"Outside Agencies Do Not Bring Development:" Mennonite Central Committee and the Decades-Long Challenge of Decolonizing Aid

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Contemporary calls to "decolonize aid" have historical roots. In this article, the authors focus on Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) as a case study of how one Christian humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding agency has grappled for at least five decades with how to carry out its mission in a way that abdicates colonial power and fosters mutually transformative partnerships with churches and other organizations in the Global South. Exploring how MCC has thought about the power it wields offers insights and lessons for other international aid agencies, both Christian and non-Christian, about the complexities and opportunities involved in attempts to decolonize aid. External and internal pressures to show impact, demonstrate relevance, and ensure compliance with standardized policies and procedures have all generated tensions within MCC's efforts to decolonize its work: other international aid agencies, the authors suggest, will encounter similar tensions as they work at decolonizing aid.

In 1975, Edgar Stoesz, an administrator with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), wrote that "outside agencies do not bring development" (Stoesz 1975, 12). This claim reflected a growing understanding within MCC in the 1970s that MCC needed to strip itself of the illusion that, as an outside agency, it "brought development" and to look instead to the communities in which MCC operated for visions and solutions for addressing community challenges and for the knowledge and resources to realize those visions.

Stoesz's assertion anticipated contemporary discussions and debates within the international aid world today. A moral quandary faces international humanitarian relief, development, and peacebuilding agencies: how can they adequately respond to the pressing needs generated by armed conflict, climate change, mass displacement, extreme poverty, and acute food insecurity, responses that require marshalling immense financial and human resources, while also disentangling themselves from the legacies of colonialism in which they find both their origins and their current financing? *Decolonization* has rightly become a call to action, including among Christian organizations working globally at humanitarian assistance, community development, and peacebuilding, as aid organizations confront ways in which they have too often replicated colonial patterns of action.[2]

The issues that the current call to decolonize aid raises are not new for international humanitarian

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[2] For a collection of resources about decolonizing aid, see "Decolonising Aid: A Reading and Resource List" (2022). See especially the report from Peace Direct, African Development Solutions (ADESO), Alliance for Peacebuilding, and Women of Color Advancing Peace, Security, and Conflict Transformation (WCAPS) (Peace Direct 2021).

organizations. In this article, we focus on MCC as a case study for how one Christian aid agency has grappled for at least five decades with how to carry out its mission in post-colonial contexts. [3] Exploring how MCC has thought about the power it wields and about how to strive towards mutually transformative partnerships may offer insights and lessons for other international aid agencies, both Christian and non-Christian, about the complexities and opportunities involved in contemporary attempts to decolonize aid.

For MCC as a Christian organization, this grappling with its power and its striving towards authentic partnerships marked by mutuality have foregrounded vital *missiological* questions, questions about how international Christian aid organizations like MCC with roots and primary funding sources in the global North might be de-centered, so that we do not cling to the idolatrous illusion that we are at the center of God's mission, but instead become open to encountering Jesus within communities marginalized by colonialism's violent legacies, to recognizing how God's Spirit is at work within those communities, and to coming alongside those communities in true partnership, relinquishing the need for control. In practice, these missiological questions routinely run up against and generate multiple operational tensions.

After a brief summary of contemporary discussions of decolonizing aid and the push for localization within the international aid sector, this article turns towards an examination of historical shifts over decades in how MCC understood its call to *service*, with understandings of service transformed from primarily unidirectional understandings of service as a movement from the Global North to the Global

MCC as an Organization

Organizational structure, governance, and funding all shape the challenges humanitarian organizations from the Global North like MCC face when seeking to decolonize their work. MCC describes itself as a "worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches," yet in terms of governance it is a Canada-US organization (MCC 2011). Structurally, the MCC system for the past decade has consisted of eleven MCC entities in Canada and the United States: four regional MCC entities in the US, bound in a covenantal relationship with MCC US; five provincial MCC entities in Canada connected through an agreement with MCC Canada; and MCC Canada and MCC US jointly owning and administering MCC's program in 45 countries outside Canada and the US. For most of its history, MCC's headquarters for its international program work was Akron, Pennsylvania; today, both Akron and Winnipeg, Manitoba, serve as these headquarters (even as "headquarters" staff have become increasingly geographically dispersed, a reality made possible by technological advancements and accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic).

At a governance level, MCC is accountable to boards with strong representation from Anabaptist churches in Canada and the US and with participation in board meetings by representatives from Mennonite World Conference (MWC), a global fellowship of Anabaptist churches. During an organizational restructuring process from 2009-2011, MCC had discussions with MWC and the service agencies of national Anabaptist churches worldwide about the possibility of these agencies coming together in a truly global agency. The strong voice from those consultations was that MCC should remain a relief, development, and peacebuilding agency of Anabaptist churches in the US and Canada in its governance. In different ways and with varying degrees of success, MCC boards in Canada and the US have sought to become less White and more representative of the racial and ethnic diversity of Anabaptist churches in the US and Canada.

MCC's primary source of funding is from Anabaptist communities in the US and Canada—donations from individuals and congregations, income from thrift stores and relief sales, and contributions of material resources such as school kits, relief buckets, comforters, and canned meat. The second largest source of revenue comes from the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB), of which MCC Canada is a founding member. Individual donors contribute to MCC's CFGB account, with CFGB food aid and food security initiatives matched by Global Affairs Canada. Last year, MCC supported almost US$13M in food security and food aid projects via its CFGB account. While MCC has programmed and continues to program projects funded by governmental and inter-governmental donors such as EuropeAid and the World Food Program, MCC's global programs have not depended on such grants to stay operational, giving it more flexibility to follow the vision and plans of its local partners globally.

[3] For a more extended examination of MCC's one-hundred-year-plus history, see Epp Weaver (2020). This book is reviewed by Parsons (2023).

South into service as a posture of *presence* and *solidarity,* with the hope of *mutually-transformative partnerships.* We conclude with reflections on enduring tensions MCC faces as it seeks to decolonize its work and to be led by the visions of its partners in 45 countries around the world, tensions that we suggest point to conundrums that international aid actors face if they attempt to take the call to decolonize aid seriously.

Decolonizing Aid, Localizing Action

Colonization, as an historical process, violently imposed external political, cultural, economic, social values, and practices on communities in order to facilitate the transfer of vast resources from those communities to the colonizing powers. These often centuries-long systematic practices altered forever communities' sense of identity, knowledge, and cultural practices. Today, these imposed values and practices form the foundations of contemporary global power structures.

The process of colonization rendered many affected communities more vulnerable to disasters and humanitarian emergencies through the extraction of resources and the external imposition of political and social systems. Moreover, contemporary community conflicts are often rooted in the legacies of colonialism and the trauma of the erasure of indigenous cultural norms and practices. Yet, the former colonizing powers are the primary funders of most aid responses (spanning the humanitarian relief, development, and peacebuilding spectrum), giving them disproportionate power over the design and prioritization of programming. Today, a growing movement led by Global South-based organizations calls for the decolonization of the aid industry.

Colonialism also communicated an order of value, in which the colonizing power's knowledge, practices, and beliefs were coded as good and forward-looking while indigenous knowledge, practices, and beliefs were coded as bad and backward. Even after anticolonial movements in the Global South drove out most colonial powers in the mid-twentieth century and gained national independence, the racialized, white supremacist value systems introduced by colonial systems have proven more challenging to uproot, with ideas and approaches introduced by actors from the Global North often embraced as progressive and innovative. International humanitarian relief, development, and peacebuilding actors operate within these colonial legacies. These legacies place obstacles in front of efforts to ensure that humanitarian assistance, development, and peacebuilding initiatives are truly generated within and owned by local communities instead of being imposed upon them.

Decolonizing aid is about *who* the primary actors are in humanitarian action, but also about *how* humanitarian action is undertaken, and *what* sources of knowledge are drawn upon to shape humanitarian action. Efforts to *localize* humanitarian action—commonly referred to simply as *localization*—have sought to address the question of *who* undertakes humanitarian action by calling on governmental, inter-governmental and international non-governmental donors to direct more assistance directly to local actors (even as the localization agenda has been unevenly translated from rhetoric into reality). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines localization as the process of international humanitarian actors recognizing, respecting, and strengthening the leadership of local authorities and the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations and to prepare national actors for future humanitarian responses. A step in this direction was taken in 2016, when the world's largest humanitarian donor governments, multi-lateral organizations, and international aid agencies convened at the World Humanitarian Summit. Their discussions, which were sparsely attended by local and national actors, resulted in the so-called "Grand Bargain," an agreement which sought to make humanitarian action more efficient and "level the playing field where all meet as equals" (Inter-Agency Standing Committee).

The Grand Bargain had nine thematic workstreams, two of which were exclusively focused on localizing humanitarian action. Workstream 2, for example, called for more support and tools for local and national responders and set a target of channeling 25% of aid directly to those local and national actors by 2020. Workstream 6 called for a "participation revolution" to include people receiving aid in making the decisions that affect their lives. Yet in the years following 2016, little progress has been made towards localization. The 2020 Global Humanitarian Assistance report shows that more than four years after the Grand Bargain, donor agencies allocated only 2.1% of their funding to local and national responders, a far cry from the targeted 25%. Now, a 2.0 version of the Grand Bargain agreement has been signed with an even greater focus on localization—yet progress is still stalled. If part of decolonizing aid involves redirecting funding to support locally-owned and -led initiatives, scant progress has been made.

For MCC, the shift away from direct implementation of humanitarian relief, development and peacebuilding initiatives towards localized partnerships began already in the 1970s. Today, MCC's primary global programming model involves partnerships with churches, church-related agencies, community-based organizations, and national non-

governmental organizations (NGOs). To say that MCC began to localize its efforts decades before the global call for localization emerged is not hyperbole. This article's ensuing sections trace the history of those efforts, while also examining how MCC's long history of localizing its work does not free it either from the imperative to decolonize aid or the tensions involved in that ongoing work.

From Service as Alternative to War to Service as Listening and Presence

MCC began in 1920 as an inter-church response by diverse Mennonite groups in the United States and Canada to a call from Mennonites in southern Russia (Ukraine today) to provide food assistance in the face of revolution and famine. Established only a couple years after the conclusion of a global war, MCC galvanized the idealism of young Mennonites who viewed Christian relief efforts as a positive form of Christian service, both as an alternative to the self-sacrifice of military service and as a positive witness to Christ's way of peace.[4]

MCC's role as a mechanism through which young Mennonites undertook humanitarian service as an alternative to military service intensified during and then in the decades after the Second World War. Throughout World War II, MCC administered scores of Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps in the United States, through which thousands of Mennonite, Amish, Church of the Brethren, Quaker, and other conscientious objectors carried out state-sanctioned alternatives to military service, including staffing mental hospitals, fighting fires, and volunteering for medical experiments. Many young Mennonite women also served at or near CPS camps.

After the war, MCC oversaw the Mennonite Voluntary Service program in the United States, through which young Mennonite men engaged in alternative service assignments as the mandatory draft continued. MCC also launched its Pax program (1951-1976), another alternative service program, but global. While many "Pax men" and other MCC workers in the war's immediate aftermath worked on a variety of reconstruction and refugee response projects in post-war Europe, the 1950s were a time of rapid expansion for MCC globally, with the organization opening up MCC programs across Latin America, Africa, and Asia in the 1950s. In the early 1960s, MCC initiated its Teachers Abroad Program (TAP, inaugurated in 1962 and closed in 1985), through which MCC placed 768 teachers in Christian and government schools in 27 countries around the world, with most TAP participants serving in newly independent countries. Both Pax and TAP were established during a period of anticolonial ferment and successful national independence movements. Over the course of their service terms (typically two to three years), Pax and TAP participants inevitably confronted questions about what global Christian service looked like within post-colonial contexts.

The 1970s saw the start of a multi-decade creative ferment and rethinking within MCC about the nature of service, with questions raised about *who benefits* from Christian service. In 1976, for example, Urbane Peachey, then MCC's Peace Section executive secretary and Middle East director, penned a provocative article for MCC's internal publication, *Intercom*, titled "Service—Who Needs It?" "We've really done our best to send skilled personnel who could make a needed contribution," Peachey wrote, "but now there are a number of countries which are interested in our aid but not our personnel." Peachey urged MCC to ask itself: "Who is asking for the relationship? With whose needs are we primarily concerned?" Was MCC concerned with the need of Mennonites from Canada and the US to serve, or with the self-identified priorities of churches and communities in the countries where MCC operated (which might not include the placement of workers from the US and Canada) (Peachey 1976, 5-6)? Such questions about what role, if any, service workers from Canada and the US might fruitfully play internationally became more pressing as countries around the world gained greater independence from former colonial powers, which included the rise of a professional class and the growth and development of local civil society organizations. As we discuss in the next section, the intensity of such questions grew as MCC moved from direct program implementation to partnership with and accompaniment of local churches and civil society organizations.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, MCC began redefining service as *learning*. Responding to Peachey's 1976 *Intercom* article, Atlee Beechy, a member of MCC's executive committee, wondered whether "perhaps it is time to redefine the meaning of service, to recognize more fully the two-way dimension of service, including the notion that learning from others is an act of service" (Beechy 1976, 3). Such pondering was accompanied by active debates within MCC during the following decades about colonial and racialized assumptions about who is serving whom and where, with some visions of service critiqued for their implicit understanding of service as a unidirectional initiative of

[4] Throughout this article, we use "Mennonites" as a generic category encompassing a wide variety of Christian groups, including Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren, Conservative Mennonite, Brethren in Christ, multiple Amish groups, and more.

White Mennonites of European heritage to the rest of the world.

Reflecting on these debates in the late 1990s, Judy Zimmerman Herr summarized the concerns about service in the form of questions: "Does being in a giving posture demean those we send our help to? . . . Is our service really an expression of power? How do we prevent our service from becoming an attitude of self-righteousness?" (Zimmerman Herr 1998, 3). Moreover, in service assignments in places like Atlanta, New Orleans, and Gulfport, Mississippi, MCC workers encountered the stark reality of racism in the United States. Beyond the U.S., MCC workers also began to highlight MCC's organizational Whiteness and the racialized character of MCC's global service, with predominantly White Mennonites from Canada and the US going out to the primarily Black and Brown countries of the Global South.

Probing questions about service and power in the seventies and eighties led to a redefinition within MCC of service as *learning* and *presence*. So, for example, Bertha Beachy, a long-time Mennonite worker in Somalia, wrote in 1978 that Christian service workers needed to adopt the stance of being "eternal learners" and to participate in "the rhythm of people's lives" (Beechy 1978). The redefinition of service as learning was crystallized in a 1986 review of MCC Africa's work led by Tim Lind. "Africans have suffered under centuries of words and theories of change/development coming from the North," Lind observed. "It is in this context that servanthood for us today means abandoning all of the good and useful things we have to say in Africa in favor of a listening stance." MCC workers from Canada and the US, Lind argued, needed to take a "back seat" and adopt a "waiting" posture. Revisioning service as listening and learning, Lind recognized,

> may seem to some less than exciting and creative, particularly as it involves a shift in our thinking about ourselves as initiators and planners of activities and responses to need. However," he continued, "we feel that this posture is in fact highly creative as it allows space and visibility to approaches to service and development which are different from our Western approaches, and which can mix with our own approaches in new and exciting ways (Lind 1986, 1-2).

This reconceptualization in the seventies and eighties of service as a multidirectional movement of listening, learning, and sharing has shaped MCC service programs up to the present. This new understanding of service was reflected in the name adopted by MCC when it inaugurated an eleven-month service program in the early 1980s for young adults from Canada and the US to the rest of the world: Serving and Learning Together (SALT). In later years, the Serving with Appalachian Peoples (SWAP) program, operated by MCC in Kentucky and West Virginia, changed its name to Sharing with Appalachian Peoples. Jean Snyder, an MCC worker in Jamaica in the mid-1980s, emphasized that without a learning stance, service work threatened to devolve into pointless activity: "Unless we learn from the people themselves . . . who they are and why they see themselves, the world, us and God as they do, we have little to offer them but our busyness," she explained. "And our busyness may, in the long run, have more relevance to our monthly reports than to the lives we touch" (Snyder 1986, 2).

The MCC understanding of service as presence took on additional nuances from the seventies into the nineties, with presence described as a form of *solidarity* as well as a site of *mutual transformation*. A 1976 MCC board statement underscored the expectation of MCC workers "being in solidarity and identifying with the weak and oppressed" (MCC Statement... 1976). Indigenous leaders in Canada called on MCC workers placed in First Nations communities to become "partners in the cause," with the "being there" of presence understood as a political act (MCC Ontario Consultation on Native Ministries 1982). MCC workers in Latin America stood in solidarity with Indigenous and economically marginalized communities facing violence and repression from right-wing governments and corporate interests, while in the occupied Palestinian territories MCC workers forged bonds of solidarity with Palestinian and Israeli peace activists who mobilized against Israeli military occupation and settler-colonialism.

Describing service as *presence* or even *solidarity* could still arguably be interpreted as foregrounding the agency of MCC workers, implicitly placing them at the center of God's mission. As a counter to such an implicit understanding of presence, MCC began in the 1990s to describe service in terms of *mutuality, mutual transformation*, and *gift giving*, reflecting how approaches of presence and solidarity sought to underscore the agency, talents, and resources of the communities in which MCC operated. In its 1993 statement outlining "A Commitment to Christ's Way of Peace," MCC articulated this understanding of service as mutual gift-sharing thus: "We recognize our own spiritual and moral poverty and seek to receive the gifts that others, some of whom may be materially poorer than we are, have to share with us" ("A Commitment to Christ's Way of Peace" 1993). In a 1999 brochure summarizing the *Principles that Guide Our Mission*, MCC described itself as serving "as a channel of interchange by building relationships that are mutually transformative" and as facilitating "interchange and

mutual learning between its supporting constituency and those with whom we work around the world, so that all may give and receive" (*Principles that Guide Our Mission* 1999).

Multiple MCC service programs over the decades have also sought to transform the face of *who* engages in service, an ongoing commitment that can be viewed as an effort to decolonize service. For much of MCC's history, "service" was associated with images of predominantly White people from Canada and the United States being "sent" to the Global South. Yet relatively early on in MCC's history, MCC took tentative steps to disrupt such a colonial understanding of service. The International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP) established in 1950, for example, introduced elements of mutuality and exchange in service, at first providing European Mennonites with one-year service opportunities in the United States and Canada as a complement to the Pax alternative service program. Over the ensuing years, the program expanded to welcome participants from scores of countries, primarily from the Global South. Beginning in 2004 and continuing up to the present, the Young Anabaptist Mennonite Exchange Network (YAMEN) has operated in partnership with Mennonite World Conference, offering eleven-month service opportunities for young adults outside of Canada and the US to other parts of the Majority World, opportunities through which the global church shares gifts of service with one another. Meanwhile, an increasing percentage of MCC's multi-year workers, including program administrators, come from outside Canada and the United States.

Service within MCC has (albeit slowly and incompletely) shifted from a unidirectional movement from the Global North to the Global South to a multidirectional movement of global sending and receiving. At the same time, MCC program teams have become increasingly multicultural, with expanded and more prominent attention to the staff roles of in-country nationals and with greater globalization of program leadership.

From Direct Implementation to Local Partnerships

The transformed understanding of service within MCC as listening, presence, solidarity, and mutual transformation went hand-in-hand with another transformation, a shift from MCC directly implementing projects to supporting projects planned and implemented by local churches and community-based organizations. The seeds of this shift were planted in the 1960s, as MCC leaders rethought mission patterns in light of post-colonial realities. "Some overseas efforts in missions and relief have been characterized by a paternalism similar to the attitude of western nations in the so-called colonial period," observed MCC Executive Director William Snyder in 1963. "The winds of change toward political independence have likewise affected the churches and mission programs in the underdeveloped countries. Missionaries and relief workers today must adopt a true servant relationship to these younger churches..." Snyder concluded (1963, 3).[5]

Painting with very broad strokes, MCC program director Edgar Stoesz wrote in 1976 in MCC's internal publication *Intercom* that

> North American agencies used to go around running their own programs, using their own personnel and doing pretty well as they pleased. Eventually the error of that approach became obvious and we began to have a great deal of respect for the indigenous process. Now, we much prefer to identify an existing agency with which we feel compatible and support it with personnel or money, permitting it to enlarge its effort (Stoesz 1976, 1-2).[6]

Also in 1976, MCC's board affirmed the importance of learning from and supporting local organizations. "Our involvements will take place in a spirit of mutual respect, realizing that we must put as much effort into learning as we do into teaching," the board declared ("MCC Statement on Program Assumptions, Objectives and Priorities" 1976, 181-82). Instead of viewing development as a unilateral process in which knowledge and skills are transferred from agencies like MCC to communities in so-called underdeveloped countries, this MCC board statement instead presented development as "based on local capacity and self-reliance" (Ibid., B.3).

From the late seventies into the nineties, these emerging understandings of development within MCC steadily gained traction. Alongside descriptions of

[5] Even as Snyder envisioned movement beyond a paternalistic, colonial paradigm, his reference to "underdeveloped" countries reflected the paternalism built into modernist understandings of development as a linear, progressive movement towards a Western ideal.

[6] Stoesz's statement begged the question of what the markers were of MCC feeling "compatible" with local organizations. Did these local partnerships simply consist of MCC seeking out its own reflection, or did they have room for potentially disruptive difference?

service with the vocabulary of presence and solidarity, MCC leaders increasingly began talking about its programmatic operations as *partnership* and *accompaniment*.

Several interconnected and mutually reinforcing factors contributed to this shift. First, MCC's experiences in the 1960s in post-colonial contexts in which nationalist movements in newly independent countries charted new visions for national liberation and development pushed MCC to begin revisioning how it positioned itself in these contexts, stepping back from viewing itself as a lead agent for change to instead recognize that the primary energies and leadership for change came from within communities themselves.

Second, the rise in the seventies and eighties of civil society organizations such as farmers' associations, women's cooperatives, and social service agencies of national churches in many parts of the Global South pressed MCC to consider how it could support and accompany these organizations as they worked to make change in their communities. Many MCC programs began to shift in this period away from directly implementing program towards partnership with local churches, church agencies, and community-based organizations, partnerships in which MCC looked to local actors to set the vision, bring the needed knowledge of the community and context, and establish and implement plans for humanitarian action. In the 2000s, MCC began using the language of *accompaniment* to name this partnership stance.

Third, within broader missiological circles, a rethinking of Christian mission was gaining steam, with a shift in emphasis away from sending missionaries from the Global North to the Global South toward a focus on how churches in both the Global North and the Global South might together join in the *missio Dei*, God's reconciling mission in the world. This transformation of mission thinking meant a disruption of paternalistic relationships between European and North American mission agencies, on the one hand, and churches in the Global South, on the other, and the beginning of halting efforts to develop mutual mission partnerships between the churches of the Global North and the Global South, with mission moving in crisscrossing directions globally.[7]

Finally, the failure of modernization theory to live up to its promises led MCC and other international development actors in the seventies and eighties to reassess their development models and search for alternatives. While modernization theory had held that countries of the Global South would accrue steadily expanding benefits and improved livelihoods through the adoption of Western-style institutions in the realms of education, health, and economic systems, reality did not live up to the heralded vision.[8] Development initiatives informed by modernization theory depended on centralized interventions by the state or external agencies, such as the United Nations or international non-governmental organizations like MCC. As a counter to such top-down development, MCC program leaders began in the 1970s to champion visions of development as emerging from community-led and community-owned processes.

In a series of "Development Monographs" and in several Occasional Papers released in the seventies and eighties, MCC leaders like Stoesz, Heisey, and Lind advanced this bottom-up model of development while critiquing the optimism that drove modernization theory. For example, in surveying the development programs promoted across Africa from the 1950s into the 1970s, MCC Africa director Lind highlighted the "continuing failure of planning to accurately predict consequences of specific actions or to foresee new problems created by new technology." These ongoing failures, Lind underscored, should "temper" any residual optimism about the efficacy of such centralized development measures (Lind 1977-78, 19). Countering models that equated development with industrialization, modernization, and Westernization, MCC program leaders in the seventies and eighties drew upon the work of the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, and his notion of *conscientization*, a pedagogy of popular consciousness-raising in which students, not teachers, are viewed as the primary actors in the learning process (Freire 1970).

Reflecting on what she described as the failure of school systems set up by missionary and colonial authorities in Africa to deliver Western-style development, MCC Africa program leader Heisey turned to Freire's idea of conscientization as well as to the notion of de-schooling advanced by the Austrian-Croatian priest and educator, Ivan Illich, to promote an understanding of education and development as community-led processes, rather than primarily as interventions organized by the state or by international actors (Heisey 1977 and Illich 1971).

Stoesz also built on Freire's work in defining development as "a people's struggle in which the poor and oppressed are the active participants and beneficiaries," a "conscientization process by which people are awakened to opportunities within their reach." Instead of requiring external intervention,

[7] See, for example, Bosch 1991.

[8] For discussions and analysis of MCC's community development efforts within the broader context of shifting development discourses, see Davis (2010) Guenther and Reimer (2010, 353-74).

development emerging from conscientization, Stoesz argued, "begins as an attitude in the hearts and minds of people," building on their existing knowledge and driven by their own initiative (Stoesz 1977, 3-4). Merrill Ewert, who served as project coordinator for MCC in the mid-seventies in what was then Zaire, also drew from Freire's pedagogy of critical consciousness-raising in order to articulate a model of development education that did not "contribute to domination." Such a Freirean model of development, Ewert explained, reconceptualized the role of MCC workers to be "facilitators instead of manipulators," people who did "not control decisions or the flow of information," but rather helped "create optimal conditions in which the local people can determine their own direction." In this development model, Ewert continued, "there are no teachers and learners, advisors and advisees, or experts and laypeople—all work together to solve problems" (Ewert 1975, 25).

For MCC, adopting a model of development as conscientization meant reconfiguring its own place in the development process, taking a step back from seeing itself as leading or controlling the development process and instead viewing itself as supporting and accompanying locally led efforts. "Outside agencies do not bring development," Stoesz emphasized. Rather, he continued, development "is an indigenous process going on before [agencies like MCC] arrive. At best they accelerate its pace; at worst they frustrate it" (Stoesz 1977, 12). Agencies like MCC, Lind cautioned, "must from the very beginning abdicate the executive power inherent in its position as implementor or planner" (Lind 1977-78, 28). Rather than building up their own profile or controlling development processes, Stoesz argued, the "highest goal" for MCC and other international development organizations should be "to strengthen institutions which are locally owned" (Stoesz 1977, 11).

MCC programs in Africa took the lead in adopting accompaniment and partnership models of development. Beginning in Lesotho in 1980, MCC programs in Africa started shifting away from direct implementation of relief and development initiatives towards what MCC Africa director Lind called "relational programming," or a "community worker movement." Spurred by what Lind and others within MCC viewed as the "failure of development activity" and by a "disillusionment with development institutions," MCC programming in Africa transitioned towards a model of "presence," involving the long-term placement of MCC workers within local communities, outside of institutional contexts, and "with an emphasis on learning about and developing relationships with specific communities and their needs." These "community worker" placements, Lind stressed, were not primarily focused on technical implementation of projects, but were rather shaped by a "learning stance *vis-à-vis* Africans." This missiology of presence started from the assumption that "program creativity and renewal" came not from MCC but rather from African communities themselves. MCC's organizational stance within this vision of relational programming was a servanthood posture towards African churches. Adopting such a posture, Lind stressed, was a "better way for us to participate in and respond to problems faced by Africans" (Lind 1989, 19).

If this shift away from implementation toward presence and partnership began within MCC's programs in Africa, it quickly expanded to other parts of the MCC world. So, for example, the 1980s witnessed the establishment of an MCC rural development program in the Artibonite Valley in Haiti. This program wedded a Freirean pedagogy of conscientization with the Haitian tradition of communal work days (*konbits*). Members of MCC's Haitian animation team took on facilitating rather than teaching roles as they engaged isolated rural communities in Haiti's rolling mountains and valleys in agricultural development initiatives. In a 1989 paper describing the MCC Haiti team's approach, Barry Bartel explained that animation entailed a facilitative process in which community members themselves identified their gifts, resources, and needs and took the lead in developing and implementing responses to those needs, with MCC playing a supportive role. "With their own planning, work, and sacrifice," Bartel contended, "[Haitian communities] will own the solution, begin to feel like they can solve their own problems, and work to ensure that the solution lasts," with positive impacts continuing long after MCC animators had left the community (Bartel 1989, 1-2).

By the end of the 1980s, this missiology of presence and partnership had taken root in MCC orientations of new workers and in most MCC programs. In his report to the governing board in 1987, MCC executive secretary John A. Lapp explained that "A ministry of presence suggests that need is best defined from the stance of being present rather than by strategies inspired by well-developed ideology, media headlines or grandiose projects" (Lapp 1987, 2). While in modernization models of development the state and international aid organizations led the design and implementation of large-scale initiatives to improve education, health, and livelihoods, in the accompaniment and presence models of development, MCC took a step back, seeking to support and follow the lead of local churches and community-based organizations. A desire not to overwhelm and usurp local leadership, Reg Toews observed, in turn led to a "preference for the small scale. If you make mistakes, let them be little mistakes" (Toews 1989).

Enduring Tensions in Efforts to Decolonize Aid

Embedded within these evolving MCC understandings of service and shifting modes of MCC programming over the past five decades have been questions of power: who holds and exercises power in relief, development, and peacebuilding work and how can power be shared between an international actor such as MCC and the churches and other local and national actors it seeks to partner with? Similarly, contemporary calls to decolonize aid also involve questions of power, including how international NGOs (INGOs) might relinquish power and follow the lead of local actors. As our historical overview has shown, MCC has moved over the past decades, at least in principle, to being *partner-led*. Yet in practice, visions of mutually transformative partnerships often take a messier form. MCC administrator Lind may have called on MCC to "abdicate" leadership of development efforts, but efforts to abdicate that power run into practical complications and generate multiple tensions.

Over the past two decades, MCC has maintained this emphasis on following the lead of local churches and community-based organizations in envisioning and implementing relief, development, and peacebuilding initiatives. Yet following the lead of local partners has been complicated by MCC's adoption of a standardized outcomes-based project planning, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting (PME) system for the purposes of demonstrating the impact of MCC-supported work and of exercising accountability for the use of MCC resources. In this final section, we examine some of the tensions that external and internal pressures to show impact, demonstrate relevance, and ensure compliance with standardized policies and procedures have generated within MCC's efforts to follow its partners' leads. At their root, these tensions and complications all arise from the inherent power MCC holds by virtue of the financial and other resources it controls and to which it has access. These complications and tensions, we suggest, have relevance beyond MCC—other international actors that seek to take the call to decolonize aid seriously will run into variations of these challenges.

Pressure to Demonstrate Impact

Abdicating the executive responsibility for implementing development programs, as envisioned by Lind in the mid-1970s, meant following the lead of communities and local organizations embedded within communities in relief, development, and peacebuilding work, with MCC then accompanying those efforts. How would such a partner-led approach fit with results-based management (RBM)? In the late 1990s and early 2000s, external and internal pressures mounted on MCC to adopt an RBM system. Externally, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) pushed its grantees, like MCC and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB, an inter-agency body of which MCC Canada was a founding member), to plan and report using an outcomes-based framework. Internally, MCC's governance boards, along with its donors, increasingly wanted more quantifiable information about the impact of MCC's work. As MCC rolled out an RBM system for its global relief, development, and peacebuilding work in 2004, internal critics worried that that such a system would undermine the mutual partnerships MCC had sought to cultivate, with RBM viewed as an external (perhaps even colonial) imposition on partners. "To whom did MCC seek to demonstrate impact?," these critics wondered. "To its boards in Canada and the United States? To Mennonite churches and individual donors in the Global North? To institutional donors, such as the Canadian government? What about accountability to partners and to project participants?," some in MCC asked. The answers were not obvious.

MCC program leaders sought to quell anxieties about the introduction of RBM by underscoring that the development of project plans would be partner-led, with local partners identifying the problems they wanted to address, developing the plans for initiatives to address those problems, identifying the outcomes they hoped would materialize through those initiatives and setting the indicators they would use to measure progress towards those outcomes. Accountability fostered by RBM, its defenders argued, was not only or even primarily to boards and donors, but to local partners and project participants.

While outcomes-based planning can be (and, at its best, is) used in this partner-led way, the inescapable fact remains that MCC exercises the power it holds as a funder to require that its partners use a standardized planning, monitoring, and reporting system they might not otherwise choose.[9] At a minimum, this dynamic complicates efforts to decolonize aid. Stated more boldly, one could argue that MCC has not found a way beyond the tensions (or perhaps contradiction?) between standardized outcomes-based planning and the effort to decolonize its work. While that fact does not completely undercut efforts to decolonize aid, at a minimum it complicates those efforts.

An even greater tension arises in the pressures MCC faces to show global impact by aggregating

[9] This standardization requires project plans and reports based on a standard logframe structure. That said, MCC looks to partners to identify desired outcomes, indicators, and other elements of the project logframe.

outputs and outcomes data across its global programs. MCC, like other international NGOs, struggles with an industry-wide push for *agency-level measurement*, with charity ratings agencies and institutional and individual donors wanting to know not only about the impact of specific projects, but of the agency as a whole. Such agency-level measurement presses organizations to standardize outputs and outcomes, which in turn stands, at best, in uneasy tension with a commitment to partners identifying outcomes and indicators. Agencies that program governmental and intergovernmental funding in turn must often use outcomes and indicators predetermined by those funders, which can clearly undermine partner-led planning.

Despite these pressures to demonstrate impact, MCC has resisted the push to standardize ways of measuring impact across all partners, programs, and projects. Instead, partners are encouraged to name ways of monitoring project progress and measuring the impact of their work that is meaningful both to them and to the participants in their communities.

Pressure to Demonstrate Relevance

Within an international aid landscape in which at least a rhetorical commitment is given to localization, INGOs seek to demonstrate their relevance, making the case to governmental and inter-governmental donors as to why grants and contracts should continue to be channeled through them instead of local actors. MCC is funded primarily through donations from individuals and Anabaptist churches in North America, and MCC has historically chosen not to work with many bilateral and multilateral funding agencies in large part due to their colonial legacies. MCC leadership, for example, chose not to apply for USAID funding in Latin America due to the long history of violent imperialism in the region by the government of the United States.

Still, MCC does, on a case-by-case basis, apply for external grants from other agencies in consortium with local partners and in support of local partners' vision for a project. In such cases, MCC is still under pressure to demonstrate relevance, especially when local partners are implementing the project interventions. One way to show such relevance is to highlight how INGOs build the capacities of local partners; indeed. *partner capacity building* is one of MCC's current strategic priorities.[10] Yet when MCC first began discussing partner capacity building, many staff viewed it as undermining MCC's understandings of service as presence and partnership.

In the late 1990s, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) critiqued MCC for paying insufficient attention to building the capacities of the local organizations it worked with. With CIDA providing significant resources to MCC's global program, addressing this critique became a pressing concern. MCC Canada responded by commissioning an external evaluator, Lawrence Cummings, to assess MCC's capacity building work and to make recommendations for improving it. Cummings' study uncovered significant tensions within MCC about using the language of partner capacity building.

He noted that the language of "capacity building" had in some MCC and broader circles come to be viewed as different from "development," with the latter carrying neocolonial connotations that the former supposedly avoided. Still, for some MCC staff interviewed by Cummings, the discourse of capacity building rankled—these staff warned of the danger of "imperialistic capacity building." Was MCC supporting partners in building capacities that they themselves prioritized? "Who determines the capacity?" Cummings asked. "What kind of capacity is being imposed?" some worried. Meanwhile, Cummings observed that in some parts of MCC an emphasis on "presence" meant "giving up rights to establishing" direction. A focus on partner capacity building, in contrast, seemed to represent an attempt by MCC to set direction (Epp Weaver 2021). If the shifts within MCC towards presence and partnership represented an attempt to avoid replicating colonial patterns of operation, a focus on building partner capacity, internal MCC critics feared, threatened to revive those colonial patterns.

Pressure to Ensure Partner Compliance

MCC's status as a funding organization for local partner initiatives places legal and moral responsibilities upon MCC, responsibilities that in turn complicate the vision of mutual partnerships. Whether for preventing fraud, promoting safeguards against sexual exploitation and abuse, or addressing other vitally important matters, MCC must hold partners accountable on multiple fronts, taking steps to ensure partner compliance. These types of accountability and compliance mechanisms are essential for many reasons, yet for an INGO like MCC to monitor and hold local partners accountable for compliance with

[10] MCC also recognizes that the term "capacity building" has paternalistic connotations. Capacity strengthening and capacity bridging are two terms suggested as alternatives by Peace Direct in their 2021 "Time to Decolonise Aid" report. In practice, MCC's efforts to support and strengthen the capacity of partners is prioritized through discussion with the local partner. MCC supports exchanges of ideas, practices, and capacity between and among local partners through regional and global partner exchanges, which also build MCC's own capacities.

such fundamental measures as fraud prevention and safeguarding underscores the power imbalance between MCC and its partners and threatens to foster a transactional or even paternalistic relationship between MCC and its partners, rather than the desired mutuality. MCC seeks to counteract that inevitable power imbalance by trying to foster ways in which its partners can hold MCC accountable in formal and informal ways, yet the power imbalance can prove difficult to erase, especially in partnerships for which MCC is the sole or primary funder.

Conclusion

As this case study of MCC's historical shifts over the past half-century has shown, reflections on how INGOs can avoid colonial patterns of programming, abdicate or share power, and take the lead of local actors in relief, development, and peacebuilding work are not new, even as explicit calls for decolonizing and localizing aid efforts have recently become more explicit and pronounced. Yet the vision of the Grand Bargain of "a level playing field" within the international aid sphere "where all meet as equals" is far from being realized. A robust commitment to truly decolonize and localize aid work would present INGOs with an existential crisis: what role would exist in the future for organizations that have grown accustomed to wielding power over the design and implementation of relief, development, and peacebuilding work?

While MCC has sought over the past decades to take the lead from local actors and to foster partnerships marked by mutuality, these efforts to decolonize its practice have always been complicated by multiple factors, most fundamentally by the power MCC holds as a funding agency. The global call to decolonize the aid industry is an urgent and crucial demand—yet, if MCC's experience is in any way indicative, truly living into a vision of decolonized partnerships is a long-term, challenging process. This long-term work of decolonization requires patient persistence sustained by God's grace and the recognition that international Christian aid organizations are not at the center of God's mission, but instead are invited to join alongside and follow the lead of God's Spirit at work in communities around the world devastated by colonial legacies.

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