has faced several challenges when partnering with Western organisations and donors, such as culturally inappropriate compliance mechanisms, "undervaluing of local skills, knowledge, and experience, and a focus on one-way 'capacity building' rather than mutual learning."

For instance, when working with the humanitarian aid sector, most of the evaluative methods, approaches and tools such as log frames, data collection tools and narrative reports have been adopted from the Global North development literature. Most provide little space for local actors to be flexible and creative in using local approaches to knowledge production, for example, storytelling or singing. In this, YEU recognises a degree of epistemic injustice; only certain cultural forms of knowledge 'count' while others are declared invalid or insufficient.

Epistemic injustice also occurs in relation to project requirements that are based on a 'global standard' without local consultation and contextual analysis. For example, YEU built a water, sanitation and hygiene facility financed by a donor from the Global North. In Indonesia, as in many other parts of the world, handwashing does not take place in the same room as the toilet. However, this is an international hygiene standard and so YEU's facility did not pass the donor's evaluation, even though it met all local standards.

While international hygiene standards may be argued to be generally a good thing, it is striking that whether something fulfils a global hygiene standard is merely assessed on its existence at the time of inspection, not based on whether

it is used in the intended way. The CLIP offers an opportunity to ensure the latter applies to innovations.

4. A way forward

As mentioned above, postcolonial critique is about understanding and challenging the power of ideas, knowledge and institutions. In the case of humanitarian innovation, its meaning has largely been constructed in the Global North, characterised by market-based approaches and a Silicon Valley-inspired focus on entrepreneurship and design. As a construct developed largely by and for international agencies based in the Global North, power over resource allocation has also been largely retained in the Global North, along with the benefits of knowledge production.

But that is not the end of the story. A central tenet of the humanitarian innovation agenda is the practice of double-loop learning, which involves "reflection on the appropriateness of existing practices, policies and norms within an organisation" (Ramalingam, Scriven and Foley, 2009). This process of reflection and reconsidering of existing practices does not mandate a particular approach or set of tools. This holds the potential for new spaces to emerge, alongside new meanings of humanitarian innovation.

By definition, the CLIP seeks to flip the roles usually seen in humanitarian aid. Instead of an actor from the Global North imposing programmes and projects onto organisations or communities in the Global South, the CLIP's objective is for communities to lead the search for innovative solutions to challenges they face, and to be guided through that process by local organisations with direct links to those communities. The partners in the Global North – Elrha, Start Network and the ADRRN Tokyo Innovation Hub – remain in the background as donors and as facilitators.

As this paper demonstrates, each CLIP partner brings different understandings and perspectives on the humanitarian sector in general, and humanitarian innovation in particular. We all need to question assumptions and have learning to do. Together, we aim to offer an alternative to the dominant meaning of humanitarian innovation today. With that in mind, we have identified four core interconnected characteristics of our practice within the CLIP that underpin our efforts to reimagine humanitarian innovation as a way of fostering localisation and local leadership.

Innovation with local decision-making

The initial proposal for the CLIP was developed primarily by Elrha and Start Network, in discussion with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and with input from the ADRRN Tokyo Innovation Hub. But CLIP decision-making around strategic prioritisation and funding allocations at the country and community levels has been devolved to CDP, YEU and ASECSA. Although funding must be allocated to 'innovation', this leaves significant creative freedom to decide how and where to invest.

Across the CLIP we are on a journey to distribute power in our funding decisions and our support for humanitarian innovation, for example, through the use of participatory grantmaking. Our journey echoes the GrantCraft report on shifting power through participatory grantmaking, which describes how participatory grantmaking changes the role of funders "from arbiters of what gets done to facilitators of a process in which they work with other organizations and non-grantmakers to designate priorities and act" (Gibson, 2018).

This process of change has been different in each CLIP country, with funding distributed through stipends for those participating in projects in Guatemala, and through grants in the Philippines and Indonesia.

In Guatemala, ASECSA has used community engagement events, including art installations, to convene community members around particular problems. A community committee, including representatives from ASECSA, municipal authorities and local government, then selected which initiatives would receive ongoing financial support.

In the Philippines, CDP has sought to balance a community-led approach with efforts to engage and ensure buy-in from a wider range of stakeholders. Its multi-stage process involves an initial review by CDP staff before a subsequent scored shortlisting process informs selection. This process balances review by a community representative panel (with a decision weighting of 45%), peer review between shortlisted applicants (22%) and review by people with project-related technical expertise (33%). In Indonesia, YEU has taken a similar approach to decision making by involving national and local government and other civil society organisations who represent disability, humanitarian, faith-based, academic and DRR sectors.

Innovation that is politically engaged

As the International Development Innovation Alliance notes, "Innovation… is inherently political… Innovation means changing the status quo, and this might

mean loss of privileges for some" (Kumpf, Strandberg & Barkell, 2021). Further, the alliance echoes earlier sentiments about the influence of Silicon Valley approaches on how innovation is understood in the Global North, and the marginalisation of "social movements, indigenous communities, grassroots innovators and other players from the Global South that pursue different innovation approaches and present radically different visions for the future." (ibid).

Within CLIP, the community-led innovation approach has had the effect of creating a new space which has room for the political aspect of community organising and activism as well as the cultivation of social entrepreneurialism and problem solving. In the Philippines, CDP's focus on community-led innovation has given communities a vehicle through which to interact with Local Government Units constructively. It has also provided a level of visibility and a collective strength through which communities can challenge authorities and seek to protect their rights as citizens.

In the case of ASECSA in Guatemala, community members have been encouraged and supported to see themselves as subjects of rights through engagement with the programme, and through this understanding they have been better able to develop new insights into their situation and power to access their rights. And so, while our work within CLIP is focussed on the actual creation of innovative ideas, products and services to address problems related to humanitarian action, the process of this work is that of community organising within a space of collective thinking that interacts forcefully with stakeholders in the state as well as in the international aid sector.

It is important to note that the form of vibrant and empowered community described by ASECSA and CDP, where people are motivated to solve their own problems rather than relying on outside assistance, is not unusual in general – but it is unusual within the confines of the aid sector. From this perspective community-led innovation creates a somewhat new space, that can hold activism as well as development work that is sustainable and collective for the communities, and in which collaboration can happen with the state, despite the state, and even in defiance of the state. In other words, it opens up a way of working, through which communities can determine their own needs, propose solutions, and actively challenge colonialism in the process.

Innovation that listens to, and recognises the power of, communities

As expressed by CDP, YEU and ASECSA, the CLIP has created a new way of working with communities, where they are actively invited to speak and – importantly – are both listened to and supported to act. This contrasts with traditional approaches where community projects are designed and

implemented without deep local consultation and engagement, often by outsiders. According to CDP, YEU and ASECSA, this change in perspective has created a platform that community members can use to speak up and push back against the neglect of the aid sector and/or the government.

As such, the community-led innovation approach allows, and even presses for, active engagement with communities, centred on respect for the knowledge and experience of people affected by crisis, including Indigenous and minoritised communities. This is a good example of how humanitarian innovation, when applied locally and proactively, can incorporate decolonial aspects.

As we have noted, engagement with postcolonialism is valuable because it confronts us with the deeply colonial power structures of development and aid. It shows us that the sector is not just a product of Europe or the US, but that it is deeply shaped by the very resistance to and agency within it. In other words, one of the ways out of the paralysis sometimes felt when seeking to decolonise humanitarian aid is to understand the radical importance of recovering the voices, knowledge, and perspectives of those marginalised and oppressed. The innovation spaces created by ASECSA, CDP and YEU provide this possibility.

ASECSA, in particular, notes that its community workshops and activities have led to community members who would not usually propose ideas or speak up – such as women, young people and elders – gradually starting to co-create community solutions. In some cases, women have taken on leadership roles, which was unthinkable before CLIP. The form of the communities they work with has gradually begun to change as a result of CLIP partners defining their approaches with their respective communities, and implementing this approach over time.

The challenge in attempting to apply a critical postcolonial lens to CLIP's work is to strike the right balance between epistemic reconstitution (Mignolo, 2017) and extracting local knowledge for the benefit of the Global North with nothing given in return. Trying to hold the critical lens of postcolonial critiques on humanitarian innovation and to recover and engage with community knowledge is an ongoing process that can help us begin to discern the multi-layered concept of gender, or intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). This concept describes the fact that some women struggle against both sexist oppression within their community and state oppression as female members of Indigenous or religious communities, or oppression from local municipalities as political activists.

We believe that the ways in which ASECSA, CDP and YEU have implemented the humanitarian innovation concepts acquired through the CLIP give space to complicating the systems of oppression communities are up against, which is necessary if we want to ultimately tackle them. Their way of working with communities and innovation enables women – both the women leading the

partnership teams as well as the women in communities – to inhabit an active role in development work. This challenges both the monolithic understanding of 'Third World women' as passive objects awaiting development (Mohanty, 2003) as well as the more recent idea of women as 'hyper-industrious, entrepreneurial agents' (Wilson, 2013) whose 'empowerment' is not a question of justice, but simply of smart economics.

Innovation that is strengths-based

Humanitarian aid is largely driven by a needs-based (or deficit) mindset, derived from the core mission of providing immediate life-saving assistance to people affected by crisis. But in complex protracted and recurring crises, this mindset – forged in the immediacy of life-saving work – can go unquestioned and become the default, even when circumstances call for a different approach.

CLIP was founded on the recognition that communities have important strengths and assets that equip them to lead on the design of local initiatives and actively participate in decision-making to support emergency resilience and response. CLIP partners aim to meet people as equals rather than beneficiaries. These strengths-based (or asset-based) approaches are also rooted in innovation thinking, with concepts such as 'lead-user innovation' or 'user-directed innovation' describing many examples of new products and services being adapted and developed by users themselves.

This strengths-based mindset resonates across CLIP. In the Philippines, CDP refers to communities as partners rather than beneficiaries. This relates to the concept of *bayanihan*, a Tagalog-based word that loosely translates as "collective cooperation" or "cooperative action" (Ealdama, 2012). *Bayanihan* is frequently invoked in the aftermath of crises, including by President Benigno Aquino III who called on all Filipinos to practise this spirit just before Typhoon Haiyan struck (Su & Mangada, 2016).

Yolanda Ealdama, Associate Professor at the University of the Philippines, advocates for *bayanihan* as a strengths-based approach to social work, emphasising the skills and capacities of people and communities rather than what they lack (Ealdama, 2012). In developing this approach, Ealdama draws on several related Indigenous concepts, including *kakugui* ("to perform one's work judiciously without harming the environment"), *patugsiling* ("to view things through the window of one's conscience, to put into subjective relations with others") and *tao* ("the worth and dignity of the human person") (ibid).

Conclusion

What, then, is the meaning of humanitarian innovation? And what role does it play in either reinforcing coloniality, or supporting decolonial practices? In the minds of its critics, humanitarian innovation represents an agenda driven by the international aid community that places technology and market-based ideologies at the centre of efforts to drive change. While there is truth to these challenges, at the same time it is true that innovation can create the space for alternative ways of working, including community-led approaches that allow for a different set of priorities.

We acknowledge the tension between being locally- or community-led and being embedded in a body of knowledge that has primarily been produced by practitioners and scholars from the Global North, based on concepts derived primarily from the study of innovation in the private sector. Acknowledging this tension means to hold on to it, to embrace its messiness, and to recognise that we will not resolve it easily. It means to accept that we cannot exit the complicity of our current power imbalances, and that we must, instead, commit to constantly applying a decolonial lens to our work.

Understanding the ways in which the humanitarian and development space are deeply rooted in colonial power imbalances and working to fundamentally change this is a complex endeavour. That is why the CLIP exists in the first place, and why we have taken this opportunity to reflect. Within the CLIP, the practice of humanitarian innovation is both a way of collaborating with the humanitarian space as well as a way of resisting its colonial power structures.

The experiences in our partnership paint a nuanced picture, with the central focus on double-loop learning and problem-solving creating spaces for community engagement and empowerment. But this should not lead us to the conclusion that humanitarian innovation might perhaps be innocent after all, or that postcolonial critique is unnecessary. It means to go a step further and to understand that concepts like humanitarian innovation are being continually interpreted, disassembled, reassembled, and implemented in different ways.

Innovation is thus a buzzword in its truest sense. As Deborah Eade says in the preface to *Deconstructing Development Discourse*, a buzzword is imprecise with a "multitude of meanings and nuances, depending on who is using it and in what context" (Cornwall and Eade, 2010). If we accept the power of the dominant discourse on humanitarian innovation, what matters is to be explicit about the meaning that we ascribe to our own version of 'humanitarian innovation' so that it

offers a challenge to the dominant account – and so that we are also open to challenge.

This paper represents part of that ongoing conversation to make explicit the meaning that we collectively ascribe to humanitarian innovation, and to restate the values that we are committed to upholding in our work. Within the CLIP, we see being 'community-led' as the continual practice of community-defined principles and values rather than an objective end goal. Through the partnership we seek to promote ownership and leadership from the community, and we seek to prioritise local expertise and knowledge. Being community-led means challenging our mindset every day to make sure all aspects of our work are led by the values and priorities of those we seek to serve.

We hope that the paper inspires further questions and research. For instance, to discuss the meaning of humanitarian innovation from the language of the community, and to think about what its concrete manifestations are, what the elements of 'unlocking' certain elements of innovation are for communities and to what extent a shift in power dynamics takes place on a local level.

We also hope that this discussion paper has pointed to a few pathways whereby funders and innovation leaders may think more reflexively and according to local contexts, support efforts to question dominant knowledge paradigms present in humanitarian innovation, operationalise equity as an underpinning value in humanitarian innovation, and realise a localisation agenda with increased reciprocity with local and Indigenous knowledge-holders. Importantly, we hope that the aspects discussed here – innovation as a space for the political, for recovering voices, for making decisions locally, for focussing on strengths and assets – will help illuminate the potential contributions of humanitarian innovation to the task of decolonisation.

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