

Decolonising our Narratives

Position Paper

1. Introduction

This position paper¹ has been produced by young participants and International Voluntary Service (IVS) organisations from all regions of the world under the Decolonise IVS! project to reflect on concepts around solidarity and decolonisation² and the changes that are needed for this.

In this document, we offer a **critical reflection on the narratives we use as IVS organisations to promote international volunteering**, and on the neo-colonial patterns we tend to reproduce through our communication.

We present reflections on how to decolonise our discourse with the aim to put forward a form of volunteering that truly

promotes interculturality and defends the equal emancipation of peoples.

2. Rationale for action

Colonialism has structured our lives for centuries and continues to do so beyond the decolonisation process of the 1960s and the 1970s. Coloniality and forms of neo-colonialism persist in our societies, reproducing power relations that are often invisible, but which maintain domination and exploitation of certain parts of the population by others who are more privileged.³

It is still possible to observe neocolonial patterns within international volunteering and our organizations, as well as inequalities of power. As actors of solidarity, peace and international cooperation, we have the responsibility not to reproduce these patterns of domination over marginalized populations but, on the

¹ This document is also available in French and Spanish. You can access the translations [here](#).

² This document's inconsistencies in the spelling of "decolonization/decolonisation" and other words and expressions is intentional. Diverse spelling reflects the fact that in decolonial thinking and action - and in this very project - involve participants coming from a variety of backgrounds, often non-native English users, and involved in questioning

anglicism as a colonial legacy itself. Editing for 'consistency' would silence and erase the diverse and inclusive participation that is critically needed by the decolonial movement to be successful.

³ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J., 2012. Coloniality of power in development studies and the impact of global imperial designs on Africa. *Australasian Review of African Studies*, The, 33(2), pp.48-73.

contrary, to strengthen the capacities and listen to the voice of the communities we work with. Although the perspective of decolonisation is very present in international volunteering, the transformation of power structures and organisational culture is still pending within our movement.

This also applies to the way we communicate what we do. Our speeches and stories can influence the way the world is perceived and, therefore, to define it. An image is never neutral. Our language determines the viewer's perception of reality.⁴ Like the words we use, it can very easily reproduce a vision of the 'Global South'⁵ as backward or inferior, and the 'Global North' as a source of solutions.

At the same time, the speed and quantity of messages transmitted by digital media represent a new challenge for our times. Our words are opinion formers, construct meaning and feed the common sense of audiences. The ease with which, for example, xenophobic messages circulate in the media, and the amplification they receive, is an issue that must be combated if we are to eradicate discrimination in our societies. **The existence of these stigmatization and stereotyping mechanisms reinforces the importance of addressing decolonisation processes in our communication.**

The purpose of this position paper is to reflect on how we can improve the narratives that underpin our practices in order to reverse some of the neocolonial inequalities that persist within our sector. It is our commitment to identify and deactivate all the mechanisms of domination that we reproduce, so that we can truly become allies of the people and groups we work with or are part of. The intention of this document is not to reaffirm a feeling of guilt or, on the contrary, of innocence in the face of these power relations, **but to become aware of our privileges and of the responsibility that an authentic decolonial perspective implies in our communication and our actions.**

This questioning of our narratives is also the first step in advocating for change in the practices of institutions, IVS stakeholders and policy makers. Structural changes in our own organisations and ways of operating can serve as an example to decision makers for the decolonization of their own practices and structures.

⁴ Kachur, I., 2021. The Correlation between Language and Reality.

⁵ In this paper, the term 'Global South' refers to all countries outside the 32-member Development

Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which represents the 'Global North'.

3. Points of reflection

Reflection 1: Bring host communities and organizations back to the center.

Whether it is a long-term volunteering project or a short-term workcamp, volunteers have an impact on local cultures and families, and are there to contribute to social change. When promoting or publicizing international volunteering opportunities, most organisations continue to focus their stories on the volunteers, rather than on the host communities and the role of the families.

This can be explained by the fact that IVS organisations are offering a service that the volunteers will need to pay for. The marketing of volunteering missions therefore mostly highlights the benefits and the value of the experience for the volunteers rather than the social change they can contribute to.

However, when it comes to giving visibility to the movement's shared values of peace, solidarity, diversity, social and climate justice, IVS organisations have a responsibility that goes beyond financial considerations. Therefore, our stories must reflect the impact and change that the communities we work with want to achieve.

Presenting host communities as key players when communicating volunteering missions has the merit of better responding to the needs of marginalized populations and to the social change to which we all want to contribute.



Host families and organizations help the volunteer to live a wonderful experience. Host families and organisations are the actors,



said a participant of the Decolonise IVS! project. Placing host communities at the center means presenting them not as passive agents but as active agents of change. In this way, their capacities are not underestimated, and volunteers better understand the role of each actor before committing to a mission.

For example, disseminating testimonies from host communities and organisations helps to avoid a distorted interpretation of the reality of these populations, and can contribute to changing the attitude of volunteers from the 'North' towards the populations of the 'South'.⁶

It also gives visibility to other forms of volunteering used by host organizations in

⁶ Perold, H., & al., 2023. Understanding Inequalities in Volunteering Research and Evidence.

the 'Global South' that are better adapted to their needs. Finally, giving as much importance to the host community as to the volunteer helps to avoid the reproduction of hegemonic models of solidarity coming from the 'North', in which communities from the 'South' are trivialized as mere recipients of help from the volunteer and waiting to be 'saved', which does not consider their capacities and diversity. In turn, it contributes to a communitarian and social vision of international volunteering as opposed to an individualistic and personal view of the experience.

The change to which volunteers and host communities can contribute together must therefore be at the center of our communication and practice. It is about learning from each other, working together for social justice and jointly contributing to solidarity and intercultural understanding.

Reflection 2: Promoting reciprocal learning in volunteering.

"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is linked to mine, then let us work together".⁷

To enable this equality and horizontality in the relationship between volunteers and

⁷ Dr. Lilla Watson, Murri (Indigenous Australian) visual artist and activist.

⁸ Brouwers, A. & Le Ber, E., 2020. The Neo-Colonial Europeanization of Africa: A post-developmental

the host community, it is essential to advocate a reciprocity of learning and mutual understanding among all parties in our communication and practice of volunteering. The co-construction of knowledge and emotional engagement in volunteering should be based on building bridges between different cultures and their specific way of understanding the world, power relations and inequalities. In short, promoting a social and political awareness of the time and space we occupy.

A participant of the Decolonise IVS! project stated:

“ I hope to see some kind of change that comes from working together, from a better understanding of each other and what it feels like to be in each other's shoes. ”

International volunteering is the opportunity to "(re)learn as individuals as well as collectively to listen to each other, respect each other and live together".⁸ Therefore, international volunteering should be presented as an opportunity for everyone to question their own prejudices, mentalities and attitudes and to build the necessary bridges to promote solidarity and peace in the world.

perspective on the communication of the AU-EU Partnership, pp. 16.

Volunteering is effective in the teaching-learning process because it allows learning with the body through experience. It is an opportunity that breaks down stereotypes and prejudices. This participatory and mutual learning process can contribute to the emancipation and empowerment of both volunteers and host communities.



Through this engagement, volunteers can explore, experiment, learn and develop ways of thinking from a broader perspective,



explained a volunteer from Zimbabwe.

Advocating for a form of volunteering in which volunteers can not only contribute, but also learn from the host community certain practices or values that can be beneficial to their home country is therefore a second step in decolonizing our narratives as volunteering organisations.

When it is important to advocate a logic of mutual learning between volunteers and host communities in international volunteering projects taking place in the 'Global South', this perspective should also be defended by IVS organisations in the 'North' when hosting volunteers from the 'South'. When volunteers from 'Southern' countries engage in a project in a 'Northern' country, their capacities tend to be underestimated or even ignored, which is

an issue we must address if we are to fully decolonize international volunteering.

Reflection 3: Give the same value to all.

When IVS organisations ask volunteers "Why do you want to volunteer?", sending organisations in the 'Global North' usually hear the answer **'To help to ...'** while sending organisations in the 'Global South' usually hear the answer **'To learn how to...'**. How can we break this perception that fosters asymmetry?

A common representation in IVS places volunteers who respond to hegemonic cultural models (white, western, middle and high social sectors) in a place of knowledge and social/cultural hierarchy that reproduces power relations and inequalities between people.

One of the causes of the reproduction of this stereotypical hierarchy is the disregard for the skills and experience of volunteers from some cultures while overvaluing others. The dominant conception of international volunteering in political discourse has been framed and rooted in the experiences of the 'Global North'. "Until now, the tendency has been to overlook the richness of volunteering practices in the 'Global South' and local volunteering at the community level, or not to consider

them as legitimate contributions to development".⁹

Consequently, opportunities for volunteering mobility from 'Southern' countries to 'Northern' countries are limited or reserved mainly for young people from high-income families.

To address this exclusion, it is important to provide spaces for volunteers from diverse cultures to meet so that they can share and give voice to their experience, without it being taken over or distorted by the host organization. In addition, allowing volunteers to directly express themselves avoids appropriating their voice. "By giving ourselves the authority to be the voice of the voiceless, we centre ourselves in the discussion".¹⁰ Reducing the adult-centric perspective by providing young people time and space to express themselves can enable IVS organisations to learn more from their volunteers. As a participant of the Decolonise IVS! project explained,

we can know more about IVS participants than simply where they are from and where they are going. For example, we do not mention their 'nationality' as the first piece of information we get about them, [to preserve the] complexity of [the] human life.

⁹ Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda.

Recognizing the value of all people equally is a sine qua non for decolonizing international volunteering. However, to achieve this, international volunteering must emphasize principles that are not necessarily valued in the hegemonic Western cultural model.

Reflection 4: Assume a political reading to understand the role we play in our societies.

Organizations working in the field of intercultural volunteering must conceive themselves as political actors. This means having a political reading and position in relation to the violation of rights, the role of states and global issues that involve supra-state matters.

This critical perspective should be transmitted or discussed in volunteering programs. It is key to promote geopolitical reflection among volunteers to enable them to better connect conflicts and causes such as war, climate change, international debt of countries, poverty in resource-rich regions, and to engage in discussions on these issues with host communities during their missions. This exercise not only prepares citizens to be aware of their role in the communities, but also enhances empathy and supportive relationships with host families.

¹⁰ Elahee, S., 2021. Decolonising Development Narratives. Oxfam's 'Views & Voices' Blog.

Assuming the commitment to broaden the political outlook of youth by organisations also implies mobilizing values such as environmental justice, cultural pluralism, the autonomy of peoples, and the self-determination of communities.

All these values build peace and global citizenship, and challenge the capitalist, individualistic logic centered on meritocracy and privilege. Therefore, decolonizing our movement means highlighting in our stories values that allow us to transform the way we live together peacefully, respecting and building on our differences.

Specifically, it is a matter of freeing oneself from Western concept of 'development' and the neoliberal ideology that remain hegemonic in international volunteering. This model advocates a 'development' that invites extractivism, unlimited production and consumerism. This notion of progress in a society is not only limited but also impoverishing as it is based on the exploitation of resources in a few hands to sustain economic systems in which fewer and fewer people have access to decent living conditions, such as housing, health, education, or food. On the contrary, this

¹¹ Van Binsbergen W.M.J., 2008, Traditional wisdom – its expressions and representations in Africa and beyond, Exploring intercultural epistemologies, Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy, Vol. XXII, No. 1-2, pp. 49-120.

worldview must dialogue with the experiences of volunteers so that they can understand the realities in which they are inscribed.

IVS organizations have a responsibility to promote an intercultural narrative in which the various parties involved can present their cultural differences and increasingly tend to "apply convergent worldviews, recognize convergent rules and thus produce convergent truths".¹¹ All the cultures involved in an IVS project must feel valued and respected in their diversity when we communicate about the mission. A concrete example is found in the verbs we use in our stories. Replace words like "maximize, minimize, increase, enhance, improve, adapt, deepen, ensure, or guarantee" with words like "create - listen - collaborate - ask - observe - converse"¹² fosters a more horizontal relationship with host communities and promotes a form of international volunteering that is more representative of the diversity of their cultures.

This narrative must also be found in the way we present the results of our volunteering projects. However, this depends not only on IVS organisations, but also on the funding institutions and the evaluation requirements they assign to these projects. We should therefore use our discourses to advocate for calls

¹² Brouwers, A. & Le Ber, E., 2020. The Neo-Colonial Europeanization of Africa: A post-developmental perspective on the communication of the AU-EU Partnership.

for projects that are better suited to upholding these values.

Reflection 5: Use our narratives to generate changes in project execution requirements.

Financial institutions maintain policies and frameworks that may contribute to imbalances in power and economic dependency between countries in the 'Global North' and in the 'Global South'. In the context of IVS projects, these institutions often define requirements for how projects should be planned, implemented and evaluated using models and practices that reflect the values and priorities of donor countries.

In many opportunities, organizations are subjected to the development of reports and stories about their projects conditioned to indicators and verification instruments that are not representative of the work processes we develop. They imply, for example, leaving aside the evidence of the creative processes generated during the projects and the significant learning of the people involved. Therefore, these requirements in the implementation of IVS projects by financial institutions do not encourage South-South exchanges or the consolidation of local volunteering networks. They reduce the potential for positive change that international volunteering aims to generate in guaranteeing the sovereignty of host

communities, effectively fighting inequalities and taking into account the cultural and social context of the families involved in these volunteering projects.

How can we promote narratives and practices in projects that reflect elements that contribute to consolidate work spaces between adults and young people, between people from different cultures, between diverse organizations? How can we show the communion that is generated without having been raised in a result indicator?

Our narratives can play a crucial role in bringing about change in the practices of financial institutions, offering alternative perspectives, mobilizing stakeholders and influencing policy. Exposing the dynamics of this power relationship by disseminating narratives about colonial history and its lasting effects can raise awareness of the inequalities that persist in current 'development' practices. Using case studies to show how neocolonial demands have negatively affected local communities can also make these dynamics more concrete and understandable.

Illustrating the consequences of these practices through the testimonies of people directly affected by imposed projects, or through documentaries and reports that explore the effects of neocolonial practices on the ground, can also humanize the impacts and create an emotional

connection with the public to encourage critical reflection. These stories can also be accompanied by examples of successful 'development' projects that respect local autonomy and cultural contexts to demonstrate that viable alternatives exist, especially from within communities and respecting their traditions and needs.

In addition, it is important to encourage activism within volunteering organisations, launching awareness campaigns on social media and other platforms to mobilize public opinion and draw attention to neocolonial practices. Using stories to fuel petitions and advocacy actions is also a way to influence the policies of financial institutions.

Indeed, engaging policymakers directly is essential to make them adopt more equitable and participatory practices.

Establishing partnerships with progressive financial institutions that are open to reviewing their practices in light of shared histories can also help change these power relations over the long term. Finally, it may be key, as part of these collaborations, to organize forums and conferences where

stakeholders, including local communities, can share their stories and discuss the impact of neocolonial practices. Facilitating cultural exchanges between all parties involved in an international volunteering project can allow local stories to circulate internationally, fostering mutual understanding and respect for cultural diversity.

In short, our narratives can be powerful tools for transforming the practices of financial institutions. By raising public awareness, mobilizing stakeholders, influencing policy and changing the global narrative, they contribute to creating an environment where project implementation requirements are more equitable and respectful of local contexts. It is very important to include in our stories an appeal to financial institutions to come together and, as the main architects of the aid system, play a leading role in reshaping it. We have a responsibility to communicate openly the obstacles faced by civil society organizations, while recognizing the limited room for maneuver offered by donor restrictions.

In conclusion, our points of reflection can be summarised as follows:

1. Represent from our narratives the communities and their contribution to volunteering in order to empower their voices.

2. Promote mutual learning between volunteers and host communities, as well as inspiration and collective action for change.

3. Recognize diversity and interculturality as a value, avoiding the construction of cultural hierarchies or the supremacy of one culture over another.

4. Take a political approach to understanding volunteering practices in a global-local context marked by inequalities.

5. Emphasize in our narratives the power mechanisms that can be perpetuated by the conditions and requirements of the institutions funding our projects.



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